

“An Eye of gifts & graces” : A Reading of Blake’s *The Book of Thel*

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Introduction

The Book of Thel, a pastoral narrative poem, is set appropriately in the edenic Vales of Har, which in turn are appropriately inhabited by shepherdesses, their “sunny flocks,” and a Nature that is personified and/or humanized. Our heroine, Thel, is a virgin blossoming into womanhood and adulthood. She stands, as it were, between two worlds--the innocence of childhood and the experience of adulthood or maturity. Suffering from a desire for death, she takes a journey in which she meets a Lily, a Cloud, a Worm, and a Clod of Clay, and hears a “voice of sorrow” from her own grave. All (except the Worm) speak to her, giving her advice or information, but none satisfactorily answering her question, which is, essentially, “What is the meaning or purpose of (my) life?” Upon hearing the voice from her “grave plot,” she “flees” “back . . . into the Vales of Har.” On the surface, a very simple story, but one which has, in recent years, been subjected to much critical scrutiny and received many variant readings because of what might be described as the rich ambiguity of the poem.

Critics have a tendency to read the poem as an allegory, mystical or otherwise. As Christopher Hepner remarks, the Neoplatonic school sees Thel as “an unborn soul fleeing the terror of decent into the body” (79). Others see her as a mortal much like ourselves, representing the movement from innocence into experience, from adolescence into adulthood. Her flight at the end is either approved of (usually by Neoplatonists) or disapproved of (usually by the “others”). Besides the flight, other specific problems include: how do we read the motto¹, if indeed it is ready a “Motto” at all:

Does the Eagle know what is in the pit?
Or wilt thou go ask the Mole:
Can Wisdom be put in a silver rod?
Or Love in a golden bowl?

A. G. den Otter calls it an “un-motto” (634) which, rather than being “a maxim adopted as a rule of conduct” (OED), is more clearly allied to its Latin etymology (*muttum*, *muttire*) meaning “grunt” or “to mutter.” Are these questions proposed by the motto rhetorical or not? What do

the Eagle and Mole symbolize? Indeed, for Otter, *Thel* may “show that the very nature of questioning (and the meaning of answering) is the real (that is, realized) theme of *The Book of Thel*” (636). Hence, *Thel* may be a sort of allegory of questioning.

What *Thel*’s name means is also a problem. Is it from the Greek word meaning “will,” “wish,” or “desire”? If so, as Marjorie Levinson argues, the poem may be a sort of allegory of desire, “the idea of Desire working out its articulation” (290). Perhaps, as E. B. Murray says, it means “female,” Blake drawing on Martin Madan’s *Thelyphthora, or a Treatise on Female Ruin*, published in 1780-81, “*Thel*” meaning “woman” and “phthora” “corrupting.” Murray’s reading of *Thel* is rather curious (to say the least), leaving the connection between *Thelyphthora* and *Thel* very tenuous. K. D. Everest, however, pushes Murray’s associations of “*Thel*” with “female” further, arguing that *Thel* encounters possible future selves (via the dialogues with the Lily, the Cloud, and the Clod of Clay) which are articulations of socially acceptable (albeit inimical) gender constructs couched in naturalistic terms. *Thel* is “experiencing the crisis of those contradictions inherent in the encounter with her society’s myth of womanhood--a myth in the sense defined by Barthes as ‘interpellant speech’, a mode of signification which passes off as natural meanings that are actually freighted with ideology. *Thel* is addressed by the social myths which hail her as she passes out of adolescence” (198). “The Lily offers virgin sexuality, validated by a divine analogy with the processes of nature. The Cloud makes a similarly validated offer of courtship and marriage; the Clod of Clay completes the conventional pattern of female life and ‘fulfillment’ awaiting *Thel* with the image--so especially powerful in Christian terms--of maternity” (198-99).

This has introduced us to at least one more problem, that is, the nature and status of these other characters, what they symbolize, and how we take their advice, indeed, what their advice actually is or means. Donald R. Pearce also sees them as negative, as spokespersons for the Natural Religion (anathema to Blake) who misteach *Thel*. They are “representatives of the physical and the natural sciences” for whom Nature (and hence life) is a mechanical, ever-repeating process. Their lessons teach nothing of the divine or the eternal imagination, and so *Thel*, ill-prepared for her lessons from the grave, tragically flees. “The brutal philosophy that makes lilies rejoice, clouds exult, and clouds content--nature philosophy--only succeeds in driving the human soul to despair. Blake could hardly have made the point more clearly” (32).

Unfortunately, or fortunately (as the case may be), that this is Blake’s point is not so clear to other critics, including myself. The editors of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, for example, see the four characters as positive, “caught in the cycle of innocent existence,” trying

to comfort Thel, but speaking from the perspective of essential ignorance" (2:42). This reading of the characters as positive and well-intentioned is itself subject to a variety of interpretations: from being ignorant (as we just saw), to being misunderstood or even intentionally misunderstood by Thel. Symbolically, their meaning may range from natural "entities" and processes to religious icons (symbolizing a unity with Christ and God) and processes².

The general reading of Thel as a person who meets with well-meaning "guides" (however competent) and who fails to learn enough or grow enough to make the transition from Innocence through Experience to Higher Innocence is probably the reading most widely held by the critics. She is a seed, as Northrop Frye puts it, who must be planted (i.e., die in the grave, to her self--i.e., undergo Blakean self-annihilation) before she can be reborn into the higher state (232-33).

To the two major schools which see Thel as unborn soul or as mortal, Everest suggests we add a third, that of W. J. T. Mitchell, "who finds in the poem a sceptical and reserved ambivalence of effect, 'enacting' Thel's dilemma of choice between the alternatives of on the one hand a static or repressive resistance to change, and on the other an acceptance of processes of change that are unknown in their effects, and therefore able to spawn in Thel's mind various dark possibilities of dread. The poem thus offers itself in the guise of simple clarity hedged about by enigma which is Thel's own story in the poem" (193).

Mitchell's book, *Blake's Composite Art*, is important and influential (published in 1978). After him, some critics have turned their attention to Thel's choice and so to the teachers or advisors and read in them more sinister meanings, such as Everest who, as I mentioned earlier, sees the other characters as encounters with potential future selves which are articulations of socially acceptable gender constructs couched in naturalistic terms. Like Everest, I too wish to resolve Mitchell's "ambivalences," but my focus will not be on change but on potentiality, a word often used by critics, but never really explored. In some ways, we might read *Thel* as an allegory of potentiality. My reading will go along Mitchell's general lines, but I will focus on a critical (that is, important) passage in the poem which, in my view, has been continually misread. Then, drawing on image clusters that have been only partially analyzed, offer a re-reading of important sections of the poem, hopefully elucidating, or at least expanding the critical debate over, central problems in interpreting the poem.

Text

Mitchell offers a reading of the closing series of questions, a reading that repeats a false dichotomy set up by Thel. This reading simplifies what the text holds out to be a more compli-

cated series of choices and assertions, and simplifies also the problematic nature or identity of the voice from the grave plot. The voice from Thel's grave plot says:

Why cannot the Ear be closed to its own destruction?
 Or the glistning Eye to the poison of a smile!
 Why are eyelids stord with arrows ready drawn,
 Where a thousand fighting men in ambush lie?
 Or an Eye of gifts & graces. show'ring fruits & coined gold!
 Why a Tongue impress'd with honey from every wind?
 Why an Ear, a whirlpool fierce to draw creations in?
 Why a Nostril wide inhaling terror trembling & affright
 [Why a tender curb upon the youthful burning boy!
 Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?]

The Virgin started from her seat, & with a shriek.

Fled back unhindered till she came into the vales of Har. (8.11-22)³

Critics, including Mitchell, are in general agreement that this is Thel's own voice because it issues from her grave plot. This makes most sense, I think, if we see Thel as the unborn soul. In any event, Mitchell gives what may be called a standard reading of the lines:

The "voice of sorrow" (Thel's own voice, really, since it comes from her grave), expresses her general alienation from nature in the more narrow, radical form of a protest against the condition of her own little piece of nature--her body, its senses and sexual drives. The senses are seen as breaches in the defenses of the self through which beguiling, destructive forces may enter, or as offensive weapons designed for the entrapment and destruction of others. Male sexuality is seen as repressed by "a tender curb," and female sexuality by "a little curtain of flesh." (90-91)

There are two important problems with this reading. First, it is ambiguous and at this point indeterminate that this voice is indeed Thel's. Second, although Mitchell is certainly right that the senses are seen as breaches in the self's defenses through which destructive forces may enter and/or as weapons destructive to others, they are only potentially so. We might say that it is important to say that the senses are *seen* this way and that it is Thel who sees them this way. The critic repeats Thel's either-or error when s/he also sees them in only these two ways⁴. There is another possibility proposed by these questions. The senses and the self are potentially creative, in the most positive "sense" of the word. As Blake said in "Auguries of Innocence," "We are led to Believe a Lie / When we see [with] not Thro the Eye." The "lie" in this

case is the half truth, or half of the equation Blake offers in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*:

Thus one portion of being, is the Prolific. the other, the Devouring: to the devourer it seems as if the producer was in his chains, but it is not so, he only takes portions of existence and fancies that the whole.

But the Prolific would cease to be Prolific unless the Devourer as a sea received the excess of this delights.

Some will say, Is not God alone the Prolific? I answer, God only Acts & Is, in existing beings or Men.

These two classes of men are always upon earth, & they should be enemies; whoever tries to reconcile them seeks to destroy existence. (16.7-17.2)

We might say that Thel is obsessed with, or being eaten up by, the devourer: she longs to die, she imagines she is food for worms, she goes down into the earth and visits her grave plot, she sees the senses as devouring others or allowing her self to be devoured. She everywhere denies the prolific *in* herself.

In Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, written just after *Thel*, the prophet Isaiah, in response to a query about how he could be sure that God really spoke to him, says: "I saw no God. nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover'd the infinite in every thing, and as I was then perswaded, & remain confirm'd; that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God. . ." (12.6-10). Or take the well known lines, also from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite" (14.15-16). Or, once again, also from this poem: "How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way, / Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?" (7.4-5). In other words, the senses may close and distort, but they may also open up and expand and clarify the world. As the Devil in Blake's poem says: "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age" (4.10-12).

The senses are only potentially destructive (to self and to others). They are also potentially "inlets to the Soul" which allow us to see in that Bird "an immense world of delight," which allow us to "discover the infinite in every thing." The question becomes, then, how do we perceive? Or, how do we "use" the senses? Do we see with or through the eye? Put another way: How do we perceive these organs of perception? (We might say that the prison house of language becomes or really is the prison house of the senses: as we can only use language to talk about language, so we are stuck having to use the senses to try to understand the senses *and* language, there being no Soul or Mind distinct from Body.)

When we apply this problem to *Thel*, the questions become: How will you, O *Thel*, perceive or use your organs of perception? And how do you, O *Thel*, perceive perception? As perception determines how we live our lives, so these questions involve a larger one. As I said at the beginning of this essay, *Thel* is about a virgin blossoming into womanhood *and* adulthood, a young woman who wants to know the meaning or purpose of *her* life. The twin problems of sexual and spiritual (or mental) maturation are inextricably bound together (as Soul and Body or Mind and Body). Hence, her question about the meaning/purpose of her life is “answered” by a voice from her grave plot which poses a series of questions which primarily focus on alternate, contradictory, and potential realizations or actualizations of the uses and functions of the senses. How do you perceive and how do you perceive perception become: What will you make of your life, O *Thel*? The meaning (or use) of *Thel*’s life is what she makes it. Knowledge and action are twin functions of perception. Making is creation, creation is imagination, imagination is divine. She has the potential of living a creative life⁵.

That one’s life is what one makes of it is hardly an earth-shattering discovery. But putting this within the perspective of a society wherein social, gender, and class roles are rigorously prescribed and proscribed, *Thel*’s very act of questioning borders on the heretical and revolutionary. (One might say that Blake’s prescription for proscription is creation.) In both religious and social terms, *Thel* should already know the meaning and the use of her life. As the little Chimney Sweeper from *Songs of Innocence* said, “if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.” But because *Thel* is in a transitional state, between innocence and experience, she cannot rest comfortably with such naive complaisance and acquiescence. She has intimations of the destructive forces of the world of experience where, as in the London of Blake’s poem “London” from the *Songs of Experience*, one can hear

How the Chimney-sweepers cry
Every blackning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldiers sigh,
Runs in blood down Palace walls. . . . (9-12)

Let us return to the questions from the grave plot and see if the text will bear the weight of my argument. The voice is (only) potentially *Thel*’s, as the grave plot is where she will potentially be buried. The questions are about potentiality and, if you like, about impotence and potency. The first set of questions leads us to believe that the voice is *Thel*’s own (and in at least one sense it is), depicting the senses as breaches, yes, but also reflecting *Thel*’s desire for her lost innocence (which is a function of her perception, the eye of the I).

Why cannot the Ear be closed to its own destruction?

Or the glistning Eye to the poison of a smile! (8.11-12)

She is, after all, already fallen and, like Keats' persona in "Ode to a Nightingale," she longs to leave the fever and fret of this world but cannot. She is already "self" conscious. The questions, the wishes, already contain their negation. They are impotent desire.

Why are Eyelids stor'd with arrows ready drawn,

Where a thousand fighting men in ambush lie? (8.13-14)

This next question makes us question whether or not this really is Thel's voice, for it contains knowledge about perception, or presents a mode of perception, that seems quite alien to the poem and to Thel's own "experience" and consciousness. There are armies in Eden. The world is a destructive force that must be fought. These first two groups of questions set up a binary opposition. Either the senses are defensive or aggressive. The images are of the Devouring: devouring others, being devoured. Both images are destructive. If the questions are hers, we are still left with the problem that this interpretation of the world is a function of her perception. Welcome to the world of Experience, which may well be at least a partially self-created nightmare. This can be made "clear" by looking at the ambiguity of the following lines from "London":

And mark in every face I meet

Marks of weakness, marks of woe. (3-4)

How do we read the first "mark"?⁶ Does the persona *inscribe* marks of weakness and woe in the faces? Does he *see* these marks or indications that are already there? Does he see the marks that he himself has inscribed? The marks that Thel sees (destruction, poison, arrows, fighting) may well be of her own creation. In *Thel*, the ambiguity of whether something is seen or projected may well be dramatized in the next set of questions, which when read literally are positive but when read ironically are negative.

The third set of questions breaks down the either-or paradigm and proposes a third phase or activity, which is creative and is itself in opposition to those destructive phases or activities in the first two groups.

Or an Eye of gifts & graces. show'ring fruits and coined gold!

Why a Tongue impress'd with honey from every wind? (8.15-16)

The imagery is purely positive in the context of the two lines--gifts, graces, fruits, coined gold, honey, wind--images of fullness, richness, generosity, fruition, creation, and creativity. These are images of the prolific. In terms of mythopoeia, the coined gold is art; it is the valuable product of a tongue impressed with honey from every wind. The wind of poetic inspiration serves to pollinate, as it were, the poet who then, with inspired language, creates. Wind, honey, coined

gold. Blake inspired engraves his plates and impresses the pages of his book on his press⁷. He sees through his eyes and graces us with his gifts. Welcome to the Higher Innocence.

These lines are potentially negative or threatening only if we read them ironically or satirically--as a false, lecherous eye and a flattering tongue--something Thel may do but something that the imagery, tone, and larger context of the poem as a whole all resist⁸. This third group is, I think, distinctly not the voice of Thel, offering a third possibility on how to perceive perception (and perception is creation--what the eye sees, ear hears, nostril smells, body feels, tongue tastes, all this the tongue will speak). It is "neutral" in tone in the sense that it is neither accusatory nor defensive.

The fourth set of questions begins by reversing the first question.

Why an Ear, a whirlpool fierce to draw creations in?

Why a Nostril wide inhaling terror trembling & affright. . . . (8.17-18)

The "why cannot the Ear be closed" of the first question changes to "why does it have to be closed," and destruction changes to creation. Why cannot the ear be closed to its own destruction becomes why can't the ear be open to creation--and open actively--a "whirlpool fierce," as the eye is active, "show'ring" fruits and coined gold. The fourth group is where the questions seem to be actively turned toward Thel and where they become truly threatening. The "whirlpool fierce" (like the Tyger from *Songs of Experience*) is a threatening image of creation (and of perception as creation), and the next line repeats the form of Thel's original "why does it have to be this way," but directs it accusingly at Thel (much like the Cloud deflects Thel's words back on to herself): why does the Nostril have to inhale "terror trembling & affright"? By implication it could inhale the perfume of the Lily that Thel said "Revives the milked cow, & tames the fire-breathing steed." The lines unite the Devouring and the Prolific, particularly the Ear which devours creation, but also the Nostril which, by implication, may well be drawing in or devouring its own negative creation of "terror trembling & affright." Like fire, the senses are potentially destructive or purifying. Perception is creation, and you may create a heaven or a hell. What will you create, O Thel?

The final group of questions takes us specifically into the realm of sexuality--questioning why society (or we, or Thel) puts severe restraints on sexuality. At this point, of course, Thel flees, and Blake capitalizes the title/epithet of Virgin for the first time in the poem, perhaps to emphasize that she has frozen forever into this role⁹. It is perhaps significant that Blake uses the word "trembling" in the fourth group of questions, which leads into the questions about curbing sexual desire and gratification. In the Cloud's discourse on the pleasures of love and sexuality, he refers to his lover, the Dew, as "trembling" before him in anticipation of their

soon-to-be "happy copulation"¹⁰. Thel trembles in fear, dew in desire. Dew consummates her desire; Thel flees.

Both the "burning boy" and the "coined gold" reiterate an important image cluster in the poem, one that may help us to more clearly read the poem. In this poem, Blake uses gold, sun, fire references in association with creativity, completion, consummation, and usually with reference to male sexuality. Thel is associated with the moon, silver, water--which suggest virginity and innocence, and also incompleteness. Thel avoids going "up" to the Eagle vision of the motto, and instead will descend into the earth. One should recall the medieval-Renaissance scheme of the four cardinal elements--earth, the heaviest, lies underneath the water, the next heaviest, which lies under air, which in turn is heavier than fire, the lightest and therefore the highest of the elements. The implication is that Thel should at the very least rise after her descent. She, in one sense, chooses only to follow the Mole vision when she turns downward, away from the Cloud. But, with these image clusters in mind, let us see how they operate in the poem.

First, Thel's motto, if it is Thel's, inverts the gold-male, silver-female associations:

Does the Eagle know what is in the pit?

Or wilt thou go ask the Mole:

Can Wisdom be put in a silver rod?

Or Love in a golden bowl?

To be consistent, the motto should ask if Wisdom (or Love) could be put in a golden rod or Love (or Wisdom) in a silver bowl. The inversion might suggest that Thel has misread her lessons in the poem. The first two questions (about the Eagle and Mole) posit the either-or paradigm that Thel mistakenly applies to "reality," thus falsifying it. It should be "both/and." The second two questions repeat the either-or paradigm, this time by separating Wisdom from Love--or soul from body. As Blake said in the "Argument" to *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*:

Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence. (3.7-9)

Both one and the other. Each implies its opposite without which it is incomplete. The questions can be answered both yes and no. Both male and female, Love and Wisdom, Mole and Eagle. "One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression" (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 24.11). The Mole and the Eagle will each have their law or wisdom. So will Thel--she must find her own law (or system, if you like), create her own life.

From another perspective, the Mole and Eagle combine to form one totality. I would like to suggest that Thel refuses half the knowledge, the "Eagle" knowledge, which clusters with images

of “up”: fire, air, and hence the Cloud (and the union with Dew). It is very significant that Thel mishears or misreads *each* of her three advisors. Let us turn again more specifically to the poem.

Thel, on her quest for answers to the meaning of life (hence, she looks with her reason and intellect¹¹), first meets the virgin Lily--white, watery, pure, sitting “in her silver shrine.” Water is “resolved” by fire in this section. The Lily reports that “God” visits her and tells her that when “summers heat melts thee beside the fountains and the springs” she will “flourish in eternal vales.” Thel’s response to the Lily bears little or no connection to what the Lily spoke about, that is, divinity and rebirth in eternity. Thel rewrites the fire-water equation saying that the Lily’s perfume “*tames* the fire breathing steed” (10). Her misreading will be corrected or clarified by her next visitant, the Cloud, who descends to meet her (rather than she rising to meet him).

The Cloud is central to any understanding of the poem. The Cloud, I think, very deliberately corrects Thel’s misreading of things, addressing precisely the point about the steeds:

O virgin know’st thou not our steeds drink of the golden springs

Where Luvah doth renew his horses. . . .¹² (5.7-8)

Luvah is lover and is associated with Phoebus Apollo, the sun-god, who drives his chariot of the sun. The horses, or steeds, are also traditional symbols of sexual passion. They drink and are *renewed*, not *tamed* as Thel said, by the water. Blake is being very deliberate here. There is a continual renewal and gratification of love and sexual desire. The Cloud then goes on to describe himself and Dew, his lover, caught up in exactly the same thing--a continual process of renewal and gratification of love and sexual desire. The Cloud continues:

O virgin know’st thou not our steeds drink of the golden springs

Where Luvah doth renew his horses: look’st thou on my youth,

And fearest thou because I vanish and am seen no more.

Nothing remains; O maid I tell thee. when I pass away,

It is to tenfold life. to love. to peace. and raptures holy:

Unseen descending, weigh my light wings upon balmy flowers:

And court the fair eyed dew. to take me to her shining tent;

The weeping virgin. trembling kneels before the risen sun,

Till we arise link’d in a golden band. and never part;

But walk united, bearing food to all our tender flowers. . . . (5.7-16)

Fire and water are in a continual dynamic process. The “raptures holy” seem to be sexual passion and fulfillment rendered in terms of Male Cloud courting and uniting with Female Dew, a

dynamic union made possible by the fire of the golden sun. The fact that the sun is golden takes us back to the "silver shrine" where the virgin Lily resided (4.2). Silver is the color of the moon, which is cool (which would tame the passion), female, and, like Diana, chaste.

The sun is masculine in the poem, and the "risen sun," before which the "weeping virgin, trembling kneels," is also the Cloud's erection. Blake has indulged in a rather obscene sexual pun here. Cloud and Dew "arise link'd in a golden band, and never part"--union of male and female, fire and water¹³. The holy rapture--soul and body as one--is reminiscent of John Donne's "Canonization." Donne writes:

The Phoenix riddle hath more wit
By us: we two being one, are it.
So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit.
We die and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love. (23-27)

A holy rapture indeed. The Cloud courted the "fair-eyed dew to take me to her shining tent." The "shining tent" recalls the Lily's "silver shrine," both images also symbolic of female sexuality, changing the golden bowl of the motto to silver. Thel had been referred to in the opening section in terms of dew: "her gentle lamentation falls like morning dew." We are thus encouraged to view Thel as potentially dew-like, that is, as someone like the Cloud's lover: she has the potential for sexual (and thus creative) fulfillment.

But Thel also misunderstands the Cloud and speaks of things only partially related to what the Cloud just spoke of, completely ignoring and changing the emphasis of the Cloud's narration. She talks of him feeding flowers, not of his holy raptures:

Dost thou O little Cloud? I fear that I am not like thee;
For I walk through the vales of Har, and smell the sweetest flowers;
But I feed not the little flowers: I hear the warbling birds,
But I feed not the warbling birds. they fly and seek their food;
But Thel delights in these no more because I fade away,
And all shall say, without a use this shining woman liv'd,
Or did she only live. to be at death the food of worms. (5.17-23)

One might note that she refers to her senses: she smells, hears, and (although not explicitly stated) sees. She does not understand the creative function of the senses: they are passive to her. She seeks something that to her will be active: *feeding* the flowers and birds. He spoke of happy copulation, of the union of body and soul, which was creative, leading to the production of food (art, if you like) for the flowers. She says she is unproductive, incapable of producing

such food. Hence, her reference to herself as the “shining woman” is the more ironic since it echoes the dew’s “shining tent” of female sexuality, and thus creativity and production. But Thel is isolated, detached by her perception. She is like Coleridge dejected:

I see them all so excellently fair,

I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!

How do we read the Cloud’s second response to Thel?

The Cloud reclind upon his airy throne and answer’d thus.

Then if thou art the food for worms. O virgin of the skies,

How great thy use, how great thy blessing; every thing that lives,

Lives not alone. nor for itself: fear not and I will call

The weak worm from its lowly bed, and thou shalt hear its voice.

Come forth worm of the silent valley, to thy pensive queen. (5.24-29)

It almost sounds as if he is chastising her. “O virgin of the skies” sounds sarcastic or satiric. She is a virgin of the skies in two senses: she remains ignorant of the Cloud’s vision (or the Eagle vision) and, in remaining ignorant, retains her virginity (her naive innocence and her separation from others). She is paradoxically a virgin to and of the skies. To say that nothing lives alone or for itself is consistent with Blake’s hatred for selfishness and egotism. In the end, he calls forth the Worm, calls her pensive (thoughtful, intellectual) and goes off to find his contrary, the female Dew. He is not a virgin of the skies, and even though Thel “aspires” to be like the Cloud, she is afraid and cannot—he tells her to “fear not.” He argues for participation, not separation. She denies participation, and insists on separation.

Thel then speaks to the Clod of Clay, a mother who talks also of sexual raptures and fulfillment, Thel again, for the third time, misunderstanding or deliberately avoiding what has just been said¹⁴. She goes downward, sees frightening things (images of death, instead of creation, images she herself has been insisting on throughout the poem), hears the voice, and flees. That her flight is not the right thing to do is clear, not only from the poem itself, but also from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which employs a similar scene or motif. An Angel wants to show our hero of that poem (that is, Blake) his “eternal lot,” “the hot burning dungeon thou art preparing for thyself for all eternity.” The Angel takes him down into an underworld abyss where he is to see his fate in eternity trapped among all the terrible monsters that populate this hell. Our narrator concludes this description:

. . . and now we saw, it was the head of Leviathan, his forehead was divided into streaks of green & purple like those on a tygers forehead: soon we saw his mouth & red gills hang just above the raging foam tinging the black deep with beams of blood,

advancing toward us with all the fury of a spiritual existence.

My friend the Angel climb'd up from his station into the mill; I remain'd alone, & then this appearance was no more, but I found myself sitting on a pleasant bank beside a river by moon light hearing a harper who sung to the harp, & his theme was, The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, & breeds reptiles of the mind.

But I arose, and sought for the mill, & there I found my Angel, who surprised asked me, how I escaped?

I answered. All that we saw was owing to your metaphysics: for when you ran away, I found myself on a bank by moonlight hearing a harper. . . . (18.25-19.14)

The implication is, I think, quite clear. Had Thel abided, finished going through with the test or quest, her vision would have changed. She had the potential of achieving the creative vision. Instead, like the Angel, she ran away, her entire journey marked by a series of mis-seeings and mis-readings and mis-hearings.

Illuminations

Let us now turn to the illuminations. The copy that I will focus on is copy J, reprinted in *William Blake, The Early Illuminated Books* (volume 3 of *William Blake, The Illuminated Books*). The Motto¹⁵ is labeled plate 1, the title page plate 2, etc. I will skip the Motto plate and begin with plate 2.

On the title page, Thel stands at an archway formed by a bent tree entwined by a spiraling vine that completes the arch as it connects with a lily below, which leans towards but does not touch Thel. She stands outside (or before) the threshold. What appears to be the personified Cloud embraces Dew his lover as she lifts her arms into the air (potentially either in fear or delight¹⁶). The lovers appear to be emerging, or flying out, from the flowers and are behind (inside) the threshold. Thel's gaze on the scene is ambiguous--we cannot tell precisely what she is looking at: she is postured with her front to us but her head turned, at the most, half way around, apparently watching or becoming aware of the courtship of Cloud and Dew. But does she really see them? She misreads the Cloud's dialogue in the poem. Since the lovers are behind the archway and the lily, and Thel is distinctly in front of the tree and flowers that form the archway, and since she is only half turning her head at most, she would only be peripherally aware of the "action" of courtship. The poem is yet to begin: it is the story of her journey, a rite of passage from one phase to another, and Thel will only partially comprehend (and definitely miscomprehends) what she sees and hears--so her positioning outside and only potentially seeing seem appropriate.

The illustrations for plate 3 are at the top of the page, preceding the text which begins immediately below them. From bottom left spiraling upward (in a general clockwise movement), they show: a man reclining on a leaf; he is looking to the right and slightly upward at a woman holding and looking at a child; her gaze leads upward to the third image, a man looking at and pointing to an eagle which, in turn looks right and down at a flying man brandishing what appears to be a flaming sword.

The coloring of the upper section above the text "recalls" Thel's binary oppositions, particularly the fire-water opposition, and appropriately divides Thel's name, engraved at the top and around which the illustrations and the text converge. The left side is blue, possibly signifying water below blending into air above, the figures of the woman and child and of the man distinctly floating not flying (the man resting on the leaf would signify earth--he is resting on, not floating in). The eagle bridges the blue left and red right sides, looking down toward a flying warrior figure (with shield and flaming sword), the red signifying fire. The movement is from earth to water to air to fire. It should be noted that the inscription is now "Thel," not "The Book of Thel" as on the title page. She is not represented in *propria persona* as she is on the title page and on plates 4, 6, and 7, having not "entered" until the text starts below.

The representations on plate 3 are both inter- and extra-textual. Intertextually, they are representations of some of the characters of the linguistic text: Worm, Clod of Clay, Cloud. However, read in this sense, Blake disrupts the linear temporality of the linguistic narrative (Lily, Cloud, Worm, Clod of Clay) with the pictorial (Worm, Clod of Clay and Worm, Cloud, plus Eagle and warrior figure), inviting different readings. In their movement, they describe a different narrative structure, one that is highly charged with symbolism and transformation. They are potentialities, in one sense, of what Thel may become or make of her life; in another sense, as Thel's story is everyone's, they are allegorical or iconographic representations of the potentiality (or potential growth and development) of the human being: from most simple to most advanced, from the embryonic worm to childhood to adulthood (growth of bodily form, or mortal body) to wisdom to creative artist (growth of mental or spiritual life).

The human figures are representations of the personified characters in the text and are in this sense inter-textual. The allegorical, however, leads into the symbolic with the figures of the Eagle and the warrior which have no linguistic referent in the text¹⁷, encouraging us to read beyond personification and allegory into the symbolism of the text and the illuminations.

Let me try to put this another way. The figures as pictorial representations of characters from the linguistic text, and Thel as a representative of everyone, have a one-to-one correspondence, inviting the allegorical reading. The movement of the pictorial narrative disrupts and

fragments (rewrites, is a palimpsest of) the linguistic narrative¹⁸. Because the figures/characters themselves symbolize many things and so yield many divergent readings, and because the presence of the Eagle and warrior force us beyond the "simple" allegory of *Thel*, allegory itself slides from its more comfortable one-to-one correspondences to the multiple meanings of symbolism, perhaps as uneasily as Thel herself when faced with the conflicting and confusing questions posed by the voice(s) from her grave plot.

The reclining man, as the Worm and as male sexuality, invites Thel (who is present in the text below) to look "forward" to the result of "happy copulation" or holy raptures, that is, a child. The mother and child are the Clod of Clay and the Worm, but the image is representative of more. This is one of Thel's potential future selves, that is, Thel as mother with child. The Worm, as an image wedded with death (love-death music), is Marvel's worm who would try the virgin's virginity in the grave (she is, after all, a coy mistress, as the Cloud makes "clear")¹⁹. Eros and thanatos are united, recalling the ambiguity of the Dew from plate 2, who ambiguously raises her arms in either fear or desire. The Worm, as foetus, grows into a child, who in one reading grows into the woman/mother holding the child, in another into the man at the top of the plate. The linguistic text encourages us to read Thel as the potential mother (like the Clod of Clay). It also encourages us to read the "everyman" allegory as Worm becoming child becoming man. The imagery becomes both hermaphroditic and androgenous: the Worm may grow into male or female; Thel is both the mother and the man at the top of the plate. Everyone's story is also her story.

Mitchell observes that the figure of the Worm

... is presented in what we might call the posture of the "awakening Adam". . . which Blake probably borrowed from engravings after Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling. This Adam's emergence from unconscious vegetative life is depicted as an encounter with contrary images of love and aggression, Innocence and Experience, the contraries that Thel leaves unresolved. As an Adam figure, Thel (so far as we know) never goes beyond a vision of human fulfillment as merely a state of innocence and infantile dependency. (100)

The man at the top of the plate looks to the eagle, the spiritually transformed man. It is worthwhile noting that Blake has similarly postured this man after the God of the same picture, particularly the right hand which is pointing to and almost touching (as in Michelangelo's depiction) the Eagle, perhaps a symbol of Adam awakened. At the beginning of her quest, Thel still has the potential to awaken, to complete this rite of passage. Like the Worm, she can be transformed into the Eagle. And, as the Eagle makes us return to the motto, so the motto makes us

return to the illuminations: the Worm “is” the Mole--it lives in the earth, in the pit--and the Mole is the Eagle²⁰.

Or, perhaps it is better to say that the Worm potentially develops into the Eagle--they are part of the same process. Another way of putting this is that out of the inarticulate (the Worm of the silent valley is itself silent, nongendered in the text) chthonic mire of the earth as death (the earth that Thel explores when she comes upon her grave plot) arises all life and creation, male and female, all varieties and potentialities of life itself. Out of the devouring arises the prolific. Thel cannot reconcile the two, even though she seeks to. The Eagle is the apex or zenith of the (of Thel's?) horizon and looks down at the figure in fire. The motto is invoked, but not dichotomically: the Eagle has been “asked,” but the Eagle is potentially united with the Mole.

The movement spirals from lower left to the Eagle in the center top in an innocent optimism, but changes with the Eagle's gaze down toward the apparent warrior figure flying off to the right, that is, into *The Book of Thel*, towards the next page of the book. The warrior is both leading us in and warning us (leading us into and forcing us out of the garden), and is in part a symbol of Blakean Apocalypse, of self-annihilation. Like the questions from Thel's grave plot, he is both threatening and revelatory. What will you make of your life, O Thel? To seek only the Eagle (or the Mole) vision leads to a destructive fire that burns away the stable particulars. To see that the Eagle is the Mole (multitenaity, not reconciliation), leads to the cleansing or purifying fire of the moving all of the illuminations and text²¹. Potentially, at this point in the book, either “end” is possible.

A question becomes, therefore, how do we read the movement from Eagle to warrior figure? If we see the Eagle as a symbol of intellect divorced from body, then, I think, the warrior is a warrior, a symbol of aggression and destruction. This is what Thel seems to find in her intellectual quest for the meaning and purpose of life. She is the “pensive queen,” after all. This is the Eagle we see in the following section of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*:

Does not the eagle scorn the earth & despise the treasures beneath?
 But the mole knoweth what is there, & the worm shall tell it thee.
 Does not the worm erect a pillar in the mouldering church yard?
 And a palace of eternity in the jaws of the hungry grave
 Over his porch these words are written. Take thy bliss O Man!
 And sweet shall be thy taste & sweet thy infant joys renew! (5.39-6.3)

However, if we take the Eagle to be the spiritualized man, the awakened Adam in his divine body, then the figure with the flaming sword is another transformation, the last stage in the

growth from Worm to creative or visionary artist. He is what Thel can potentially become. He is also William Blake. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the narrator remarks:

As I was walking among the fires of hell, delighted with the enjoyments of Genius; which to Angels look like torment and insanity. I collected some of their proverbs. . . .

When I came home; on the abyss of the five senses, where a flat sided steep frowns over the present world. I saw a mighty Devil folded in black clouds, hovering on the sides of the rock, with corroding fires he wrote the following sentence now perceived by the minds of men, & read by them on earth.

How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way,

Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five? (6.14-16, 6.21-7.5)

And a little later, perhaps more to the immediate point, plate 14 states:

The ancient tradition that the world will be consumed in fire at the end of six thousand years is true. as I have heard from Hell.

For the cherub with his flaming sword is hereby commanded to leave his guard at tree of life, and when he does, the whole creation will be consumed, and appear infinite. and holy whereas now it appears finite & corrupt.

This will come to pass by an improvement of sensual enjoyment.

But first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul, is to be expunged; this I shall do, by printing in the infernal method. by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid.

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.

For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.

The warrior figure is on the one hand the "cherub with his flaming sword"²² who wields a fire that is both destructive and creative, devouring and prolific. And he is Blake, who prints "in the corrosive method," using acid to etch the copper plates, creating by destroying. The cherub and Blake both will cleanse the doors of perception, "melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid." The destruction of the Apocalypse is a cleansing action which is also creative. The figure is best seen, then, as a warrior-creator or destroyer-creator.

Ostricker says that in Blake there is an "identity between sexuality and the imagination" (91). And so, as "all repression is one" (91), the repression of Thel's perception is also the

repression of her sexuality and vice versa. We must read one as the metaphor for the other. The Clod of Clay's children are the fruits and coined gold which in turn are the love of Dew and Cloud which in turn feed the Lily (and which the Lily associates with God) and refresh Luvah's horses. Perception is imagination, imagination is God, God is love, love is sex, sex is creation, creation is perception . . . in a ten fold rapture of dying and rebirth. The ambiguity of the creative fire is repeated in the image of sexuality in *Thel*. The Dew in the title page holds her arms up in either joy or fear. Eros is mixed with thanatos in the Cloud's narration. The danger that Thel seems to feel about sexuality is involved in the act of awakening, of moving from Innocence through Experience to Higher Innocence. It is dangerous to enter into the caves and melt away the apparent surface of things²³. It can be dangerous to meet the dragon eye to I. To someone like Thel, as to the Angels in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, creation or Genius may look like torment and insanity.

The illuminations of plates 2 and 3 both create images of frames and frame the text. The warrior-creator figure points off into the text, and in three of the next four plates we are given a series of literal representations of the poem's action, the frame itself being repeated in pictorial archings that recall the original archway. In plate 4 a tree canopies Thel and the Lily, in plate 6 a small bush canopies the Worm, with Thel herself being overarched by the departing Cloud. In plate 7, Thel is framed by a diminutive bush (or grass) while she herself canopies over and frames the Cold of Clay and the Worm. Interestingly, these "literal" and internal pictures themselves frame the only plate (5) without any pictures on it (maybe sporting a leaf or two). It is here in this portion of the book (as text and illustrations) that the linguistic density is highest, and this is the section with the Cloud. It occupies the center of the text and the book, marking, perhaps, its interiority, the furthest "in" that we reach (or that Thel reaches). The frames in the next two plates take us back out, the last plate completing the archway frame of plate 2. I will return to this point, but first I want to look a little more closely at plate 6, which shows us a picture of the Cloud and Thel.

First, the Cloud flies away into infinite space--there are no boundaries for him. The maximum interiority is the maximum exteriority, inside is outside, subject object. He recalls the flying figure of plate 3. He is going outward into the air, and strikes a Christlike pose. The creator-warrior figure, especially if we imagine him without his shield and sword, also strikes a Christlike pose, suggesting Christ the destroyer in *The Marriage from Heaven and Hell*:

Note. Jesus Christ did not wish to unite but to separate them [the Prolific and the Devouring], as in the Parable of sheeps and goats! & he says I came not to send Peace but a Sword. (17.4-6)

Thel, however, will continue on her inward journey, into the earth, into her "self," to the chthonic, the devouring, to her grave plot and the confusion of "interior" voices. She, too, strikes a Christlike pose, but she has turned her head downward towards the Worm, away from the Cloud who sails off to his reunion with Dew. Her Christ is one of sacrifice and death. The Cloud's journey is to a union of thanatos and eros; Thel's is to thanatos alone. One might say that Thel, in seeking the life principle only (or in seeking a life principle distinct from sexuality and creativity), finds only death²⁴.

The illustrations on the final plate are illuminating. A serpent stretches right to left, forming the underlying foundation of the archway inscribed in plate 2. In Copy O, there is a tree at the left, the trunk just visible (it is presumably the tree of plate 2), and the serpent is taking us full spiral, closing the door of the threshold as it were. Thel is conspicuously absent from the illustration. We remain behind in the interior that Thel entered and fled, and we are given this vision of the text transmuted (into extra-literal, symbolic images), as in the passage quoted above from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. The implication is that if Thel had remained, the scene would have transmuted as it did for the narrator of that poem. Here we see three small children astride the serpent, one holding the reigns, an image, as many have observed, of Innocence astride Experience²⁵. Interestingly, they have ridden or are riding it in the exterior world, on top of the earth. The interior is now the exterior. The illustration is inside and outside and part of the frame. As a creature living below the earth, the serpent is clustered with the Mole and Worm. As an animal in the illustrations, it is paired with the Eagle of plate three--these are the only non-personified animal figures in the book. The Eagle is above, the serpent below.

Conclusion

I have called this an allegory of potentiality. Thel stands at the threshold, peripherally viewing possibilities and potentialities of what she might make of or do with her life. She wishes to know the meaning and purpose of her life but continually refuses the knowledge that she is responsible for creating her own life. Perception is an act, and the greatest act is creation--a perpetual, ongoing creation.

The ambiguity of much of the rhetoric and imagery is perhaps better seen also as potentialities of meaning and transformation. The Worm is a symbol of male sexuality (and so of Thel's fear and desire, as seen in plate 2), of sexual fulfillment, of creativity and fruition. As such it is also symbolically associated with the creativity of vision and art. Perception, sexuality, art--all are creative. The Worm is also the serpent, which is also potentially a dragon

("serpent" and "dragon" are two of the meanings of "worm"--OED), which resides in the earth like the Mole (hidden in the text and illustrations, as it were) but also flies like the Eagle. The Worm, as infant (or fetus, if you like) is potentially the man (or woman) who is potentially the divine--as the movement in plate 3 shows. The Worm is also a symbol of death (the mortal body, death of the mortal body--OED), and death a metaphor for sexual fulfillment. As the Cloud said, Thel remains a Virgin of the skies--having a fear of flying, she does not die that little death to herself; neither does she die in the Elizabethan sense of making love. She does not undergo Blakean self-annihilation. She does not, as Donne's poem puts it, die and rise the same. Her lessons remain mysterious because of her "self."

One might play with this idea a bit more and say that the Worm itself is a symbol of potentiality, of the potentiality of Thel herself. She may rise from the lowly, earth-bound innocence to the higher innocence symbolized by the yoked serpent of the final plate--experience controlled and ridden by innocence.

On plate 15 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, there is an eagle clasping in its talons a serpent or viper. As the editors of *The Early Illuminated Books* note:

According to Désirée Hirst, in alchemy eagles holding serpents symbolize the "union of sulphre and mercury, matter and spirit" In those terms [placement above and below] the eagle is the redeemed, infinite form of the serpent in its traditional role of the mortal body. . . . (136-137)

By a series of transformations, the Mole of the motto is the Worm in the text. The Worm personified in the text is the mortal body in the illustration of Plate 3, which is the child/woman/man as well as the Eagle and the angel-warrior. The Worm is also the serpent of the final plate, and this serpent, yoked and perhaps only tenuously controlled (hence its fierce and threatening aspect) by the children, is the unrealized potential of the transformation of the Worm (as serpent) into Eagle, the serpent's "redeemed, infinite form." Thel has not been fully transformed by the apocalypse of the Last Judgement because she ran away before it was complete. The transformative process marks the birth of the visionary man (or woman), the angel with the flaming sword, who or what Thel could potentially become, what we all potentially could become.

Frye says that "The destruction of the appearance of this world must precede the vision of the same world purified, and, subject and object being inseparable, the Selfhood must be annihilated before the true self can appear" (59). The destruction of the world is the terrifying vision Thel sees before she hears the voice from the grave plot. She sees only half the picture, the chthonic, destructive, devouring Worm (as sexuality and death) and womb of earth. She

fails to complete the transition, fails to join the Worm (as serpent) with the Eagle, fails to see the creative and prolific, fails thus to "unite" or to see as united, devourer and prolific, matter and spirit, body and soul.

As Thomas R. Frosh remarks in a discussion of Blake's prose work *A Vision of the Last Judgement*:

For Blake, eternity and infinity involve not an emancipation from, but a reorganization of the sense of space and time. They signify the liberty to invent space and time, in the way that art does, and so to be alive in an immediate present that is delineated by the perceiver's imagination.

The visionary conversation is thus the making of life, now analogous to the making of a work of art, and in these plates Blake describes the achievement of a particular edenic moment, in which desire finds its form and in which the natural world is replaced by a word of emanation. In the poem's final line, the moment is consummated as the emanation is joyfully recognized: a poem is completed, a world is made, Albion rejoins his bridge. But there is no finality in this accomplishment, for Blake's paradise is not the end-point of a linear development, but a state of perpetual creative activity. Eden itself moves, going from Eternity to Eternity, creation to creation. (88-89)

Perhaps, drawing from Dante, we might say that instead of an allegory, *Thel* provides an anagogic of potentiality. On the literal level, we have a story of a girl who talks to various creatures and learns (or should learn) that everything that lives is holy. On the allegorical level, it is the story of the rite of passage from adolescence into adulthood, focusing on the Liminal or Transitional phase but also dealing with the initial Separation and terminal Incorporation phases, the latter of which is a failure for she has not passed her "test." The moral level is that we must undergo self-annihilation to be reborn. The sexual meaning of the allegorical level is translated to the spiritual meaning of the moral level. The anagogic or universal meaning is that the sexual (body) is the spiritual, and the Christian scheme of Creation, Redemption, Judgement is transformed by Blake into the individual's personal apocalypse (Greek for "revelation") : the "redeemed infinite form of the serpent" which is the Eagle, is revealed or made possible by the creative, visionary artist, the angel with the flaming sword.

Notes

¹ Or, to further complicate matters, where do we read the motto: at the beginning, the end, or not at all, depending on which copy we consult. We might say that this textual problem creates for the reader

the same problem Thel must try to solve: how do we interpret these different possibilities or potentialities?

² See, for example, Michael Ferber's "Blake's *Thel* and the Bride of Christ." See also W. J. T. Mitchell, who remarks that we might read in the characters "the threefold system of Christological 'consummation'; they 'consume' or are 'consumed' and, like the Eucharist, mark a union of the human and divine--they are thus 'completed' and 'perfected,' the Cloud and Clay marking the sexual meaning of 'consummate' (94, n22).

³ Unless otherwise noted, for the reader's convenience and because of variation in the numbering of Blake's plates in different editions of his poems, I have used the plate and line references from *William Blake: The Complete Poems* for all references except *The Book of Thel*, for which I have used *William Blake: The Early Illuminated Books*. The plate number is followed by the line number. For example, 8.11-22 means plate 8 lines 11-22.

⁴ The editors of *The Early Illuminated Books* remark: "She comes to her own grave and hears a series of questions (8:11-20). These centre on the destructive potential of the senses, as though each is a portal to the body's vulnerable interior, but conclude (somewhat contradictorily) with two questions about the barriers to sexual enjoyment. Thus as we near the poem's conclusion we are presented not with answers but with more--and more horrific--questions that expose the underside of the pleasant world of flowers, worms, and self-sacrifice. Thel, apparently frightened by what she hears, shrieks and flees back to where she began her journey of discovery" (76). Christopher Heppner focuses on her vulnerability, emphasizing the connection between the senses and sexuality: "Thel perceives her body as vulnerable, and her senses as so many undefended openings into which the aggressively seductive motives of others may pierce. She is in fact experiencing in her own body something akin to the vulnerability she saw in the Worm. For the first time in the poem, we become aware of the possible existence for Thel of other people, apart from sisters, and her anxieties about the stability and durability of her consciousness now become focused on the penetrability of her body's boundaries, the senses being key-points for entrances and exits. The voice of her fear shifts from the Ear and Eye of the speaking body in the first two lines, to the Eyelids and Eye of external tempters in the next lines; poison, arrows, fruits and gold are all imagined as threatening to enter and subdue by force or seduction. The Tongue, I think, is also that of an external flatterer, using 'honey' as a Trojan horse to win entrance to her mind. The world of other people, in ways reminiscent of Sartrean existentialism, is perceived as a world of aggressive threats to the integrity of body and mind. Other people are hell in that they appear to encroach upon the speaker's identity; for Thel, other people make war and not love" (94-95). Otter sees the gifted eye and honey tongue as "flattering temptation" (654); Murray sees them as "material seductions" and "tempting sweetness," respectively (293). From this point of view, one could remark on Blake's skill in making these two lines (15-16) seem so tempting in their non-threatening presentation of imagery: they flatter like flatterers. K. D. Everest, who is, I think, closer to the mark in emphasizing the contradictions, also hears the voice as Thel's, albeit a projected future self: "The voice which Thel then hears, from 'her own grave plot', is that of her 'dead' future self, that is to say the voice she imagines she will speak with, when the self she now is will have been destroyed by an entry into experience entailing decisive changes. The disabling contradictions of this 'voice of sorrow' are those feared by Thel to be the result of acquiescence in her subjection to the social order" (206).

⁵ It is worthwhile noting that Blake "erased" the last two questions, the ones focusing on sexuality, from copies I and J. The editors of *The Early Illuminated Books* suggest Blake did so to not offend the

blushing sensibilities of potential customers. Perhaps. One might also make the case that this elision refocuses our attention more fully away from the sexual theme and onto the existential one.

⁶ Significantly, Blake had originally written "see," which he deleted in favor of "mark" (*Complete Poems* 143).

⁷ Indeed, Blake embellished his final copy with liquid gold (copy O, c. 1818--one of two copies he made in a final printing; the gold makes me think it his last).

⁸ See Heppner, for example, who traces the lines to "conventions of Elizabethan love poetry" (94-96). A point that I wish to make is that critics refuse to read these individual lines in anything but an ironic way. This itself is ironic because of the critics' insistence of the ambiguity of the poem. The irony of the lines may not necessarily be within the lines themselves (not intralineal) but in their relationship to the other questions and the larger poem (interlineal). In a similar way, Blake may have meant us to take the "voice of sorrow" as ironic: it may well be that it is a voice of sorrow only to Thel's ears because she hears what she wants to hear (which is ironically or paradoxically not what she wants to hear). Hence, we might read the voice's lines 8.13-14 ironically, also drawing on Elizabethan love poetry. In Sonnet 40 of Spencer's *Amoretti*, for example, we read: "When on each eyelid sweetly doe appeare / An hundred Graces as in shade to sit. . ."

⁹ Significantly, both Cloud and Dew get decapitalized, or dehumanized, when Thel descends into the realm of the dead: "She wanderd in the land of clouds thro' valleys dark, listning / Dolours & lamentations: waiting oft beside a dewy grave / She stood in silence, listening to the voices of the ground. . ." (8.6-8). She has narrowed, reduced her own vision or perception.

¹⁰ The phrase is from *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (7.1), in a section that weds sight with sexuality, perception with the creation of reality:

Religious dreams and holy vespers, light thy smoky fires:
Once were thy fires lighted by the eyes of honest morn
And does my Theotormon seek his hypocrite modesty!
This knowing, artful, secret, cautious, trembling hypocrite.
Then is Oothoon a whore indeed! and all the virgin joys
Of life are harlots: and Theotormon is a sick mans dream
And Oothoon is the crafty slave of selfish holiness.
But Oothoon is not so, a virgin fill'd with virgin fancies
Open to joy and to delight where ever beauty appears
If in the morning sun I find it: there my eyes are fix'd
In happy copulation; if in evening mild. wearied with work;
Sit on a bank and draw the pleasures of this free born joy. (6.15-7.2)

Theotormon is self-tormented, Oothoon joyous, drawing opposite meanings from the same things. His smoky fires are like Thel's tamed steeds; Oothoon's fires of the morning sun are like the Cloud's refreshed ones. And, like the hero of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Oothoon sits on a bank watching the "transformed" scene (this is taken up below). Oothoon then later says "lovely copulation" (7.26) when she imagines watching Theotormon, the God-tormented, in happy copulation with "girls of mild silver, or of furious gold" who she has caught for and brought to him. He is tormented by these socially constructed images of sexuality and has made a hell of what is potentially heaven.

¹¹ Another way to put this is that on her ontological quest she seeks epistemological answers which the text rewrites or reformulates in terms of phenomenology--representations, functions of her percep-

tion. See the next endnote also.

¹² Or, to further complicate matters, *where* do we read the motto: at the beginning, the end, or not at all, depending on which copy we consult. We might say that this textual problem creates for the reader the same problem Thel must try to solve: how do we interpret these different possibilities or potentialities.

¹³ This image may indicate the presence of Alicia Ostriker's Blake number four who sees "the female principle as subordinate to the male" (90). After all, the silver dew is united with the cloud in a *golden* band. If so, this Blake is subordinate to Blake numbers one and two, one who "celebrates sexuality and attacks repression," and two who "depicts sexual life as a complex web of gender complementarities and interdependencies" (90).

¹⁴ Mitchell makes the same point: "Thel's relief depends, however, upon either a misunderstanding or an evasion of what the Clod of Clay is saying. She translates the account of God's relation to his creatures as a fruitful marriage into the relation of parent to infant. Where the Clod of Clay sees God as a husband, Thel sees him as a father" (92).

¹⁵ Copy J is not illustrated. Copy O, however, shows the motto contained in a rectangular box with "cloud forms, blue sky, and touches of gold" (*Early Illuminated Books* 81) suggesting associations among eagle, cloud, air, fire, sun, and gold.

¹⁶ On the ambiguity of the woman's pose, see, for example, *The Early Illuminated Books* 82.

¹⁷ Which is, of course, complicated by the motto, which is both present and absent, inside and outside, before and after the linguistic text. The Eagle is linguistically present in the motto, but Blake placed the motto sometimes before, sometimes after the pastoral poem of *Thel*, and may have even omitted it in one printing (David B. Erdman notes that there is one copy "complete except for the motto" (33)). The motto tropes on and is troped on by the whole problem of interiority-exteriority that the larger book presents. The Eagle is outside the pit, the Mole inside. Interiority and exteriority can be seen to figure the whole problem of the subject-object relationship, and hence, perception. On how we read the motto in terms of positioning before or after, the editors of *The Early Illuminated Books* remark: "Bound as the first plate, the motto proposes questions that would seem to imitate, or might even be answered in, the text that follows. When bound last (copies N and O), the motto continues the unanswered questions from the pit on plate 8 and resists closure or resolution" (108).

¹⁸ This narrative is described not so much by the movement up or clockwise as by the direction the figures gaze and at whom they gaze. Movement, which is development and transformation, is a function of perception.

¹⁹ As soul about to enter this world, he is the child being greeted by the mother in the tableau above him. In this sense the child is Thel (a hermaphroditic image) as the mother is Thel in another reading. She is both mother and child, male and female. The series of images narrate a story line of soul being born into child growing into man. Symbolically, this is Thel's story, of a soul growing into child into mother: the male figure at the top is both her child grown to adulthood and symbolically herself grown into adulthood.

²⁰ Marjorie Levinson emphasizes the need for Thel to integrate the two contrary visions or ways of seeing:

The marriage between Eagle and Mole vision would occur when the Mole brought his sense of the Eagle into the Pit. The Pit, unable to contain this unstable potential, would explode and produce a finite third term: double-vision, seeing the divine in the human and the human in the

divine. At this point, the Mole would cease to be a Mole (different vision, different being). His body, the outward circumference of his soul, would expand until it found rest in another Pit or paradigm, another confining mental form, another body of resistance needed to define his own boundaries.

Thel's experience provides the answer to the Mole's dilemma, which is, how to realize the existence of Eagles or the possibility of Eagle vision in the first place. (292)

I'm not sure if I agree with her paradigm of the pit. The different being is the mole or worm in the eagle's claws. Why not have the eagle draw the mole and hence the mole vision up out of the pit? The different being is figured in the serpent of the final plate, which is freed from the pit (it rides on top of the ground).

²¹ L. J. Swingle remarks: "Like Promethean fire, questioning is a flame that seems to produce both pain and delight. On the one hand, it is a light that burns, destroying all apparent havens of stable certainty and thus leaving the mind to torture itself in darkness. . . . But, on the other hand, the destruction of those havens of stable certainty might be experienced, alternately, as a movement toward freedom. The flame melts the ice of winter, burning away the heavy yoke of customary belief. This highly charged tension is marked most dramatically in Blake's 'Tyger,' a poem composed entirely of a series of unanswered questions. Like this questioning, the beast of Blake's poem burns; but that burning is bright. The beast is fearful, but it is also 'symmetrical.' The implied promise of the Tyger's presence in the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* is that its flames may be capable of melting the snows of an imprisoning winter that Experience finds itself confronting: 'A little black thing among the snow: / Crying weep, weep, in notes of woe!'" (*The Obstinate Questionings of English Romanticism* 5-6). It is pertinent that both the motto and utterances of the voice from the grave plot are structured entirely of questions.

²² And interestingly, the Eagle can serve for a symbol of self-annihilation and rebirth, much like the phoenix. It is also "one of the four figures which made up the cherub in Christian art" (Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*).

²³ Blake uses the same verb, "melt," to describe the action of his corrosive method and to describe what happens to the Lily.

²⁴ Mitchell says that "Her failure to learn how to die arises, paradoxically, from her wish for death" (90). See his interesting discussion of this problem.

²⁵ One is tempted to say Cherubs or Cherubim are riding the serpent. Like the Eagle, the Cherub is itself one of the four faces of the Cherub in Ezekiel. As one is the face of the other, so the image would be equivalent to the Eagle above and the serpent below.

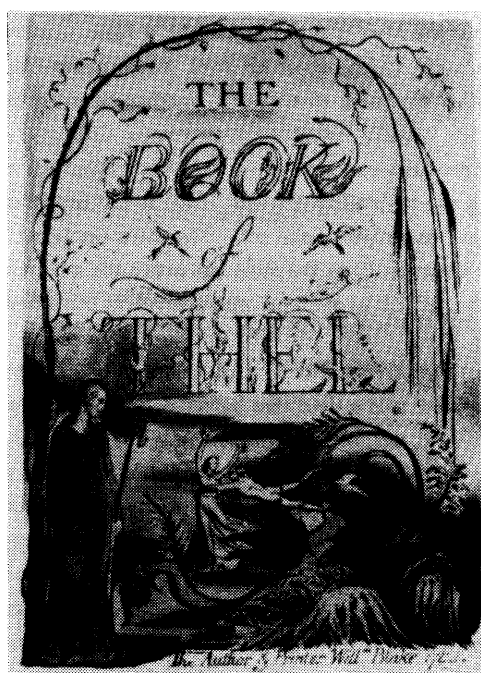


Plate 2

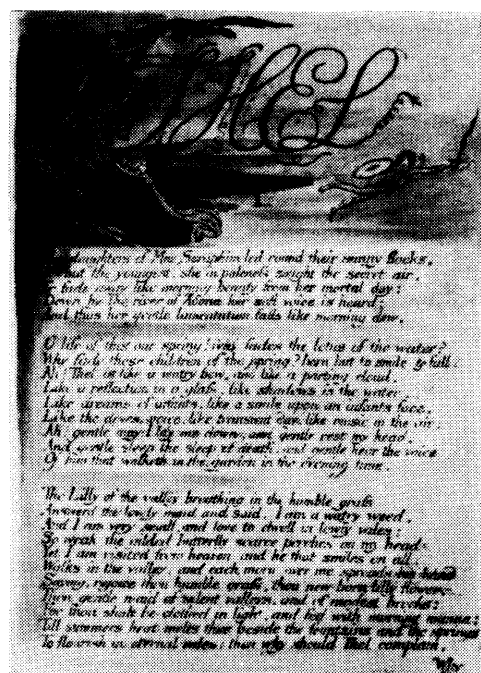


Plate 3

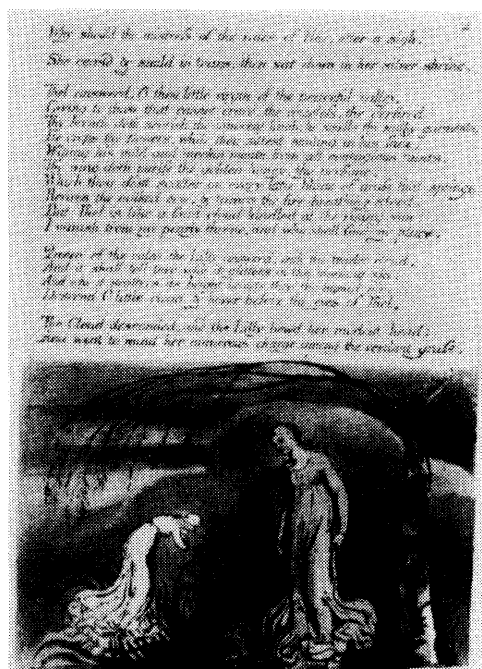


Plate 4

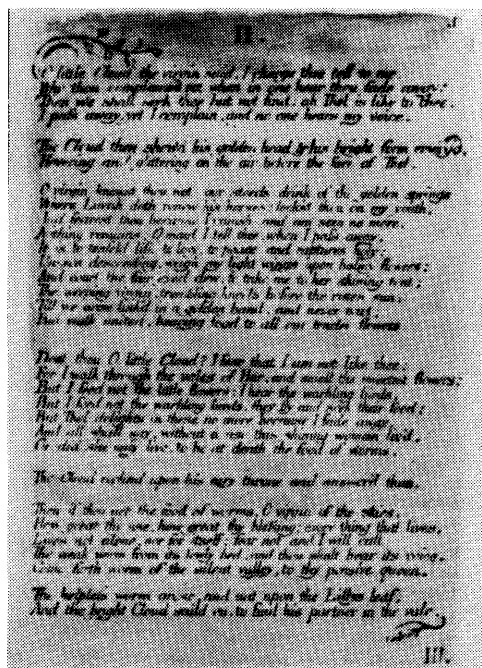


Plate 5

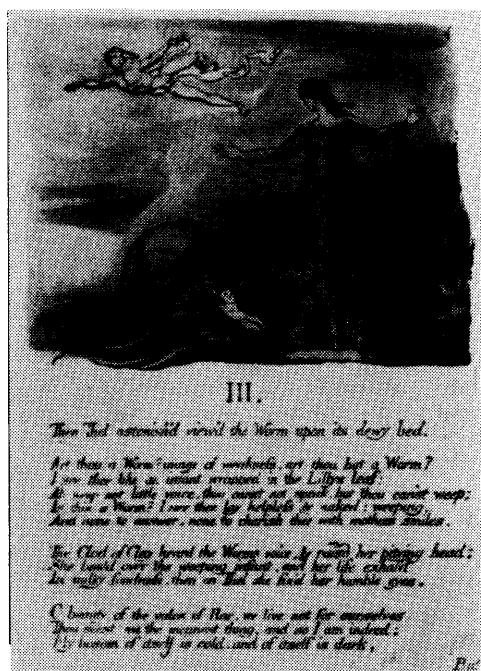


Plate 6

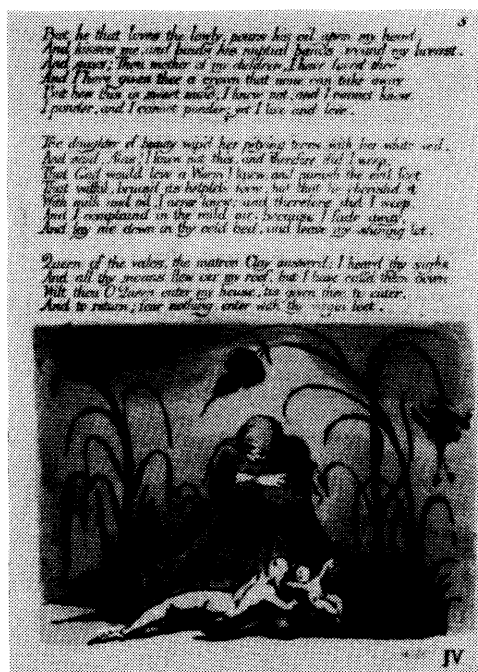


Plate 7

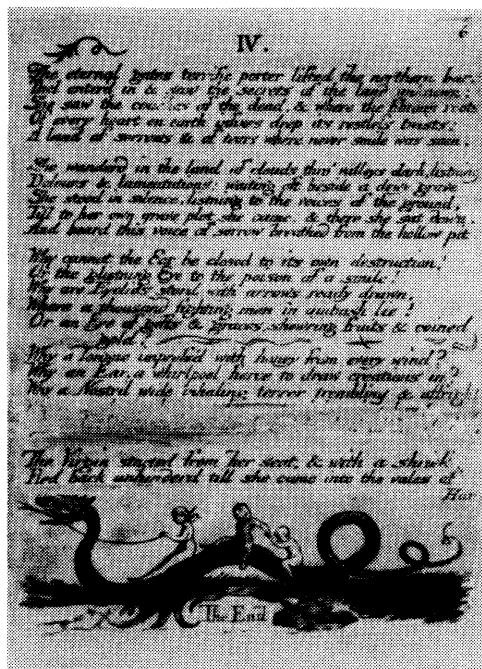


Plate 8

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