

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

D I S C U S S I O N

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 10, Issue 1, Summer 1976, pp. 35-38



DISCUSSION

With intellectual spears & long winged arrows of thought

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"Thel's Motto": Likely & Unlikely Sources

The provocation for this note is the publication, in *Blake Newsletter* 34 (Fall 1975), of a note by Michael Ferber entitled "A Possible Source for 'Thel's Motto.'" In a small way, Michael Ferber's note illustrates two of the besetting problems of Blake scholarship in this generation: ignorance of much work already published that is relevant to the point at issue and ignorance of the principles of source study. This ignorance is not, it must be stressed, confined to a particular research student, but it also, I presume (and this is more serious), extends to the editorial "filter" interposed between the scholar and his public. I write, however, not to blame, but to caution and correct.

Michael Ferber begins his note by correctly observing that several biblical sources have been suggested for the second half of "Thel's Motto,"

Can Wisdom be put in a silver rod?
Or Love in a golden bowl?

However, he quotes only two commentators, Northrop Frye and Robert Gleckner, who between them do not offer all the sources so far suggested (Frye: Jeremiah 51.7; Revelation 17.4; Ecclesiastes 12.6; Gleckner: Job 28.12-15). He rejects the Job reference on adequate, and the Ecclesiastes reference on inadequate, grounds and immediately offers "another candidate, somewhat better than these though far from perfect, Hebrews 9.3-4." Unfortunately, this new candidate is by no means the best available; I myself would not admit it as a likely source. On the contrary, it is clear to me that Ecclesiastes 12.6 is the primary source-text for these lines of "Thel's Motto" and that none of the four other "rivals" mentioned by Ferber is a likely source-text.

Why is it so clear? To put it crudely, Ecclesiastes 12.6 is inescapable: it hits the reader in the eye at once; indeed, it is such a well-known text that it is hard to believe that Blake himself could not have noticed that he has varied the formula only slightly. Ecclesiastes 12.6 has "Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken . . ."; in the same order, Blake has "silver rod" and "golden bowl" ("cord" and "rod" are so similar that the shift may well have been helped by "memorial corruption"; this supposition is not incompatible with a trust that Blake was aware of varying the formula as he shaped the lines of the motto). The linguistic similarity between the two passages is so close that, in the absence of an obvious rival or intermediary source, the onus is clearly on those who would argue for an alternative source-text to explain away this similarity. It is not surprising that most commentators are on the side of Ecclesiastes 12.6.¹

Why have some commentators not been satisfied with the Ecclesiastes reference? Quite correctly, they have decided that there is not much value in a proposed source that seems to them to have no particular function: they cannot understand how Blake could have used this particular source in "Thel's Motto." Michael Ferber admits the general relevance to *Thel* of the Ecclesiastes verse, "for its context seems to refer to the death of the body, which Thel shrinks from at the end of the poem" (unfortunately, this is a misreading of the end of the poem, where Thel flees from the terrors of bodily life, not bodily death, but we can agree that death is an important theme of the poem). However, he finds the Ecclesiastes verse cryptic, its context having "little about love or wisdom, and of course a cord is not a rod."² Such despair of finding particular relevance in the Ecclesiastes verse to Blake's lines is understandable, but it is nonetheless the product of a superficial reading. The Ecclesiastes chapter is concerned very closely with Thel's problem, insofar as this is a feeling of vanity, of utter uselessness. That she may become more useful by becoming more perishable is the paradoxical hope she tries to comprehend with the help of her counselors. A clear reminiscence, then, in "Thel's Motto" of the symbols of perishability in the key-text on the subject cannot be regarded as other than appropriate.

It happens that I have already put this case for the Ecclesiastes source-text in an article that was published over ten years ago.³ Before a "better" source-text is offered, the case for the established one should be challenged, not ignored. So far as I can see, the function of the Ecclesiastes reference is limited but definite—it helps to define the rod and bowl in the motto as specifically symbols of mortality and it reminds us of the context in which Thel's dilemma is to be understood. It is not at all unlike Blake to transform his source-material, to put new wine in the old vessels; thus the silver rod of wisdom should not greatly surprise us. The transformation is, rather, a characteristic mark of Blake's genius as a source-user.

If we can agree that this argument validates Ecclesiastes 12.6 as the primary biblical source-text behind the last two lines of "Thel's Motto," we have not necessarily excluded other biblical texts from recognition as secondary (and supportive) sources. In this category should probably be placed Proverbs 29.15, noticed by Viola Juanita Hill but not generally recognized: "The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame."⁴ Gleckner's reference to Job 28.12-15 is similarly suggestive. Frye's references to Jeremiah 51.7 and Revelation 17.4 are possible but more speculative. Michael Ferber's reference to Hebrews 9.3-4 may be regarded as a rival primary source, but cannot be a secondary source because its implications do not support but conflict with the Ecclesiastes reference.

The Hebrews text is put forward primarily because it has in close association "the golden pot that had manna, and Aaron's rod that budded." At once it is clear that if Blake used this text, he

made more changes than were necessary for the Ecclesiastes reference: "golden pot" to "golden bowl" (two quite different ideas in Scripture), "Aaron's rod" to "silver rod" (the former was presumably wooden), with the order of mention reversed. Supportive evidence would have to be strong to make us decide in favor of a source-text that is measurably so much more distant from Blake's than the one already established. Such evidence is not forthcoming in Ferber's note and is, in my opinion, not available. All that Ferber can do is show that the Hebrews text would not be inconsistent with Blake's general intentions in *Thel*, if he had used it. This would be plausible if there were not a rival, and closer, candidate.

Although, as I say, this kind of evidence is all that plausibly can be adduced (linguistic and imagistic similarity and a general similarity in idea), Ferber does attempt to adduce further evidence, viz., that the manna in the golden pot of Hebrews 9.4 is linked to another text in *Thel*, that describing the "morning manna" with which the Lilly will be fed (though not in eternity, as Ferber misreads) via the "hidden manna" of Revelation 2.17, which is, according to Ferber, the text referred to for the Lilly's food. This evidence is inadmissible, because Revelation 2.17 would be a far-fetched reference for the Lilly's "morning manna," when the much more obvious text, Exodus 16.13-21, is to hand (and is inevitable, because Blake speaks of "morning manna" not "hidden manna").⁵

It remains for me to point out that Ferber should formally have considered the other Blake text involved in any discussion of the sources of the last two lines of "Thel's Motto," i.e., the line in Tiriel's last speech which is word for word the same as the lines in *Thel*--the *Tiriel* line might, after all, have come first. Since Tiriel's speech anticipates Oothoon in arguing that men cannot be formed all alike, despite the efforts of educators, Tiriel's question is rather different from Thel's, even though the words are the same. Whereas Tiriel expresses indignation at the threat of forcing wisdom or love into narrow and exclusive channels, Thel wonders whether the attempt must be made to express wisdom or love through confined media. The answer to Tiriel's question is clearly "no," but Thel's question is conditioned by the first lines of her "Motto" and by the action of the poem as a whole, which suggest that she should, but, perhaps tragically, does not, answer "yes." Thel's question seems much the more profound, and much better fitted to its context than Tiriel's. It is highly characteristic of Blake that he should treat his own words as being, equally with other literary sources, old wineskins that must be made to hold new wine ("every thing that lives is holy" is perhaps the most notorious instance of this tendency). It is, however, not easy to see which way progress has been made, whether from *Tiriel* to *Thel* or vice versa. It could be that this particular formulation was first achieved independently of either context. My speculation is complicated by the feeling I have that the *Thel* context is much closer to the biblical source or sources than that in *Tiriel* (which we usually think of as earlier than *Thel* and, particularly,

of this part of *Thel*, as etched). But here argument obviously fails: source-study has its limitations. Nonetheless, if we observe the rules of evidence, source-study can, with such a poet as Blake, be extremely helpful; if we don't observe the rules, we are liable only to add another ort to the scrap-heap of error.

Michael Tolley

¹ See for instance S. Foster Damon, *William Blake, His Philosophy and Symbols* (Boston, 1924), p. 310; Harold Bloom, commentary for David V. Erdman's edition of *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (Garden City, N.Y., 1965), p. 808; Viola Juanita Hill, "Blake and the Bible," unpub. M.A. thesis (Indiana University, 1937), p. 54; Hazard Adams, ed. *William Blake: Jerusalem, Selected Poems and Prose* (New York, 1970), p. 704.

The weight of numbers supporting a particular source-text is, at worst, a fact to reckon with, though it is as fallible a guide to truth as most majorities.

² Robert F. Gleckner used a similar argument in correspondence with me back in 1964, concerning his article on the biblical sources of *Thel*: "I was aware of the Ecclesiastes 12.6 passage in commenting on Thel's motto, and I certainly should have said that the Ecclesiastes was a misleading reference, despite the similarity in images. I take it indeed as an excellent example of Blake's use of Biblical imagery without clearly referring to a specific passage. The silver cord is not a rod, and the broken golden bowl as used in Ecclesiastes I cannot see in the *Thel* context." However, as read along the lines I suggest, the reference does not seem either misleading or unparticular.

³ "The Book of *Thel* and *Night Thoughts*," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 69 (1965), esp. 379f.

⁴ See note 1. Hill's further suggestion, Psalms 74.2, is not at all close--one need not list the appearance of every "rod" in the Bible.

⁵ Another point against the Hebrews 9 suggestion (and this is the kind of point a source-student should consider) is that in what are, so far as I have recorded, Blake's only clear allusions to Hebrews 9.1-5, the descriptions of the opened temple in the *Last Judgment* design, the golden pot and Aaron's rod are not mentioned. See Geoffrey Keynes, ed. *The Complete Writings of William Blake* (London, 1957, etc.), pp. 444, 647. On the other hand, there is another reference to Ecclesiastes 12.6 in *Jerusalem* 65:18-19, using the idea of "the wheel broken at the cistern," while it is left to *Job Illustrations*, plate 6, to give us the remaining image in this verse, "the pitcher . . . broken at the fountain," alongside the grasshopper of verse 5.

I thank Michael Tolley for his thorough critique of my proposal. In reconsidering it I find more to be said for it, and more against it, than he would allow.

In its defense, I would again stress the weaknesses of the Ecclesiastes passage. The words "cord" and "rod" are similar only in sound, not in meaning, and the change in meaning, whether consciously or unconsciously made, is considerable. For one thing, it destroys the original image. I may have been too quick to declare verse 12.6 cryptic, though the fact that Tolley offers no help on it but turns instead to the relevance to *Thel* of the whole chapter suggests either he too finds it cryptic or he sees that its meaning gives no support for his case. Biblical commentators seem agreed that the golden bowl is an oil lamp and the silver cord is what suspends it. If the bowl is broken or the cord

loosed the oil will spill and the flame go out. It is a single image, corresponding to the image of pitcher and wheel at the well in the parallel member of the verse. Oil and water are symbols, here as elsewhere, of life. Lamps are not found, here or anywhere, on rods.

The motto, moreover, has six terms, not four, and the two abstract terms have meanings not present in the Ecclesiastes verse. Tolley does not claim they do: he sensibly suggests vanity as the concern of the chapter, says nothing about love, and adduces wisdom only as appropriate to a rod, as of course it is, but there is no rod in Ecclesiastes 12.6. I would even concede that wisdom is vaguely implicit in the verse, for it is certainly a theme of the chapter, but there is very little about love in the chapter or the whole book. To a Christian that is just what is wrong with Ecclesiastes; for love we must turn to the next book, the Song of Solomon (a substantial presence in *TheL*, as Tolley and others have pointed out), and of course to the New Testament. Love, even marriage, is an important theme in *TheL*, rather more important, I think, than vanity or uselessness (if those are the same thing).

As for my proposal, I only have to account for "silver," and I think that is less of a problem than turning a cord into a rod. It is true I have also turned a pot into a bowl, and so perhaps our dispute boils down, alas, to this: I think pots are like bowls and Michael Tolley thinks cords are like rods. At any rate, "love" seems an obvious meaning of the manna put into the bowl/pot by the Israelites (Ecclesiastes says nothing about *putting* oil, or anything else, *into* the bowl), and wisdom, as Tolley agrees, is the kind of thing that goes with rods (if not *in* rods, but that is Blake's problem), whether Aaron's or any other. Adding up the elements, then, I beat Tolley 5 to 3 (6 to 3 if you count "put"), though I would grant him an extra point for having his items in the right order. That there is something ludicrous in this procedure is a point I will return to.

In further defense of the Hebrews passage, let me return to manna. Tolley criticizes me for preferring the far-fetched "hidden manna" of Revelation 2.17 to the more obvious manna that appears in the morning in Exodus 16. That more obvious manna I had in fact just mentioned as the contents of the pot. But it is not a matter of choosing one or the other: for a Christian, at least, it is the same manna. How it got hidden is told in 2 Maccabees 2, where we also have a prophecy that the missing ark and tabernacle will reappear when the Lord gathers his people again and receives them unto his mercy. That prophecy lies behind John 6, which contrasts the bread (manna) of Moses with the true bread of God, the bread of life, Jesus himself, available to all who come to him. Both passages seem to lie behind chapters 8 to 10 of Hebrews and Revelation 2.17. There are other reasons to look to Revelation. The Lilly in *TheL* will be "clothed in light" as well as fed with manna like the worthy few "clothed in white raiment" and the woman "clothed with the sun" of Revelation 3.5 and 12.1. (I may have erred, as Tolley claims, in placing the Lilly's

manna in eternity rather than at a stage before it--the morning of it, perhaps--but the feeding on manna and the flourishing in eternity are at worst continuous phases of the transfiguration the heavenly visitor announces as imminent.) The Lilly herself leads us to Revelation by way of the lily of the valley of the Song of Solomon 2.1, taken by Christians as a symbol of the gathered church married to Christ. Those clothed in light and fed with manna will come to "the marriage of the Lamb" as his wife, "arrayed in fine linen, clean and white" (Rev. 19.7-8).

I would like to shift ground now and consider the process of reading *TheL* and the motto. Tolley says the Ecclesiastes passage hits the reader in the eye at once. I agree that if any passage hits the eye (or ear) at once it is Ecclesiastes, and if that is the test or definition of "source," then Ecclesiastes 12.6 is the source, or a source. But there are two problems with this. (1) That is not what Tolley means by "source." He means Blake *had in mind* Ecclesiastes when he wrote the motto. And since we know rather little about Blake's mind outside his works, Tolley must speculate in the dark about Blake's intentions. We are offered these explanations: Blake must have noticed he varied the "formula" only slightly, but his corrupt memory may have "helped" him vary it, and this is not inconsistent at all, and in fact the variation (or transformation) is a characteristic mark of Blake's "genius as a source-user." The only way to reconcile these confident claims is to imagine poor Blake at his desk, aware that he is changing the original text but unable to remember what the original text says, if that is even logically possible. Why didn't he look it up? It seems he didn't care much, and if that is the case then neither should we. But all this speculation is of no use to the reader. Even if a diary showed up tomorrow in which Blake had written, "TheL's Motto. Cf. Ecclesiastes 12.6," we would still have to think about the rod, and wisdom, and love, and the context (eagles, moles) and form (rhetorical questions) of the second half of the motto. We are soon very far from Ecclesiastes.

In other words, (2) source-study, in the narrow way Tolley practices it, is of little use for understanding Blake. If one brings the meaning of the source into the meaning of the text in question (the main purpose of source-study), then one risks genetic and intentionalist fallacies and serious misreadings of the text. Tolley is an intelligent reader of Blake, but I think he has been led into misinterpretations, not so much by choosing the wrong source (I don't think Ecclesiastes 12.6 is simply wrong), as by overvaluing sources in general.

The functions of the Ecclesiastes reminiscence, Tolley says, are to remind us of vanity (*TheL*'s problem) and to define the rod and bowl as symbols of perishability or mortality (context of *TheL*'s dilemma). One has to agree that these ideas are appropriate to *TheL* as a whole, but they are very general, and in fact are not much different from the general purport of the Hebrews passage, or for that matter of the Bible as a whole. (Tolley claims that the implications of Hebrews conflict

with those of Ecclesiastes, but in the next paragraph he allows that they would not be inconsistent with *Thel*.) They do not take us far unless we make them more specific and bring them to bear on the text. In his 1965 article Tolley does this, and comes up with the idea that *Thel*'s three advisers (Lilly, Cloud, Clod) say "yes" to the questions of the second half of the motto; they, like the rod and the bowl, are symbols of mortality, and they are full of love and wisdom. *Thel*, he adds in the present note, should also say "yes." Now this is surely very odd, though not, I suppose, impossible. There is not space here to develop a full reading of *Thel* or even the motto, but on the face of it an affirmative answer to the questions is unlikely. These are positive rhetorical questions, like the string of questions the Lord asks Job, and they invite a "no" in response. Gold and silver objects are generally disparaged in the Bible and in Blake; these moreover suggest royalty and sexual fetishism; they are obviously unworthy vessels of wisdom and love. They have opposite connotations to the frail creatures *Thel* questions: "perishability" may attach itself vaguely to both, but rod and bowl are symbols more of false permanence while the creatures are symbolic of true eternity in apparent ephemerality.

With the Hebrews passage we have no such conflicts, though no doubt it too could be carried too far. Even the sexual connotations of the rod and the bowl fit the Hebrews context, if we remember Blake's idea that the tabernacle is female, or hides a female, and that Jesus must enter it through the veil and reveal it, "not a pompous High Priest entering by a Secret Place" (*Jerusalem* 69.44). In thinking of Hebrews we can see fuller, richer, more Blakean meanings in the uncertain symbols of the motto and in the poem it heralds. Ecclesiastes, though not irrelevant, seems to restrict us. Hebrews may be less of a source, in a narrow sense, but it is more of a presence.

I am at fault, then, for claiming Hebrews as a source in any literal sense: Tolley's strange ideas about Blake's genius at forgetting on purpose and the numbers game we must play to settle our differences have taught me my mistake. I should have been talking all along about references or allusions, not sources, and so should he. I am content now to claim Hebrews as a frame of reference for symbolic meanings, and certainly an analogue, of greater importance and helpfulness to the reader than Ecclesiastes.

Michael Ferber