

The Function and Dysfunction of Desire in Blake's
"The Book of the Thel"

William Blake's "The Book of Thel" opens with an epigraph, a pithy and barbarous quatrain entitled "Thel's Motto." The "Motto" successfully encapsulates in four lines what Blake proceeds to unfurl throughout the rest of "The Book of Thel": a quest for knowledge, objectivity, and wisdom. A contemplation of the lines between knowing and not knowing, fear and desire. "Thel's Motto" rejects the notion of objectivity. Thel's procession is ultimately a mission to achieve the objective, but is hindered by her acquaintances' lack thereof. Just as Blake finds definitive virtue in the marriage of heaven and hell, so he advises a compromise of objectivity and subjectivity (which Marjorie Levinson considers a "binary opposition between two contradictory ways of knowing and being" [291]). I would further argue that not only is compromise essential, it is inevitable. The poem's true statement of objectivity is in its notions of death and mortality. Death's barrage of *whys* in the underworld marks an intersection of objectivity and subjectivity, a meeting of *why* and *what*.

One essential detail that cannot be overlooked is Blake's use of the name "Thel," which in Greek means "wish" or "desire." (Levinson 287) While I agree with Levinson that it does little to further the understanding of the text, I'd argue that it does inform Blake's apparent reach for a greater gestalt; one in which the contemplation of desire, and the failings and findings therein, is all-encompassing. With her name, Blake imbues in Thel the very essence of desire. It permeates her being. Thel is ephemeral, unborn. As such, any symbolic attachment, no matter the extent, defines a fundamental aspect of her being. Inquisitiveness, frailty, virginity—all qualities to which Blake attributed Thel, all abstractions of a being who is herself an abstraction.

Despite Thel's abstracted existence, she possesses what Levinson deems "ontological density." (287) Thel's Socratic search for answers leads her through a parade of creations, from the Lily of the Valley, to a Cloud, to a Worm, to a Clod of Clay. Her questions are ultimately concerned with one central notion: the experiences of those who exist within the realm of the real. Questions of mortality and existence and disillusionment plague Thel's conscious. "The Book of Thel" largely concerns itself with the asking of these questions, as the central majority of the poem is devoted to Thel's visits with these creatures. There is also the inescapable problem of sexuality in the poem. Corporal experience, in the broad form it assumes in "Thel," certainly invites sexual knowledge. While this is a concern of the self, it does not preclude Thel's investment in the world around her. "Liberation [...] from sexual desires" should "transform the fallen world anew." (Craciun 172)

Thel's role as an entity consumed with Innocence is important. Brian Wilkie strongly challenges the notion that Thel is an embodiment of Innocence. In addition to dismissing it as "simple-minded," Wilkie asserts that Thel "emphatically lacks the hallmark of Innocence: trustfulness." (48) The problem with this analysis is that Thel exhibits no substantial lack of trustfulness. It's a grayer area in that what may be interpreted as a lack of trustfulness could also easily be turned into a sense of *naïve fear*. There's no question that Thel exhibits compulsive anxiety; but it's a child's fear of the dark—a dread of the unknown. Thel's virginal naivety is what *drives* her through her journey. She desperately wants to know the unknown, despite having an inborn aversion to the latter. Such an uneasy ontological mixture stirs in her guts a sense of *doubt*, mistaken by Wilkie to be distrust.

Despite her doubt, overwhelming desire propels Thel through the Vales of Har. It's ultimately her yearning for objectification—for a realization of the self—that leads her past the procession of characters. Her first encounter, with the Lily of the Valley, proves the most

frustrating for Thel. The Lily is youthful, beautiful, and ultimately satisfied with her place in Har. In these qualities Thel no doubt sees a mirror image, the major difference, though, being this unattainable sense of contentedness that appears to elude Thel. In this way, the Lily represents not a maternal figure of fulfillment; rather, she assumes much more the role of the fulfilled duplicate, the Better Sister. In reply to the Lily, Thel only bows further. She praises the Lily for “giving to those that cannot crave,” for “[nourishing] the innocent lamb,” for “[purifying] the golden honey.” (2.4-8) And after the praise, she belittles her own existence as nothing more than “a faint cloud kindled at the rising sun: / I vanish from my pearly throne, and who shall find my place?” (2.11) This is the first instance in which Thel makes plain the fact that she is somehow not a being of physical substance. Blake imbues Thel with an otherworldly sense of atomic insubstantiality, a vaporous notion of fragility and innocence. This is not to suggest that Thel is *literally* vaporous. The role of shepherd—despite long-standing allegorical connotations—suggests a humanoid physical form, as does Blake’s title plate illustration, which features a virginal young Thel. Rather, she is essentially a child’s soul; void of experience and harrowing questions of a mortality she has yet to even understand.

But it’s not only mortality Thel is unable to comprehend. The Lily of the Valley suggests a discussion with the Cloud, who falls victim to the same transient existence Thel so desperately wants to upend. “O little Cloud,” Thel says, “I charge thee tell to me; / Why thou complainest not when in one hour thou fade away.” (3.1-2) In the Cloud, Thel finds a kindred spirit, albeit one who finds itself unable to despair of its ephemerality in the way the young virgin does. The Cloud answers: “[W]hen I pass away, / It is to tenfold life.” (3.10-11) The Cloud revels in his ability to cleanse and nourish the world beneath him. His daily death is an altruistic affirmation of love, and a promise of rebirth. Thel’s reservations in this regard ring sincere and reasonable: unlike the Cloud, Thel considers herself unable to serve so vital a

function. This is important, as it speaks to that with which Thel truly concerns herself when discussing mortality. Thel searches for a kind of function she may serve and comes up empty-handed. Unlike the Cloud, she “[smells] the sweetest flowers, / but [does not feed] the little flowers.” (3.18-19) In other words, the Cloud happily acts as both a giver and receiver; Thel, however, only receives the pleasures of the world, and does nothing for the world in return. There’s a palpable sense of gratitude in Thel. She considers the flowers “the sweetest,” and once delighted in the “warbling birds.” (3.18-19) But her delight has fallen to guilt. She thinks her life serves no purpose beyond being “the food of worms” upon death. (3.23)

The creatures she visits all share a common trait. That is, their outward thoughts and actions directly represent their role in Har’s spiritual hierarchy. The Cloud assumes the role of the omnipotent patriarch, what Robert P. Waxler calls “the invisible father.” (49) While Waxler couples the term with the Jesus concept, I feel the Cloud just as easily fulfills the role. As the invisible father, the Cloud nourishes and loves from his throne above all those in the Vales. But, more to the point, the Cloud rebuffs Thel with a proper assignment of her role in Har. “Then if thou art the food of worms [...] / How great thy blessing!” (3.25) He goes on to explain that “everything that lives / lives not alone, nor for itself.” (3.26-7) The Cloud provides a domineering role of paternity over Har in general, and Thel in particular. Here Blake establishes the concept of false objectivity: the Cloud may provide life, but he too is an inhabitant of Har, and therefore is no different than the Mole, blind to all but his pit. (Levinson 291)

The curious feature of the ensuing stanza is Blake’s reflexive ambiguity. Who’s doing the speaking in these lines? Unlike the other dialogue stanzas, this one appears without an attribution tag before or during. “Art thou a Worm?” the speaker says. “Image of weakness, art

thou but a Worm?" (4.2) If these words belong to Thel, it indicates that she sees the worm as a small, insignificant creature. Her initial disdain for her inability to do nothing but feed the worms has proven stronger than the Cloud's words of encouragement. She views this creature not as an equal with which to share her spiritual wealth, but as a pitiful, "helpless" thing. (4.5) Its nakedness—remarked upon with a subtle twinge of disgust—undoubtedly calls to mind a phallus. Here the phallus is stripped of its usual power; the worm is impotent, and in need of a maternal bond.

With that taken into account, the path grows curious if you consider the stanza to be entirely spoken by the *Worm*. The entire dynamic of the relationship between the two is reversed. Where the prior instance would have signified Thel as the dominant opposite of the Worm, we're now given a chance to see the Worm question Thel's own spiritual integrity. "Art thou a Worm?" *Is* Thel a worm? What separates the young virgin from the naked, helpless creature sitting on the leaf? After all, isn't it ultimately the Worm that will be devouring Thel after she's dead? The Cloud insists this type of relationship is something that resembles a cooperative agreement between equals. Thel, however, stands to gain nothing in death. If this is the Worm speaking to Thel, we're also treated to an interesting moment when the Worm relishes in Thel's solitude. Thel has no one, "none to cherish thee with mother's smiles." (4.6) Here we return to the filial concept previously seen in the Cloud and the Lily. Thel is an incomplete concept, a loose abstraction of fears and worries with no discernible maternal presence, despite (or perhaps due to) her active role as a lost daughter. As such, it's a grotesque mockery of motherhood when the Clod of Clay appears to soothe the weeping phallus. (4.7-9)

Unlike much of Blake's more canonical and denser texts, "The Book of Thel" follows a fairly traditional narrative structure, complete with something resembling a climax. After

having moved from creature to creature in search of a Big Answer, Thel is invited underground by the Clod. Blake's close attention to language here is key. "'Tis given thee to enter / And to return," assures the Clod. (5.16-17) Explicitly, this may be a show of goodwill or courtesy; but the Clod's promise of return is just as well a warning. In an appropriately epic fashion, the "eternal gate" is lifted and Thel enters "the land unknown." (6.1-2)

Thel's descent marks the climax of the poem, but occupies little of the text itself. It's with this abbreviated resolution that Blake ultimately places greater importance on Thel's earlier conversations. Blake's twist of the knife comes not with the revelation of this perverse land of the living/dead; rather, we realize that Thel's eventual descent into mortal permanence is inevitable, and is therefore of no concern to readers. She does not desire to know *what* is going to happen to her in the event of death. Thel concerns herself only with the *why* of the matter. This is made most explicit in the litany of questions that explode from her grave. "Why cannot the ear [...] Why are eyelids stord [...] Why a tongue impress'd?" (6.11-16) It's Thel's mortality personified, a vicious presence that seems to mock her ontological preoccupations. This rip in the veil between life and death ("A little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire" [6.20]) echoes the "pervasive concern in Blake's works for the precarious nature of birth and the thin line dividing life and death." (Williams 486) In each of her four previous encounters, Thel identifies a singular aspect of her being of which she lacks. Respectively: purpose, reciprocity, childhood, and motherhood. The encounter in the underworld carries similar prescience. Similarly, Waxler notes that because of Thel's "lack" of "imagine" she is "unable to risk the loss of this world [...] unable to create her own life within the passionate world available to her." (47) The primary difference, however, is that Thel's previous search was for what she *lacks*, and therefore what she *desires*. What Thel *does not lack*, and therefore *does not desire*, is knowledge of her own mortality. Thel flees the underworld because she has in

fact encountered the opposite of her desire; as Thel *is* Desire, what she's encountered is her essential opposite. Richard C. Sha notes that in later editions, "Thel's Motto" is relocated to the end, capping off the poem after Thel flees back into the Vales of Har. This "[gives] Thel the last word." (224) I would argue that also suggests that Thel has actually attained a partial enlightenment in her descent. By ascending, Thel is taking the Eagle's position over the underworld, given a seemingly objective knowledge of death, sexuality, and Experience. The inescapable truth, however, is that Thel has only retreated back into her pit of subjectivity, once more a Mole among Moles.

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