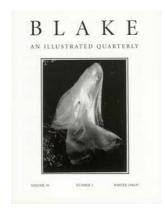
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The Seduction of Self-Abnegation in The Book of Thel

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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, E5). 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,4 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." 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. As Thel searches to discover meaning in the vapor

¹ 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).

² Contemporary handbooks exhorted young ladies to sweetly accept their roles "of servitude to masculine desires and expectations" (Eaves et al. 80).

to her their own worth in the life cycle, a worth achieved through self-abnegation. My purpose here is not simply to translate the myth of Thel, but rather to discuss arguments for a mortal life of self-abnegation as presented in *The Book* of *Thel*.

Since the name "Thel" is derived from the Greek word for "will" or "desire," the implications for Thel's characterization are manifold. Some readers might see her as willful, while others might attribute her name to the desire for knowledge about life that motivates her.3 At any rate, early in the poem, Blake presents her as ripe for seduction from the safe Vales of Har, which Foster Damon defines as "the state of Self-love" (401). Her motto (i.1-4, E 3) reveals her desire to know-but only from secondhand sources at first. A. G. Den Otter, who classifies the forms of questions in The Book of Thel, observes that on the title page, the plate contains a bud that "slithers up to her knee," suggesting the temptation of Eve (646). The motto "hooks Thel's interest, managing successfully to guide her to the altar of sacrifice" (647). Blake's pictures of Thel present her as an adolescent; her incessant questions in the motto and throughout the work likewise convey a childish and innocent nature.4 In her innocence, she seeks to know what is in the pit, just as the Eagle and the Mole know, but she trusts a predator and a blind, limited creature for her answers. Her questions about Wisdom and Love, with their respective containers, a rod and a bowl, suggest her naive eagerness to explore a contained, mortal life. But in her innocence, she does not realize that both containers represent the necessity of procreation in the cycle of mortal existence.

Thel is also ripe for seduction because of her willingness to separate from her sisters, while not knowing who she is. The other Daughters of Mne Seraphim know their place—tending the flocks (1.5, E 3). Their dwelling, The Vales of Har, receives more attention in Blake's complementary work, *Tiriel*. It is a peaceful valley, ruled by the senile Har and his sister/wife, Heva, who "dwell in an extreme and childish old age, tended by Mnetha" (their mother/nurse). Har is "the God of Moral Law" who holds to "uninspired wisdom to enforce restrictive morality upon man." In fact, the dotard himself has authored the code (Sloss and Wallis 275-76). Although this pastoral setting offers relative safety, Thel is restless.

Thel's description of herself reveals another problem that contributes to her vulnerability to seduction: although she is essentially selfish, she does not possess identity. Referring to lines 10-18, Nelson Hilton observes: "Thel displays an essential aspect of lamentation: not going anywhere, not standing firm, but assimilating everything to its vision. Narcissus-like, lamentation centers on itself and so defeats its fulfillment" (30). Her description of herself in comparison to objects-typical of Blake's intentional ambiguityfurther reveals a female who does not realize her essence. While she bemoans her destiny—should she be born—she first compares herself with "a wat'ry bow" (1.8, E 3). Such an object is beautiful, but exists only because of the light. "A parting cloud" (1.8, E 3) collects life-giving moisture, as Blake mentions later, but paradoxically, its absence is usually heralded by humans since it obscures the favored sunshine. "A reflection in a glass" is only a representation of the real object, just as "shadows in the water" (1.9, E 3) are not solid entities and can change with the ripples of the waves. The "dreams of infants" are not actual events; even their smiles (1.10, E 3) are pointless, since, as she has lamented earlier, they are "born but to smile & fall" (1.7, E 3). As she continues to catalog transient forms, the ambiguities continue. A "dove's voice" is sweet, but mournful; "transient day" enlightens, but grows dark; "music in the air" may be either joyful or funereal (1.11, E 3). In brief, even after Thel has described herself, we know that she will fade, but we do not know how or if the world will change when she does.

Finally, Thel may be easily seduced into the mortal world because she is ignorant of the harshness outside the Vales of Har. She uses "gentle" (ll. 16-17) to describe the act of dying/rebirth and the euphemism "sleep of death"; however, the vision she later experiences in the land of the dead (plate 8) shatters these expectations. Similarly, her expectations of "him that walketh in the garden in the evening time" (l. 18) reveal her naivete. Genesis 3:8 uses this phrase immediately after the fall of Adam and Eve and immediately before God reprimands the pair and casts them out of the Garden of Eden. Ironically, the voice she later hears in the land unknown is her own "voice of sorrow" (l. 117).

Blake has thus created a naive woman who asks questions restlessly, refuses to accept her place in the Vales of Har passively, sees herself only in vague terms, and expects to be treated consistently with gentleness. Moreover, the Lilly, the Cloud, the Worm, and the Clay each attempts to seduce Thel into mortal existence by appealing to her most outstanding characteristic-her need to have a unique and lasting place in the universe. In addition to the lines with which she has described her transience (Il. 12-15), an echoing refrain is formed by such lines as the following: "I vanish from my pearly throne, and who shall find my place?" (l. 41). "I complain, and no one hears my voice" (l. 51). "And all shall say, 'Without a use this shining woman liv'd'" (l. 69). Morris Eaves, Robert Essick, and Joseph Viscomi aptly note that "The Book of Thel is Blake's version of Ecclesiastes, with an innocent woman substituted for the melancholy patriarch for whom 'all is vanity'" (78).

³ Michael Ferber identifies many of the names in the poem by showing connections with other Blakean works and myths outside Blake; at the same time, he postulates that Blake may have alluded to traditional myths only to make fresh suggestions from those associations.

⁴ Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi point to Blake's "subtle uses of the interrogative [in his illuminated books] as a way to confound common assumptions, suggest alternatives, and engage the reader's imagination" (14).

Thel's primal need, then, to feel significant in the universe, is itself universal and thus common to both genders. Mindful of the culture of Blake's day, one can easily speculate as to the solutions the four natural beings would have offered a young male in Thel's state of mind: perhaps that he win a battle, or make his voice eternal through poetic expression, or accomplish some other substantial feat. However, the male Cloud, the male Worm, the female Lilly, and the female Clay offer her eternal life in exchange for what she can give to the earth in spite of, and because of, her feminine gender. As Den Otter comments: "Rather than satisfying Thel's concern for the meaning of things, these small educators [he mentions all but the Worm] redirect her focus to the *use* of things" (640).

An examination of the designs highlights the consequential tensions: In some, Thel "responds to her companions with imitative or sympathetic gestures [see pls. 4 and 6], much as she speaks about her similarity to them" (Eaves et al. 81). This very tendency to imitate and identify with her potential seducers is thus in conflict with her reluctance to acquiesce to their definition of her role, as is evident in plate 2, where "she stands apart as a spatial expression of her separateness and role as an observer more than an actor" (Eaves et al. 81).

The Lilly of the valley is the first entity to address Thel's problem. Quite simply, she suggests that Thel imitate her by sacrificing herself and accepting the cycle of life passively and even thankfully. Not only does the Lilly accept her lowly position, but she loves it (ll. 19-21). The Lilly, "So weak, the gilded butterfly scarce perches on [her] head" (l. 22), is like Thel in that she is a virgin (l. 31). But she gives herself to everything around her and rejoices to do so because "he that smiles on all" has told her to do so (ll. 23-25). She is "clothed in light" (l. 27) only to be melted later in the heat produced by the light (l. 28). She will dwell in "eternal vales" (l. 29) that are fertile, but remain in the place of death.

Thel sees irony in the Lilly's gift of self. The bloom that makes her beautiful and sweet-smelling attracts the innocent lamb, who devours her while she "sittest smiling in his face, / Wiping his . . . mouth" (Il. 36). But Thel admires the power that the Lilly's gift includes—the power to purify, revive, and tame, while being consumed (Il. 37-39). The last line about the Lilly reinforces her role as nurturer/giver: "[She] went to mind her numerous charge among the verdant grass" (I. 47).

Swinburne said that the Lilly, Cloud, and Worm teach that "the secret of creation is sacrifice; the very act of growth is a sacrament . . . each thing is redeemed from perpetual death by perpetual change" (quoted in Sloss and Wallis 2:267). Thel is impressed by the flower, but is not comforted and is not seduced quite yet into sacrificing herself. She has seen the example, but still laments her own uselessness (Bloom 56).

Compared with the obsequious female Lilly, the Cloud—a male figure—is quite bold and impressive. His "golden head" and "bright form" hover and "glitter" over Thel as he addresses her, and the import of the Cloud's exhortation to Thel lies in its sexual meaning. The Cloud supplies the moisture for the rivers where Luvah's horses drink. In other Blakean mythology, Luvah is the "mythical embodiment of the passional and sexual aspect of man [who] repairs to the Vales of Har simply in order to rest and water his horses" (Abrams 64). The Cloud seems to feel important largely because he serves a god of eros.

Furthermore, seeing Thel's need to be significant in eternity, the Cloud describes his union with the dew and what it produces. He makes Thel identify with the female dew, whom he calls a "weeping virgin" (l. 61). After all, Thel's "gentle lamentation falls like morning dew" (l. 9). The Cloud's lofty language describes the union explicitly: "And [I] 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" (II. 60-63). In other words, the dew is seduced into an ecstatic experience, she is never alone again, and-most importantly-her ability to nurture tender flowers is validation for her being. The Cloud thus suggests that if Thel would yield herself to her proper function, she too could have the joy of fruitful existence.

Thel, however, recognizing that she has never nurtured, remains depressed (ll. 64-68). She asks the Cloud what she intends as a rhetorical question: "Or did [Thel] only live to be at death the food of worms?" (1. 70). Echoing the heavenly being who has earlier told the Lilly to rejoice in her ephemeral state (l. 25), the Cloud instructs Thel relative to the "blessing" of the Worm (1. 73). Just before the Cloud goes to find "his partner in the vale" (l. 78), he reminds her: "Everything that lives / Lives not alone nor for itself" (Il. 73-74). But before she can be useful, Thel must abandon her fear of the Worm. Brenda S. Webster acknowledges that critics often overlook "the implicit degradation and forced submission of the woman. . . . In the speeches of both Thel and the Cloud, the theme of degradation is condensed in the opposition of high and low, shining virgin and earth worm" (52).

The thought of the Worm—associated symbolically with both death and procreation—frightens the virgin Thel. So the Cloud shows her a worm that will woo her without frightening her. Appearing as a naked, helpless infant, the Worm immediately appeals to her repressed maternalism (Bloom 57). She speaks to it, but it can only weep in return (ll. 80-84). Of course, these cries touch her more than any of the speeches she has heard previously. The worm's seductive powers are so strong that, ironically, she sympathizes with the very entity that will devour her.

The Clod of Clay that appears and nourishes the infant worm further arouses Thel's maternal drive and her search for significance. Modeling self-sacrifice, the Clay exhales "her life . . . / In milky fondness" (ll. 86-87). Her first words to Thel exhort the ideals of sacrificial motherhood: "we live not for ourselves" (l. 88). Moreover, the Clay describes a relationship derived from the account in Genesis of the creation of man in which God began the human race by forming Adam from clay and breathing into him the breath of life. Though a humble entity, the Clay has gained eternity by joining God and bearing His children: "My bosom of itself is cold, and of itself is dark; / But he, that loves the lowly, pours his oil upon my head, / And kisses me, and binds his nuptial bands around my breast, / And says: 'Thou mother of my children, I have loved thee, / And I have given thee a crown that none can take away" (Il. 90-94). The Clay does not understand this relationship; she simply lives and loves (l. 96). Thus, the Clay models the following message for Thel: Accept your role on earth, and do not question.

In plate 7, Thel's hidden face suggests the loss of identity implicit in maternal sacrifice, and as she cries again, she wipes her tears on her white veil (1. 97). Blake is apparently playing upon the phrase "vale of tears," for the virgin draws closer here to a vision of the end of life. Ironically, she cries to learn that God cares for the worm (l. 100), but the glimpse she soon receives of her ultimate destiny as a mortal reveals no benevolent God. The Worm and the Clay present danger for Thel, although they appear as innocent entities coming to the aid of a wandering innocent. Note, however, how the Clay's appeal to Thel gradually evolves from an invitation, to a suggestion, to a command: "Wilt thou, O Queen, enter my house? 'Tis given thee to enter / And to return: fear nothing, enter with thy virgin feet" (ll. 106-07). The last line is deceitful: Thel has much to fear because she is indeed a vulnerable virgin.

The Clod of Clay, who has modeled benevolent mother-hood and told Thel about a benevolent God, is able to bring her to the brink of mortal experience—but only with the condition that the virgin can return to the vales of Har (l. 107). Here at last Thel sees her destiny: After entering earthly existence, she will indeed be eternal, but eternally dying, mournful, and—despite her usefulness as mate and mother—alone. Simply put, her sacrifice (in following the example of the female Lilly, dew, and Clay) will not bring her eternal peace. The intention of the Clay (and Blake) is ambiguous here. Although the Clay has seduced her into a terrible place, the revelation of that place allows Thel to know the truth and to reject her destiny on earth.

In the "land unknown" (l. 109), Thel witnesses the corrupted forms of two of her advisors. Before, the Cloud was "golden," "bright," and "glittering" (ll. 52-53), but the "land of clouds" is dark and foreboding (l. 113). The dew had once united with the Cloud, to "never part" and to bear food (ll. 62-63). Here the dew rests on graves (l. 114). These

ironies have been foreshadowed, however, as early as on plate 2, where a vine "forms a traditional emblem of marriage or education" but in outline also suggests a tombstone, and the figure of Thel observes two other figures, either in a moment of happy union or of rape, thus symbolizing Thel's own uncertainties about sexuality (Eaves et al. 81-82).

For the first time in the poem, Thel dares to listen to her own voice, now coming from her grave (ll. 116-17). It laments the sorrowful fact that her senses have "whirled her to destruction" (Bloom 61). The sensory images gradually grow darker and more sexual. The first sensory organ mentioned is the Ear (l. 118). After all, she has listened to others' voices. Brenda Webster observes: "A further image of the ear as a whirlpool that fiercely 'draws creation in' is linked to the Clod's womb-grave and foreshadows Blake's view of the ravenous earth . . . who tries to draw all existence into her voice" (56). Next is the Eye, and Thel asks why it cannot be closed "to the poison of a smile" (ll. 118-19). This question reflects the foolishness of the "pitying tears" (l. 97) that once trusted the benevolence of God (ll. 98-101). Other temptations to the Eye are then listed (ll. 120-22), along with the honeyed Tongue and responsive Nose (ll. 123-25). Finally, the mention of touch boldly reveals a daunting picture of sexual union: "a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire"-one that can place "a tender curb upon the youthful burning boy" (ll. 126-27)—is not the pleasant image that the united Cloud and dew earlier suggested to Thel. She learns that even in experience, she will find no fulfillment (Bloom, in Erdman 809).

The truth about her mortal initiation into the sexual experience has this result: "The Virgin started from her seat, & with a shriek / Fled back unhinder'd till she came into the vales of Har" (ll. 129-30). Alicia Ostriker says "She discovers that her fate is far worse than she imagined. Instead of merely fading away and dying gracefully, she will have to undergo a storm of passions and restraints" (154).

Blake's decision concerning Thel's fate was made after at least two years of incubation. Although the title page reads "1789," the same date as *Songs of Innocence*, textual critics believe that plate 6 was actually completed two years later, along with *Songs of Experience*. During this time, Blake decided that Thel would wander into the "land unknown" at the Clay's invitation, but that she would lose her courage upon hearing her own voice from the grave. Unlike Oothoon of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, she does not fly to her lover (Ferber 52-53).

A decade ago, G. E. Bentley, Jr. remarked upon a recently discovered sketch for *Thel*. The sketch indicates Blake's plan for two designs facing each other, with lines indicating text. On the left is a sketch of the brooding Thel that later became plate 7. On the right is a figure with outstretched arms, resembling the figure of Thel later printed as plate 6. Obviously, the designs were reversed for printing, and a struc-

ture resembling a Greek temple was discarded from above the Thel with outstretched arms, probably because this manmade object distracts from the context of the pastoral setting. Bentley postulates that in the early sketch, "Thel appears to be on the threshold of the Temple of the Earth, about to enter without fear" (139). But in the course of crafting this illustrated poem, Blake chose to have Thel enter reluctantly, only to flee in fear.⁵

Critics have noted the different ages of children riding upon the serpent in plate 8, suggestive of the process of maturation "in accordance with the use of snakes as emblems of natural life and mortality . . . [and] in the context of phallic symbolism, the design would seem to indicate a control over sexual experience by playful innocence." The reins also suggest "prudence controlling desire" (Eaves et al. 85). If the female driving the snake is Thel, she looks not so much frightened as determined, with a steady, forward gaze. Whereas Michael Ferber posits that the pictured serpent and children allude to Blake's early play King Edward the Third, where the prince says that his recklessness is like "the innocent child" who "unthinking, plays upon the viper's den" (62-63), I suggest that the serpent recalls the one in Eden that tempts Eve. Unlike Eve, however, Thel has harnessed and controlled the serpent and uses it to take her "unhinder'd . . . [to] the vales of Har" (l. 129).

Because she has been allowed to see the truth, the attempted seduction of Thel into the cycle of a mortal woman's life fails at last. She will not surrender her haven of virginity in order to live eternally in such a dark world. The sacrifice of her present self for a utilitarian, earthly self would be a mistake. Disappointed by her adventurous quest away from the valley, Thel chooses to live in a world governed by the dotard Har and his restrictive codes, rather than enter into a mortal body, encumbered by sensory temptations and death. In the vale, she faces the future of becoming like the eternally aging Har and Heva in *Tiriel* (Ostriker 151).

Or is her life in the Vales of Har necessarily full of dread? One critic has speculated that "Thel" is an anagram of "Lethe," the river of forgetfulness. Perhaps Thel will forget her cares and become more like her sisters. W. J. T. Mitchell suggests still another possibility: When Thel returns to the Vales of Har and to the "Daughters of Mne Seraphim," is she returning to "a land of infantile regression [with] . . . daughters of ineffectual memories (Mnemosyne) rather than inspiration?" Or could the prophetic Blake be predicting an age where "Daughters of Memory shall become the Daughters of Inspiration?" (83). Just as Thel has raised incessant questions, the conclusion of the poem and the enigmatic emblems in the illustrative plates raise questions

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the controversial dating of the plates in Thel, see Joseph Viscomi, Blake and the Idea of the Book 234-37 and 252-58. and offer few resolutions.6

One matter is resolved, however. Although Blake shows that Thel's only alternative to relative obscurity in the Vales of Har is for her to listen to the voices of Earth that tell her to yield herself to the cycle of life, he does give her a choice. With a loud shriek, his heroine, in effect, cries "No!" to the experience of the earthly woman.

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6 In their edition of William Blake: The Early Illuminated Books, Eaves, Essick and Viscomi contextualize the ending of Thel, noting the outcome of other female figures in Blakean works, and comparing what Thel learns—or fails to learn—with the doctrines expressed in Blake's annotations to Swedenborg, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, There is No Natural Religion, the botanical poems of Langhorn and Darwin, and cultural ideologies of the day (80-81).