

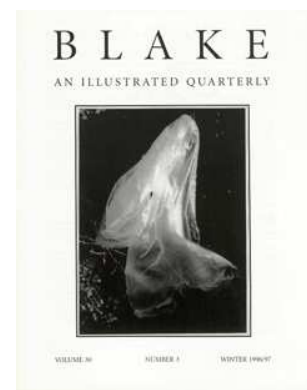
# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

M I N U T E  
P A R T I C U L A R

## Seeing Thel as Serpent

Hilda Hollis

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Verena Immenhauser (b. 1939), *Vala: Arbeiten zu Blake*, Berner Galerie, Berne, Switz., 1-24 Nov. 1988. On show were the installation "Beneath the Veil of Vala" (as reviewed above), as well as a selection of the artist's "Vala" photographs and oil paintings (the latter somehow reminiscent of Cy Twombly's "Wilder Shores of Love"). There was no catalogue, but the exhibition was previously reviewed in *Der Bund* and by Ester Adeyemi, *Berner Zeitung*, 12 Nov. 1988.

Dieter Löchle (b. 1952), *William Blake—Roof'd in from Eternity*, Universitätsbibliothek, Tübingen, Ger., 3 Apr.-25 May 1995. The catalogue, with a note on the artist by Susanne Padberg, translations from Blake's poetry, and a commentary on Blake's prophecies by the artist, is being distributed by the Galerie Druck & Buch (Nauklerstrasse 7, D-72074 Tübingen, Ger.). The show was previously reviewed by Kurt Oesterle, *Schwäbisches Tagblatt*, 6 Apr. 1995: 27. On the occasion of the exhibition, and under the same title, two portfolios with reproductions of Löchle's designs and his prints in offset lithography were issued in a limited edition of 50 copies each (Tübingen, Ger.: Galerie Druck & Buch, 1995).

Jaume Plensa (b. 1955), "One thought fills immensity," Städtische Galerie, Göppingen, Ger., 2 July-6 Aug. 1995. The exhibition catalogue contains Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" and contributions by the artist, Werner Meyer, and Alain Charre (parallel texts in German and English).

Nikolaus Utermöhlen (b. 1958), 1992 *Nikolaus Utermöhlen "An Infinite Painting" on A Vision of the Last Judgment by William Blake 1808*, Zwinger Galerie, Berlin, Ger., 5 Sept.-10 Oct. 1992. In lieu of a catalogue, the gallery issued an "artist's book" in an exceedingly small (and expensive) edition. The exhibition has been briefly reviewed in *Die Tageszeitung*, 15 Sept. 1992.

## MINUTE PARTICULARS

### Seeing Thel as Serpent

BY HILDA HOLLIS

Thel's motto remains one of the most enigmatic aspects of William Blake's short *Book of Thel*. It is composed of a series of questions, the intent of which is unclear, and which only seem to provoke more questions:

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

(i.1-4, E 3)

Most discussion focuses on the second pair of questions, and my argument begins with this set. Two major sources are widely suggested for these lines: Ecclesiastes and Milton's *Comus*. The former refers to the issue of mortality which is of paramount concern to Thel, and the latter bears a relation to Thel's virginal and frightened chastity. I suggest that, while contributing to our understanding of these lines, neither Ecclesiastes nor *Comus* comprehends the full or multiple meaning of Thel and its motto. Blake first composed these lines in *Tiriel* in a section which he subsequently deleted, and this original context suggests another metaphor which has implications for the whole of the later book.

When Tiriel first utters the questions about the rod and bowl, there is no clear reference to sexuality and certainly no allusion to *Comus*. Tiriel's concern with his old age and mortality echoes Ecclesiastes: "before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken" (12:6). But there are significant differences. Cord is replaced by rod, and neither wisdom nor love is associated with these objects in Ecclesiastes. Originally a single line, "Can wisdom be put in a silver rod or love in a golden bowl" (deleted from *Tiriel* 8, E 815), these questions occur in Tiriel's final venting of rage against his father. The anger expressed by Tiriel against power supported by a hypocritical religion is a familiar theme in Blake's work. Here Tiriel questions the universalizing myth of "Thy God of love thy heaven of joy" (del., E 815) invoked by a natural religion which turns Tiriel into a serpent. As a child, Tiriel claims that he was not given nourishment and milk by his mother, and that his father scourged him into weak infant sorrow. This treatment bred hypocrisy—"the idiots wisdom & the wise mans folly" (del., E 815). Elizabeth Stieg identifies Tiriel as a false prophet, "one who speaks in God's name to tyrannize over others" (296). Tiriel is brought to that hypocritical and limiting religion which Blake elsewhere identifies as feminine: "Compell'd to pray repugnant & to humble the immortal spirit / Till I am subtil as a serpent in paradise" (8.23-24, E



285). I suggest the transformation into a serpent that Tiriell undergoes is identical to Blake's intention in the drawing of a serpent at the end of *Thel*.

When Tiriell asks "Can wisdom be put in a silver rod or love in a golden bowl," he appears to allude to his father's scourging "off all youthful fantasies" (8.18, *E* 285) and to the replacement of his mother's milk and nourishment presumably by food served in a dish. As a metaphor extending Tiriell's personal experience, the silver rod and golden cup have wider reference to abusive political and religious authorities which can be identified with the sceptre and the chalice. Blake's condemnation and linking of King and Priest occur throughout his work. For instance, in "The Chimney Sweeper" from *Songs of Experience*, Blake connects "God & his Priest & King / Who make up a heaven of our misery" (11-12, *E* 23). This identification is also seen clearly in the alliance between the Archbishop and the sceptre-wielding King in *The French Revolution*. Tiriell thus inquires whether wisdom can come from a silver sceptre and if love can be found in a golden chalice. The gold and silver symbolize the hypocrisy with which these symbols are overlaid. In particular, the image of the golden bowl is striking since it recalls the Eucharistic cup representing Christ's sacrificial offering. But the golden chalice of a wealthy and selfish church in the face of poverty creates an image of contradiction. While wisdom and love are declared, their opposite is evinced. Gold and precious jewels are used in the same way in "I saw a chapel all of gold." Just as Tiriell is transformed into a serpent, this chapel breeds a serpent who vomits "his poison out / On the bread & on the wine" (13-14, *E* 467).

I suggest that we read *Thel* as a type of the Female Will, and, as such, as a metaphor for the limiting natural religion enforced by priest and king. *Thel*'s name is itself a Greek pun on *female* (*thel*) and *will* (*thel*).<sup>1</sup> Susan Fox argues that in *Thel* Blake depicts a feminine failure which

foreshadows the genderless failure of active desire Blake will develop in later poems: in the context of his other works *Thel* suggests not just the frailty of women, but the "feminine" frailty of all human beings. In *Europe* (1794), engraved five years after the *Innocence* songs and *Thel*, female characters represent not only the darker propensities Blake feared in women, but the technically genderless tyrannies of nature and religion as well. (511)

In later works, Blake consolidates his idea of Female Will and develops it in an explicit opposition to an active Will. While there is no male Will in this early poem, Blake depicts in *Thel* the attributes that he will later give to the separated female emanation.

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Murray draws attention to the popular contemporary recognition of *Thel* as Greek for *woman* after the publication in 1780-81 of Martin Madan's notorious polemic, *Thelyphthora* (see esp. 276 and n4).

Foster Damon draws our attention to two traditional ways of understanding *Thel*. While Damon argues that *Thel*'s fear of maturation and motherhood is an "obvious" interpretation of the poem, he also suggests that *Thel* represents a soul fearful of entering the world and hypothesizes that the *Book of Thel* is an elegy for a possible stillborn child of the Blakes.<sup>2</sup> In either case, Damon contends that *Thel* never reappears in any of Blake's later poetry, either because she is "far too nice a girl" (*Dictionary* 401) or because the poem lacks a universal application since "most souls do not refuse to be born" ("Blake and Milton" 94). In contrast to Damon, I argue that we do see a reincarnation of *Thel* in Blake's development of a fearful Female Will. The "*Thel*" who reappears is the one who corresponds to the first interpretation of *Thel* acknowledged by Damon to be obvious, but I place a more sinister interpretation on this girl who is "too nice." In *Jerusalem*, Los's thunderous query, "O Albion why didst thou a Female Will Create?" (56.43, *E* 206), is uttered in response to the Albion women's declaration of timidity: "We Women tremble at the light therefore: hiding fearful / The Divine Vision with Curtain & Veil & fleshly Tabernacle" (56.39-40, *E* 206). The women's statement of prohibitive fear recalls the near final lines of *Thel*: "Why a tender curb upon the youthful burning boy! / Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?" (6.19-20, *E* 6). Limited by her mortality, *Thel* separates herself from her fellow creatures and, by refusing to give, she becomes symbolic of self-oriented religion.

Rather than seeing an infinite world, *Thel* is bound by death, wanting to "hear the voice / Of him that walketh in the garden in the evening time" (1.14, *E* 3). In *Genesis*, when God is heard walking in the garden in the evening time, Adam and Eve hide themselves because they have disobeyed, and then God curses them with their own mortality: "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (*Genesis* 3:19). The voice which speaks in the garden is punitive and utters death; *Thel* desires to be bound by this voice which insists on mortality.

Some recent critics read *Thel* in a positive light and see in her a rebellious female—a type of proto-feminist, years beyond Mary Wollstonecraft.<sup>3</sup> Applauding *Thel*'s refusal to

<sup>2</sup> Damon finds support for this hypothesis in what he contends is yet another allusion to a miscarriage in Los's words to the Albion women in *Jerusalem*:

To the golden Loom of Love! to the moth-labour'd Woof  
A Garment and Cradle weaving for the infantine Terror:  
For fear; at entering the gate into our World of cruel  
Lamentation: it flee back & hide in Non-Entity's dark wild.  
(56.13-16, *E* 206)

Damon makes this argument in *A Blake Dictionary* (401) and "Blake and Milton" (94).

<sup>3</sup> For example, Gerda Norvig argues,

For despite the evidence that Blake later on adopted a revisionary form of these same Christian ideals, my contention is



submit to masculine demands, sexual or otherwise, they suggest that Blake approved of Thel. It is important, however, to distinguish a feminist sympathy with Thel from Blake's attitude, and I would avoid the danger of falsely attributing a feminist agenda to Blake. Blake's work is not written in support of the 1990s hard won recognition of a woman's right to say *no*, but rather identifies the nay-saying virgin with natural religion. Alicia Ostriker's comment that "Thel is selfish, and a coward" (151), while not representative of most current feminist readings of Thel's actions, is probably closer to Blake's own reading of his creation.

Throughout the book, images identify Thel as a parody or false Christ. In the frontispiece, Thel is depicted as a shepherdess without sheep. Originally she is not without a caring role, but like the leaders of the church or false prophets, she is a false shepherd and abandons her sheep. In each of the illustrations, Thel does not act, but merely presents a formal imitation of her interlocutors' activities. In the second plate, the lily bows deeply because she is weighed down by her fruit—representing her generative powers and her gifts. Thel, in contrast, engages in a shallow ritual bow. While the cloud in plate 4 spreads his arms to drop his moisture, Thel spreads her arms over the baby worm at a safe distance from which she can give nothing to him. David Erdman comments that in plate 5 Thel "almost makes a cradle of her arms" (39). This empty cradle parodies the clod of clay lying on the ground and perhaps playing with the baby. Thel is like a golden bowl, for like it, she is a hypocritical imitation of loving kindness. While Thel does eventually enter the earth, she does not engage experience; she only observes, listens and then flees.

In *Thel*, the verses concerning the silver rod and golden bowl are preceded by two other questions: "Does the Eagle know what is in the pit? / Or wilt thou go ask the Mole" (i.1-2, E 3). The reference to the Mole, in connection with gold and silver symbols of religion and authority, recalls the only mole who appears in the Bible. Because of Blake's immersion in the Bible's prophetic books, this passage in Isaiah should be viewed as an important, though previously neglected, intertext:

And they shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth. In that day a man shall cast his *idols of silver*, and his *idols of gold*, which they made each one for himself to worship, to the moles and to the bats. (Isaiah 2:19-20; my emphasis)

that in *this* text he represented and endorsed a liminal view of the desiring self for the purpose of critiquing a philosophy detrimental to the energies of real women even as it served the so-called feminine values of an empirical, deistical patriarchal order. (271)

This passage speaks of powerful leaders taking refuge in the ground when "the day of the Lord" comes and of their realization that their limiting natural religion is not large enough. In particular, "The Lord will enter into judgement with the ancients of his people, and the princes thereof: for ye have eaten up the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses" (Isaiah 3:14). Thel's visit to the caves of the earth is prompted by a personal fear of death or her own "day of the Lord" rather than a universal and apocalyptic one, but in these caves she also encounters terror in the face of insistent and unrelenting questioning. The silver and gold idols—the silver sceptre which pretends to wisdom, but really is a sign of self serving power, and the gold chalice which symbolizes not love, but self-love—are undermined by the questions which are asked.

The series of questions emphasizes Thel's dependence on her eyes and ears—her mortal senses. They query the bounds placed on love. In contrast to the motto's silver rod, Isaiah introduces a rod which is not limited and bound, and which will contain wisdom: "there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse . . . And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding" (Isaiah 11:1-2). In contrast to Thel whose "Ear cannot be closed to its own destruction/ Or the glistening Eye to the poison of a smile" (6.11-12, E 6), he "shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears" (Isaiah 11:3). Thel, however, is concerned with self, and she will not face the challenge posed by the questions which she encounters under the earth. Rather than entering into an active love which will confront natural religion, she flees. Thel attempts to escape her own mortality by entering the holes of the earth, but eventually she opts to return to her own enclosing, safe and dissembling world.

Donald Pearce argues that Thel's mistake was to have inquired of moles rather than eagles. He comments that the lily, the cloud, and the clod only encourage Thel towards a limiting natural religion since they do not have prophetic and spiritual vision. Similarly, Gerda Norvig asserts that Thel's "represented desire for a real female subjectivity is meant to undermine the powerful calls from her interlocutors to embrace a philosophy of repetitive and uncreative self sacrifice" (271). But the poem actually suggests that none of the characters of whom Thel inquires feels limited by their activities. All see their work within a wider and infinite spiritual framework: the lily looks towards eternal vales; the cloud lives on though vanishing to mortal sight; and the clod has an eternal crown. While these creatures are not bound by their physicality, Thel, in contrast, by engaging in imitative gestures, places herself under mortal bounds and within the "same dull round" (*There is No Natural Religion*, b, IV, E 2) so loathed by Blake.

\* See Ephesians 5:31-32.



Each of the creatures encountered by Thel—the lily, the cloud and the clod—is initiated into love. As Michael Ferber points out, the lily and the clod become brides of Christ while the cloud is united with the dew. The lily is visited from heaven, and the clod is bound with “his nuptial bands” (5, 2, E 5). Ferber argues that the cloud’s marriage, although more oblique, also suggests a transcendent marriage to God (45–48). Thel, however, remains a virgin and refuses to enter into this bridal role. The *Bride of Christ* is a title which the church claims for itself,<sup>4</sup> but Blake’s assessment of official religion suggests that the church has not actually fulfilled this role. Likewise, Thel imitates love, but does not love. This false pretense reminds us of Tiriel’s self-description: “subtil as a serpent” (8.37, E 285). In order to achieve his ends he must dissimulate. Is this also the meaning of the enigmatic serpent at the end of Thel? As commentators have noted, Thel is not the child riding the serpent. Her disappearance from the illustration suggests the possibility that she, like Tiriel, has been transformed into a serpent. Eugenie Freed argues that the children riding the serpent may represent the lady and her two brothers from *Comus*. If Thel is understood to represent the moral law, then this identification is apt. Thel, as the moral law, carries the three children on her serpent-back.

By employing in *Thel* the pair of enigmatic questions from the deleted section in *Tiriel*, Blake is able to take advantage of their wide allusive potential in the new setting. Rod and cup are clearly sexual images, and the magician of *Comus* is recalled. The silver cord and golden bowl, symbols of mortality from Ecclesiastes, become important in the context of Thel’s preoccupation with death. But Blake also uses the image of rod and bowl, as sceptre and chalice, in order to introduce Thel as a metaphor for a hypocritical and limiting religion. Thel’s refusal to engage in an active giving role becomes clear as the depictions of her imitative and inactive stance progress throughout the poem. Her transformation into the serpent finally confirms her identity as Thel—*Female Will*.

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## The Seduction of Self-Abnegation in *The Book of Thel*

BY DEBORAH MCCOLLISTER

In his 1961 analysis of William Blake’s *The Book of Thel* and Tiriel, critic Peter F. Fisher comments:

Thel is represented as a woman because she succumbs to mortality in a feminine way—that is to say, passively—by a retreat into wish-fulfilling fantasy. Tiriel is represented as a man because he succumbs in a masculine way, and actively pursues the lure of tyrannical power. . . . Both lose themselves—Tiriel by the path of tyranny, and Thel by the way of suicide. She gives way to the indolence which refuses to desire a human life, and he gives way to that aggression which fails to understand and realize it. (206)

In these characterizations, Fisher’s assignment of gender traits is intriguing: “the feminine way” is “passive,” and Thel’s refusal to enter human life is attributed to “indolence.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, despite his revolutionary spirit, William Blake reflected his culture—one that believed woman’s essential worth lay in her ability to procreate and nourish others.<sup>2</sup> As Thel searches to discover meaning in the vapor

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, in a 1989 assessment of *The Book of Urizen*, Paul Youngquist says that “an adolescent fear of sexual experience . . . precipitates the denial of life” [emphasis mine] in *Thel*. On the other hand, Urizen withdraws from eternity due to “something in the organization of the mind itself, some principle of self-preservation that paradoxically wills death rather than submit to the contingencies of existence” [emphasis mine] (90).

<sup>2</sup> Contemporary handbooks exhorted young ladies to sweetly accept their roles “of servitude to masculine desires and expectations” (Eaves et al. 80).