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Dennis M. Read

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Blake's "Tender Stranger": Thel and Hervey's Meditations

by DENNIS M. READ

OF ALL the themes in William Blake's *The Book of Thel* (1789–91), the most prominent is man's fear of death. In this short lyric poem, Thel, an alien creature, enters the mortal world to confront its most formidable feature: the material dissolution of all life within it. This both perplexes and frightens Thel, in spite of the reassuring explanations of mutability and transformation offered in the poem by four personifications of nature, the Lilly of the valley, Cloud, Worm, and Clod of Clay. When the Clod of Clay invites Thel to enter her realm (with the understanding that she may leave it if she wishes), Thel hears the one unmistakably human voice in the poem. The voice is, in fact, Thel's own, and it comes from "her own grave plot" (6:9).¹ Unlike the joyful and affirmative voices of the Lilly of the Valley, Cloud, Worm, and Clod of Clay, Thel's is a "voice of sorrow" speaking in riddles and questions. The voice and its questions terrify Thel, who flees from the mortal world to the security of her first home, the vales of Har.

To the question, who or what is Thel?, critics have given various answers. Some have interpreted her as a personification of the soul, a Persephone figure, who escapes the lowered realm of mortality to resume living in her rarified state.² Others have viewed Thel as a mortal creature in a state of pure innocence who is not willing or able to pass through the state of experience in order to attain the fulfillment that lies beyond it.³ A third party describes Thel as someone in between, possessing both supernatural and natural characteristics, who finally rejects the material world for an immaterial one.⁴ While each of these interpreta-

1. References to Blake's writings are to David V. Erdman, ed., *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, commentary by Harold Bloom, 4th printing, rev. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970).

2. See S. Foster Damon, *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924; rpt. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1958), pp. 74–76, George Mills Harper, *The Neoplatonism of William Blake* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1961), pp. 246–56, and Kathleen Raine, *Blake and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), I, 99–125.

3. See Robert Gleckner, *The Piper and the Bard: A Study of William Blake* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 161–74, Anne K. Mellor, "Blake's Designs for *The Book of Thel*: An Affirmation of Innocence," *PQ*, L (April 1971), 193–207, Christopher Heppner, "'A Desire of Being': Identity and *The Book of Thel*," *Colby Library Quarterly*, XIII (June 1977), 79–98, and especially Mary Lynn Johnson, "'Beulah, 'Mne Seraphim,' and Blake's *Thel*," *JEGP*, LXIX (April 1970), 258–77.

4. See, among others, Pierre Berger, *William Blake: Poet and Mystic*, trans. Daniel H. Conner (1914; rpt. New York: Haskell House, 1968), pp. 326–28, and Max Plowman, *An Introduction to the Study of Blake*, 2nd ed. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967), p. 88. A useful summary of *Thel* criticism up to about 1970 is given in Nancy Bogen, ed., *The Book of Thel: A Facsimile and a Critical Text* (Providence, R.I.: Brown Univ. Press; New York: New York Public Library, 1971), pp. 16–20. Other recent studies include Roland A. Duerkson, "The Life-in-Death Theme in *The Book of Thel*," *Blake Studies*, II (Spring 1970), 15–22, and Rodger L. Tarr, "'The Eagle' Versus 'The Mole': The Wisdom of Virginity in *Comus* and *The Book of Thel*," *Blake Studies*, III (Spring 1971), 187–94.

tions of *Thel* satisfies its own demands, none describes *Thel* as anything more than an embodiment of predispositions and perturbations. I believe that there are definite reasons for *Thel*'s attitudes and actions, but they have remained obscured because previous discussions of the poem have not adequately considered an important source for *Thel*, James Hervey's *Meditations among the Tombs* (1746).⁵ I believe specifically that *Thel* is, on one level, Blake's anti-Graveyard School argument advanced through ironic references to Hervey's *Meditations*.⁶

James Hervey (1714–1758) was one of the first methodist ministers. At Oxford he had been a student of Wesley and a member of the Holy Club. When his first work, *Meditations among the Tombs*, appeared in 1746, it quickly vied in popularity with Young's *Night Thoughts* (1742–45) and Blair's *Grave* (1743), the two works, in fact, to which Hervey's *Meditations* is most indebted. In 1748, buoyed by his initial success, Hervey published *Meditations and Contemplations*, containing an expanded version of his *Meditations among the Tombs* and three more essays, *Reflections on a Flower Garden*, *Contemplations on the Night*, and *Contemplations on the Starry Heavens*. In the third edition Hervey added another essay, *A Winter Piece*. In 1755 Hervey published another work, *Theron and Aspasio*, which led to an open disagreement between Wesley and himself.⁷ Although Hervey's works now dwell in near oblivion, during the second half of the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth century they were persistent best-sellers.⁸

In his *Meditations*, Hervey describes his visit to a Cornish country church, where he had spent the afternoon reading tombstone inscriptions and meditating upon the occupants below. These meditations alternate between his fanciful creation of macabre deathbed scenes and his pious pronouncements on death as a release from a troubled life. Although Hervey seems to relish his depictions of the horrors of dying, he states that his intentions in the *Meditations* are didactic: "the Grave is the most faithful Master, and these Instances of Mortality the most instructive Lessons" (I, 11–12).⁹ The lessons of the grave are of the imminence of death in life:

5. Passing mention is made of correspondences between *Thel* and Hervey's *Meditations* in Michael J. Tolley, "The Book of *Thel* and *Night Thoughts*," *BNYPL*, LXIX (June 1965), 384, and between *Thel* and many of Hervey's works in Bogen, ed., *The Book of Thel*.

6. This approach to Blake's *modus operandi* follows Martin K. Nurmi, "Negative Sources in Blake," *William Blake: Essays for S. Foster Damon*, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld (Providence, R.I.: Brown Univ. Press, 1969), p. 303.

7. Wesley criticized *Theron and Aspasio* in his pamphlet, *A Preservative against Unsettled Notions in Religion* (1756) and his published letter, *A Sufficient Answer . . . to the Author of Theron and Aspasio* (1757); Hervey's defense of *Theron and Aspasio* was published posthumously as *Eleven Letters . . . to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley* (1765).

8. For a discussion of Hervey's eighteenth-century ideas and interests, see Alan D. McKillop, "Nature and Science in the Works of James Hervey," *Univ. of Texas Studies in English*, XXVIII (1949), [124]–38.

9. All Hervey references are to *Meditations and Contemplations*, 3rd ed. (London: John and James Rivington, 1748), 2 vols. The frontispiece to volume II of this edition, invented by J. Wall and engraved by S. F. Ravinet, contains a figure using a compass and in a posture similar to the figure in Blake's *There is No Natural Religion* (1788), pl. 10. This relationship was first noted by Michael Phillips. The

O! ye Sons of Men, in the Midst of Life you are in Death. No State, no Circumstances, can ascertain your Preservation a single Moment. So *strong* is the Tyrant's Arm, that nothing can resist its Force; so *unerring* his Aim, that nothing can elude the Blow: *Sudden* as Lightning sometimes is his Arrow launched, and wounds and kills in the Twinkling of an Eye. Never promise yourselves safety in any Expedient, but constant Preparation. The fatal Shafts fly so promiscuously, that none can guess the next Victim. Therefore, *be ye always ready; for in such an Hour as ye think not*, the final Summons cometh. (I, 25-26)

Death is Hervey's constant teacher, and the relics of death, the tombstones and their inscriptions, the faded flowers, and especially the worm-eaten flesh and bleached bones of the dead, teach him that everything of this world is transitory; they "are the most invincible Proofs of the *Nothingness* of created Things" (I, 72). Thus Hervey resolves "to *moderate* my Expectations from Mortals;—to stand disengaged from every *undue Attachment* to the little Interests of Time,—to get above the delusive *Amusements* of Honour, the gaudy *Tinsels* of Wealth, and all the empty *Shadows* of a perishing world" (I, 72).

All these aspects of the material world, according to Hervey, are not simply distractions from man's more permanent state; they are, in fact, persistent dangers to man's soul, for they tempt man to leave off his proper conduct of life and take up the wages of sin. Man must constantly be watchful of these temptations, Hervey warns, and he must learn how to practice restraint and employ denial in order to keep his virtue intact. Man's reward for keeping his soul pure is an everlasting salvation in his afterlife; his punishment for allowing his soul to become defiled is everlasting damnation. This doctrine, reduced to its simplest terms, becomes a paradox: the proper conduct of life is a denial of life itself. Conversely, a love of life suggests a love of sin and a consequent fear of death. Those who love life the most, Hervey says, are "the wicked," who can only die horribly: "How did they stand shuddering upon the tremendous Precipice, excessively *afraid to die*, yet utterly *unable to live*. . . . Thus they lie, groaning out the poor Remains of Life; their Limbs bathed in Sweat; their Heart[s] strug[g]ling with convulsive Throes; Pains insupportable throbbing thro' every Pulse; and innumerable Darts of Agony transfixing their Conscience" (I, 94-96).

Blake must have been familiar with Hervey's writings from early in his life. In his manuscript, "An Island in the Moon" (ca. 1784), he refers directly to Hervey's *Meditations among the Tombs and Theron and Aspasio*, as well as Young's *Night Thoughts*:

Steelyard the Lawgiver, sitting at his table taking extracts from Herveys Meditations among the tombs & Youngs Night Thoughts. . . .

Obtuse Angle enterd the Room. What news M^r Steelyard—I am reading Theron & Aspasio, said he. Obtuse Angle took up the books one by one. I dont find it here said he.

Meditations and Contemplations frontispiece is reproduced in The William Blake Trust facsimile of *There is No Natural Religion*. Perhaps, therefore, this was the edition of *Meditations and Contemplations* with which Blake was acquainted.

Oh no said the other it was the meditations. Obtuse Angle took up the book & read till the other was quite tir'd out.

The pious and prudish Steelyard dispenses parts of these Graveyard works as if they were restoratives for weakened people in a wicked world. The works are so like each other, however, that he has trouble telling them apart. Because such stern doses of morality must have been tiresome to Steelyard's visitors, Blake quite properly makes Steelyard the victim of his own tedious entertainment by having Obtuse Angle read the *Meditations* aloud until Steelyard becomes "quite tir'd out." The satire is a delightful deflation of the pompous sententiousness of both Hervey and Steelyard.

In *The Book of Thel* Blake indicates through ironic and inverted references to Hervey's *Meditations* how Hervey reinforces man's fear of death and how this fear turns life into a tyranny. Blake sets in opposition to this fear of death his own belief in a totally procreative existence bounded by neither life nor death. Blake's conception of Thel expresses the distance between his own ideas and those of Hervey. At the beginning of the poem, Thel echoes Hervey's own wish to die wrapped in "works of faith and labours of love." In this state, Hervey "would lay me gently down, and sleep sweetly in the blessed Jesus" (I, 83). Thel says:

Ah! gentle may I lay me down, and gentle rest my head.
And gentle sleep the sleep of death. and gentle hear the voice
Of him that walketh in the garden in the evening time. (I:12-14)

The diction, tone and substance of these two passages are remarkably similar. In addition to these similarities is a similar attitude of Hervey and Thel, exemplified by Hervey when he describes the tomb of an infant who died soon after birth:

Yonder *white stone*, emblem of the Innocent it covers, informs the Beholder of One, who breathed out its tender Soul, almost in the Instant of receiving it.—There the peaceful *Infant*, without so much as knowing what Labour and Vexation mean, "lies still and is quiet; it sleeps and is at rest."¹⁰ Staying only to wash away its native Impurity in the Laver of Regeneration, it bid[s] a speedy Adieu to Time and terrestrial Things.—What did the little hasty Sojourner find so forbidding and disgusting in our upper World, to occasion its precipitate Exit? 'Tis written, indeed, of its suffering Saviour, that when He had tasted the Vinegar mingled with Gall, He would not drink. And did our new-come Stranger begin to sip the Cup of Life, but, perceiving the *Bitterness*, turn away its Head, and refuse the Draught? Was this, the Cause, why the wary Babe only open'd its Eyes; just looked on the Light; and then withdrew into the more inviting Regions of undisturb'd Repose? (I, 14-15)

The resemblance of this infant to the Thel who chooses not to be born is striking. Hervey's descriptive phrases ("little hasty Sojourner," "Innocent," and "Stranger" with a "tender soul") fit Thel exactly and are compatible with Blake's own ("lovely maid," "virgin of the skies,"

10. A paraphrase of Job 3:13.

“pensive queen,” and “daughter of beauty”). Furthermore, Hervey’s fanciful depiction of the infant’s encounter with the mortal world is similar to the story of Thel: they both find mortality “forbidding and disgusting,” both “bid a speedy Adieu to Time and terrestrial Things,” and both withdraw “into the more inviting Regions of undisturb’d Repose.” For Hervey, this course of events is favorable. He later asserts that a motherless child is better off remaining inside the womb of her dead mother than living in “a Hazardous World” without maternal protection: “Better, for the tender Stranger, to be stopped in the Porch; than to enter, only to converse with Affliction” (I, 32).¹¹

This attitude, however, is antithetical to Blake’s own belief in the completely regenerative character of life. Blake suggests stylistically that Thel, like the personifications of nature in the poem, could participate in this process of renewal by applying the same adjectives to both Thel and the personifications. The Lilly of the valley is the “Little virgin of the peaceful valley” (2:3); the Cloud is “tender” and “little” and courts “The weeping virgin” “the fair eyed dew” (3:14, 3:13); the Worm is “weak,” “weeping,” and “helpless,” lying “like an infant wrapped” “upon its dewy bed” (4:3, 4:1).¹² All these aspects of nature resemble Thel, yet they experience in mortal life a blissful fulfillment, not Thel’s doleful existence, and they anticipate a continuing fulfillment beyond mortal life, not the annihilation that Thel foresees. Of these figures, the Worm is most like Thel in its vulnerability, yet most unlike Thel in its innocent acceptance of life. The Worm suggests both death (in its feasting on corpses) and sexuality (in its priapic appearance). Its mother is the Clod of Clay, who feels the blessings and libations of Jesus and who gives voice to an innocent trust in the richness of life: “But how this is sweet maid, I know not, and I cannot know, / I ponder, and I cannot ponder; yet I live and love” (5:5–6).¹³

Hervey speaks quite differently of the clod of clay in his *Meditations*: “The pamper’d *Flesh*, so lately cloathed in Purple, and fine Linnen, how is it covered rudely with Clods of Clay?” (I, 75). The difference between Hervey’s and Blake’s use of the term serves to show how radically different their perspectives are. Hervey restricts his attention to the dissolution of mortal flesh in cold graveyard clay; Blake asserts that all of natural life, even two emblems of the graveyard, the Clod of Clay and the Worm, are immersed in the warmth of maternal love.

11. When, many years later, Blake painted his *Epitome of Hervey’s Meditations among the Tombs* (ca. 1818–22), he included in it the mother holding her infant babe, inscribing the phrase “Sophronia Died in Childbed” around her head. The phrase is a truncation of Hervey’s: “The marble, which graces yonder pillar, informs me, that near it deposited the remains of *Sophronia*, the much lamented *Sophronia*, who died in childbed” (I, 31).

12. In the case of the worm, the image may well depend upon the one who beholds it, since it is Thel herself who describes it to the reader.

13. In his *Contemplations on the Starry Heavens*, Hervey wrote: “I gaze, I ponder; I ponder, I gaze, and think ineffable things. . . . Yet, after all my present inquiries, what a mere nothing do I know” (II, 151). Bogen, p. 71, notes this analogue.

The matron Clay invites Thel to "enter my house" so that Thel might share this secure and loving world with the infant worm. Yet when Thel accepts the invitation, she experiences nothing of the Clay's "milky fondness." Instead she finds herself in a graveyard, the *locus scribendi* of Hervey. Blake's description of this graveyard as a land where "the fibrous roots / of every heart on earth infixes deep its restless twists" (6:2-3) echoes Hervey's description of unrepentant sinners: "*Evil Habits* must have *struck* the deepest *Root*; must have *twisted* themselves with every *Fibre* of the Heart; . . ." (I, 50).¹⁴ Blake does not mean through this allusion that sinners have built this graveyard; in fact, quite the opposite. This "land of sorrows & tears where never smile was seen" is what comes of the well-intentioned efforts of Hervey and other Graveyard writers to turn man from his sinful ways. Instead of helping man, they have severely encumbered him. As a result, life itself has been transformed into a graveyard; as in "The Garden of Love," all joys and desires are now bound and wrapped like corpses. At about the time he was composing *Thel*, Blake wrote:

To hinder another is not an act it is the contrary it is a restraint on action both in ourselves & in the person hinderd. for he who hinders another omits his own duty. at the time

Murder is Hindering Another

Theft is Hindering Another

Backbiting. Undermining c[on]f[er]ring & whatever is Negative is Vice

But the origin of this mistake in Lavater & his contemporaries, is, They suppose that Womans Love is Sin. in consequence all the Loves & Graces with them are Sin (Annotations to Lavater, ca. 1789)

In *Thel*, Blake presents the world which results from the transformation of Loves and Graces into sins. Thel wanders among "the couches of the dead" in a land of moral—not mortal—dissolution.

Hervey's own wanderings culminate when he comes upon the door leading to the vault beneath the church floor and descends to find bones of the dead. His description of the scene, laden with melancholy reflection, is a horrific *ubi sunt* litany:

Here, the sweet and winning *Aspect* that wore perpetually an attractive Smile, *grins* horribly a naked, ghastly Scull.—The *Eye*, that outshone the Diamond's Lustre; and glanced its lovely *lightning* into the most guarded Heart: Alas! Where is it? Where shall we find the rolling Sparkler? How are all those radiant Glories totally eclipsed!—The *Tongue*, that once commanded all the Charms of Harmony, and all the Powers of Eloquence, in this strange Land has "forgot its cunning." Where are now those *Strains of Melody*, which ravished our Ears? Where is that *Flow of Persuasion*, which carried captive our Judgments? (I, 74-75)

The climax of *Thel* occurs when Thel comes upon her own grave plot and, in an apt reversal, listens to a voice coming from it. The voice is, in fact, her own "voice of sorrow," a grim prophecy of what she will

14. This correspondence has been noted by Tolley, "*The Book of Thel and Night Thoughts*," 384.

become in the mortal world. Its questions, like Hervey's, concern man's capabilities. Unlike Hervey, however, Thel's grave-plot voice asks about the diminution of man's capabilities during life, not their dissolution by death:

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 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?¹⁵

Instead of describing what has been lost to death, the voice from Thel's grave describes the dangers and deceptions that fill mortal life. It speaks not of "an attractive Smile" that has faded, but rather of "the poison of a smile." It asks not where the "rolling Sparkler" has gone, but rather why "the glistning Eye" cannot be insensible to hypocrisy and deception; not where the tongue "that once commanded all the Powers of Eloquence" has gone, but rather why a tongue is "impress'd with honey from every wind." It finds the ear ravished not by "Strains of Melody," but rather by "its own destruction."

And finally the voice asks, in direct reference to Thel, why is love itself thwarted and frustrated? "Why a tender curb upon the youthful burning boy! / Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?" The "little curtain of flesh" is, literally, the hymen, a physical restraint to the act of love. Hervey has referred to a "tender Stranger"; Blake refers to "a tender curb." Both phrases suggest a figure such as Thel: an innocent who is fearful and suspicious because of a world she perceives as full of deceptions, attacks, and restraints. But what for Thel and Hervey is a certainty is for Blake another case of becoming what one beholds.

Blake's answer to Hervey, of course, is his Proverb of Hell, "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires." The aphorism is particularly suited to Hervey and his "tender Stranger." Hervey, who regards desires as temptations to sin, seems actually to advocate such infanticide: "Better, for the tender Stranger, to be stopped in the Porch; than to enter, only to converse with Affliction." But it is the unacted desires, Blake asserts, which produce the affliction of which Hervey speaks, not mortality itself. Hervey's graveyard vision, Blake believes, obscures the true cosmological pattern of which mortality is a part and thus keeps man from addressing himself to the "why's" in the questions from the grave and to learn the causes of his destructive impulses. Man's immortality, Blake asserts, does not lie beyond death; it is

15. Blake deleted these two lines in two of the fifteen extant copies of *Thel*.

a quality that man always possesses and need only realize. Thus, man should not hope to escape from life; rather, he should aspire to recover his perception of the true cosmology and of his eternal place in it.

Thel, however, has neither the insight nor the courage to so aspire. She instead flees from this world in terror and revulsion to return to the mindless vales of Har.¹⁶ Only her shriek lingers. It is the expression of Thel's own tragic fate wrought from her consummate ignorance. But for those who enter the mortal world, there remains the possibility of fulfillment that Thel denies herself. Death is not to be feared, says Blake—and neither is life. Blake's lesson of the grave in *Thel* is not to learn to die, but rather to learn to live. That lesson is strengthened and clarified through its opposition to Hervey's *Meditations* and its showing that Hervey's unborn babe has chosen an unenviable alternative to mortal life.

Denison University
Granville, Ohio

16. Critics have suggested various meanings and etymologies for Har; I would like to add a simple one: Har is identical to the British pronunciation of the first syllable of Hervey. The name of Heva, Har's wife in *Tiriel*, also suggests Hervey. The two characters are an Adam and Eve whose innocence makes them powerless to oppose their tyrant son, Tiriel. Perhaps Blake was suggesting in Har and Heva how the innocent intentions of such popular cleric-writers as Hervey can unfortunately spawn a doctrinaire theology.