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A Desire of Being: 
Identity and The Book of Thel

by CHRISTOPHER HEPPNER

Despite a number of recent essays on *The Book of Thel*, there are still surprising disagreements about very basic matters in this apparently rather simple poem. An overall account of previous interpretations can be found in Nancy Bogen’s recent edition, though there have been several essays subsequent to her account. In general one can say that discussions have tended to focus on a few key questions, with several subsidiary arguments more or less depending upon those.

One fundamental question concerns Thel’s status: S. Foster Damon, Kathleen Raine, and G.M. Harper are prominent among those who believe that she is an unborn soul fleeing the terrors of descent into the body; R.F. Gleckner, Nancy Bogen, and Mary L. Johnson are among those who believe that she is a mortal much like ourselves, already in the world and fearful of death, Mary Johnson being especially persuasive here. Closely associated with this problem is the attitude taken towards Thel’s flight. Those who hold the essentially Neo-Platonic view tend to look with approval on her final action, while those who see Thel as much like ourselves tend to disapprove and even condemn, though not all are as harsh as Gleckner, who suggests that her real self is “ugly, cold, mean, dark.” Partial exceptions to this pattern are Nancy Bogen and Anne K. Mellor, who see Thel as basically human, but nevertheless approve of her flight. Anne K. Mellor describes it as “a positive personal action,” and foresees a coming sexual maturity for her in the design of children riding


a serpent on the last plate.\(^4\) I feel that this takes a rather literal and time-bound view of the relationship between text and design, and I prefer the gently ironic view of the function of the design taken by David V. Erdman: "the girl holding the reins is not Thel but of the smaller fairy size of the human forms of dew and clay; her easy riding of the phallic serpent counterpoints Thel's fleeing 'with a shriek' ([6:] 21) at thoughts of genital curb and curtain.\(^5\)

Around these central discussions several other continuing debates have organised themselves, focusing on such questions as the priority of Swedenborgian or Neo-Platonic influence, the sources of the imagery of Plate 6, especially the image of the "northern bar," and the overall implications of this last plate, including the probability that it and the "Motto" were engraved later than the rest of the poem, and may represent a revised view of the poem's conclusion.\(^6\)

The purpose of the present essay is to suggest a somewhat different perspective from which to view Thel's problem, focusing on the nature of personal identity. The aim is not to attempt to bring the ongoing debate to a definitive conclusion, but to try to enrich and sharpen it at some key points. However, as will appear, I do believe that concepts traceable to Swedenborg play an important though qualified role in the poem, that the action is primarily a poetic exploration of modes of being in the world, rather than a Neo-Platonic account of an unborn soul fleeing from the agonies of descent, and that Thel's flight at the end of the poem is at the least a set-back to the search upon which she had set out at the beginning.

II

**Discussion of Thel's status** has to some extent blurred consideration of just exactly what it is that she complains of. Her initial despair is directed not only at her impending death, but also at her inability to really seize hold of her own present experience. She seems to experience herself as a kind of ghost, a mere appearance for others. She seeks "the secret air," as if even the slightest human traffic were too much for her to bear, in contrast with her sisters who "led round their sunny flocks." As solution to her anxiety she seeks rest, and the sleep of death in which she can hear a voice; perhaps she already has an intuition that confirmation of her existence must come from somewhere outside the bounds of her own iden-

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6. David V. Erdman, ed., *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), p. 713. All quotations will be from this text; those to *The Book of Thel* will not be further identified, since the poem is well-known and relatively short. References to other works by Blake will be by internal reference where convenient, or by page number in this edition, identified as E. Other abbreviations used in this paper: M: Milton; FZ: The Four Zoas; U: The Book of Urizen; VDA: Visions of the Daughters of Albion.
tity as she presently experiences it, that in one way or another she will have to change. Her desire to fade away in the morning and move towards a comforting evening also anticipates—or generates—the time structure of the poem, which moves from sunlight to deep shadow.

Thel's initial situation, then, is not simply a fear of dying, but also an intense anxiety about her present mode of existence, which seems to her to have death or absence already within it, and so her anxiety about her own life takes the somewhat paradoxical form of a suicidal melancholy. She laments transience, that the things around her are “born but to smile & fall,” but when she describes her existence as she experiences it, the images focus more than simple transience:

Ah! Thel is like a watry bow, and like a parting cloud,
Like a reflection in a glass, like shadows in the water.
Like dreams of infants, like a smile upon an infants face,
Like the doves voice, like transient day, like music in the air.

These are all images of transience, certainly, but they are also images of epiphenomena, appearances which exist only as temporary modifications of an underlying substance felt to be more real than they. The “watry bow” created by the refraction of light in air-borne moisture is a kind of doubly removed appearance. The glass and water of Thel’s next images persist after the reflections and shadows are gone. The dream and smile leave the child unchanged; the dove’s voice and the music will leave but the faint ghost of a sweet memory. Thel’s images of her life correspond precisely to one of Northrop Frye’s comments on the state of Beulah as imaged in *The Book of Thel*: “Like its prototype in Spenser, it is a world where forms dissolve and substance does not, in contrast to Eden, where the reverse is true.” To be “born but to smile & fall” is to be born with dissolution as a central aspect of one’s being.

Thel’s lament, in fact, is as much about the apparently ungraspable nature of her identity in the present as it is about its transience, though the two are aspects of the same concern. She has discovered not only the enmity of a world governed by time, but also that her consciousness is a state of alienation from any true self. Los puts the situation more strongly when he describes man as “a little grovelling Root, outside of Himself” (*Jerusalem*, 17:32).

The intense eighteenth century discussion of the problem of personal identity is of direct relevance here, and I should like to explore this background for a while before continuing the discussion of *The Book of Thel*. I shall begin with Locke, since we know that Blake read him “when very Young” (E 650), and because Locke’s account aroused an active and varied response. Locke defined identity as continuity of consciousness, despite the problems that this raised, which he was quite prepared to

face: "Or if it be possible that the soul can, whilst the body is sleeping, have its thinking, enjoyments, and concerns, its pleasures or pain, apart, which the man is not conscious of nor partakes in,—it is certain that Socrates asleep and Socrates awake is not the same person . . . ."8 In the chapter added to the second edition, Locke made it clearer that by consciousness he really meant consciousness of a persisting self, "it being impossible for anyone to perceive without perceiving that he does perceive."9 In this view, memory becomes the ability to retain or recover the consciousness that makes us an identity: "consciousness always accompanies thinking . . . and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person."10

Locke’s view pushed Hume, whom Blake almost certainly read, to a much more radical critique. Hume denied the possibility of direct self-knowledge, or consciousness distinct from consciousness of something, and produced a notion which perturbed a great many of his readers: "The identity which we ascribe to the mind of man is only a fictitious one, and of a like kind with that which we ascribe to vegetable and animal bodies," which he defined under the figure of the oak "that grows from a small plant to a large tree [which] is still the same oak, though there be not one particle of matter or figure of its parts the same." Potential in this image is the notion of identity as informing structure, but Hume’s interests lay in another direction, and led to his notorious definition of man as "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement." This led him to the image of the mind as "a kind of theatre," which however appears to have no spectators, and which is directed by memory, which "does not so much produce as discover personal identity, by showing us the relation of cause and effect among our different perceptions." The real script is written by the laws of association: "It is therefore on some of these three relations of resemblance, contiguity, and causation, that identity depends." Since identity thus depends on impersonal laws, and is not something consciously to be willed into form, or even a matter of conscious experience at all, Hume can quite logically suggest that "all the nice and subtle questions concerning personal identity can never possibly be decided, and are to be regarded rather as grammatical than as philosophical difficulties."11

I shall return to this last statement later, but for the moment simply suggest that Blake might have had an analogous vision in mind, or pos-

11. All my quotations come from Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. A. D. Lindsay (London: Dent, 1911), I, 238–249, being Part IV, Section 6, "Of Personal Identity."
possibly Hume himself, in addition to the Atomists' account of the origins of the universe, when he had Albion's Spectre define man in Jerusalem:

I am your Rational Power O Albion & that Human Form
You call Divine, is but a Worm seventy inches long
That creeps forth in a night & is dried in the morning sun
In fortuitous concourse of memories accumulated & lost [.](29:5–8, E 173).

The lines present a nightmare vision of a world in which human identity has become merely an aggregation of discrete moments of consciousness, accessible only to a dying memory.12

While Locke's view raises the possibility of multiple identities within one body, Hume's critique leads to a virtual abandonment of the notion of identity except as a kind of illusion, created by mechanical laws of association. Thel's quest can be seen, against the background of insecurity stirred by such critiques, as an existential hunger to experience herself in some reassuring fashion, be it permanence or simply usefulness to others. Her search thus explores the possibility of other than empirical models of the relationship between consciousness and identity, and Blake could have found interesting views on this in several writers.

One such view was outlined by Leibniz in his critique of Locke's Essay. In answering Locke, he defined some of the essentials of his theory of monads, including the doctrine of imperceptible sensations as a key to a two level concept of identity: "An immaterial being or mind cannot be despoiled of all perception of its past existence. There remain in it impressions of everything which has formerly happened to it, and it has even presentiments of everything which will happen to it; but these feelings are most often too slight to be distinguishable and for us to be conscious of them, although they may be developed some day. This continuation and connection of perceptions forms the same individual really; but apperceptions (that is, when we are conscious of past feelings) prove, farther, a moral identity and make the real identity appear."13 In this view, identity is a wider category than consciousness, and indeed includes an unconscious or virtual identity within itself. Leibniz's view also stresses completeness and individuality rather than merely continuity.

Blake had presumably not read Leibniz, though it is certainly possible that he might have heard about him from Fuseli, and he could have found something of his theory of identity outlined by Thomas Reid in his attack on Locke's views in Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man.14 Whether


he knew anything of Leibniz or not, Blake would certainly have found him interesting, and there are signs of analogous concepts in his writings. The epigraph to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, for instance, "The Eye sees more than the Heart knows," suggests something like Leibniz's indistinguishable sensations waiting to be developed, and Bromion sounds a similar note with his reference to "trees beasts and birds unknown: / Unknown, not unperceived" (4:15–16).

Thomas Taylor's translations of, and commentaries on, Plato and the Neo-Platonists have been suggested as a source of Blake's ideas about human identity in *The Book of Thel*, and certainly this passage, quoted by Kathleen Raine, is suggestive of the imagery of the poem: "So that the forms which appear in matter, are merely ludicrous; shadows falling upon shadow, as in a mirror, where the position of a thing is different from its real situation; and which, though apparently full of forms, possesses nothing real and true."15 Kathleen Raine gives a very interesting account of the poem as a debate between the Neo-Platonic and alchemical philosophies, the former urging the horrors of temporal life, the latter accepting descent as a stage in the process of transformation. But she offers evidence from Blake's writings of the period to show that he seems to veer to the side of the alchemists, and so the Neo-Platonic analogies appear not to be the final key to the poem, though Blake may have had them in mind.

My own sense is that Swedenborg's *The Wisdom of Angels, concerning Divine Love and Divine Wisdom*, which Blake annotated during the same year that he wrote *The Book of Thel*, had a much more direct influence on Blake's thinking about human identity than Taylor. J.G. Davies has argued that *The Book of Thel* was influenced by Swedenborg's doctrine of Use, and several critics have agreed.16 But I think there is room for a closer look at the relationship than has yet appeared.

One doctrine that caught Blake's interest was that of the discreteness of the three Degrees or levels of human existence, the natural, the spiritual, and the celestial. Swedenborg's image is that these Degrees exist one within the other in a concentric but non-spatial mode: "in simultaneous Order the first Degree constitutes the inmost, and the third [i.e., natural] the outmost."17 Communication between these Degrees is by Correspondence, which is not usually a matter of conscious awareness at all: "Man, as long as he lives in the World, does not know any Thing of the opening of these Degrees in himself, the Reason is, because then he is in the natural Degree, which is the ultimate [i.e., exterior], and from this Degree

17. Swedenborg, *The Wisdom of Angels, concerning Divine Love and Divine Wisdom* (London, 1788). This is the edition that Blake owned. All references to Swedenborg will be by paragraph number to this work, unless otherwise stated.
he then thinks, wills, speaks and acts, and the spiritual Degree, which is interior, does not communicate with the natural Degree by Continuity, but by Correspondences, and Communication by Correspondences is not felt” (No. 238). This doctrine can become faintly comic, as in No. 252: “Neither does the natural Man, in whom the spiritual Degree is open, know, that by his spiritual Man he is in Heaven, when nevertheless his spiritual Man is in the midst of the Angels of Heaven.”

An important point is that here, as in Leibniz, whom Swedenborg had read widely,18 we find explicit statements that man’s identity is a much more extensive category than his conscious awareness. Blake’s annotations make it clear that he accepted Swedenborg’s basic argument, though with some qualifications, and he explicitly agrees that the Degrees “are discrete & not continuous so as to explain each other except by correspondence which has nothing to do with demonstration” (annotation to No. 237). He also redefines what Swedenborg calls a “spiritual Idea” as a “Poetic idea” (annotation to No. 7), as if to confirm his understanding of Correspondence as a term for the power of metaphor to bridge discontinuous realms.

This notion of identity as a multi-dimensional structure unified through metaphoric correspondence rather than direct self-consciousness is reflected in *The Book of Thel* by the way in which Thel’s interlocutors point to the inadequacy of self-consciousness as a means for grasping one’s own identity. The Lilly looks forward without fear to melting in the summer’s heat, finding assurance in her work, her minding of “her numerous charge among the verdant grass,” words reminiscent of the activity of Thel’s sisters. The Cloud speaks as one who has already undergone multiple transformations, while the Clod of Clay describes herself as one who lives a mystery that she can never know: “But how this is sweet maid, I know not, and I cannot know, / I ponder, and I cannot ponder; yet I live and love.” Only Thel, within the structure of the poem, refuses to accept metaphor as a key to her identity, and persists in expressing the intangibility of her identity by means of anxious similes: “But Thel is like a faint cloud kindled at the rising sun: / I vanish from my pearly throne, and who shall find my place.”

If Thel could change her perspective and see her external world as part of herself, rather than herself as perpetually vanishing in the external world, she would find herself in a different state. In fact, the structure of the poem suggests that to see the world as an image of oneself may be a valid perspective, and here again Swedenborg is relevant. In a kind of logical extension of the doctrine of Correspondence, Swedenborg explains that in the spiritual world, appearances are “Representatives”19 of states...
of the affections: "in that World also there are all Things of the three Kingdoms [i.e., animal, vegetable, and mineral], in the Midst of which is the inhabiting Angel, who sees them about him, and also knows that they are Representatives of himself; yea, when the inmost Principle of his Understanding is opened, he knoweth himself, and seeth his Image in them, even as in a Glass" (No. 63). Such a reflection can be seen clearly in the spiritual world, but it is also visible in the created world, though there it "cannot be seen except obscurely" (No. 63).

The idea of Representation seems a key to the structure of The Book of Thel. Thel, in lines I have quoted above, contrasts the Lilly's sacrificial usefulness with her own fears of being "like a faint cloud kindled at the rising sun." The Lilly, being a creature of metaphor, of transformations of identity, takes Thel's simile with tender seriousness as a potential metaphor wherein may lie wisdom and self-recognition, and so calls Thel's simile down to confront her in the form of the Cloud. This action initiates the pattern of the whole poem, in which each of Thel's interlocutors is conjured into being by her own words as each creature chooses a key phrase or image from Thel's speech to materialize into the next speaker. The Lilly, a "watry weed." seems to rise into being as a response to Thel's question, "why fades the lotus of the water?" The Lilly in turn calls down the Cloud as a realization of Thel's simile, and the Cloud calls up the Worm in order to confront her with the image of her fear as she has just expressed it. The Clod of Clay is called up, less explicitly, by the Worm's helpless weeping, by the implications of Thel's phrase "the food of worms," and perhaps also by Thel's pitying fear that there is none to cherish the Worm "with mothers smiles." The Clod of Clay in turn picks up Thel's fear that she will lay her down "in thy cold bed," and materializes both this and Thel's moans, of which she says that they "flew o'er my roof. but I have call'd them down."

In each episode, Thel meets her own thoughts and even her own words in substantial form, and the whole process of the poem is really a self-interpretation, partly in the guise of a critique of the rhetorical forms of Thel's language. Her rhetoric may be said to move from simile to the rather brutally literal and finally to a terrified direct encounter with the world created by metaphor. She is undergoing the painful process of learning to interpret life itself, and that is certainly no easier than learning to interpret a text, and perhaps not so very different. In this sense, Hume's remark that personal identity is really a grammatical problem takes on a fuller and deeper meaning. It is herself that she questions in her encounters with the "Representatives" of her feelings as they are called into existence by her own words.

The sequence of episodes in the poem also suggests this idea in another

Bird," which vanished with the cessation of the affection. Other passages about this notion of a world called into being by man's internal states can be found in Arcana Coelestia, I (London, 1784), No. 1361, and Heaven and Hell (London: Swedenborg Society, 1860), No. 175.
form, for the sequence is that of Thel’s possible life, moving from the
virgin Lilly through the marriage of Cloud and Dew, to the matron Clay
with her infant Worm and, finally, to the Clay as Thel’s own grave plot.
The dramatic structure of the poem is thus another mirror confronting
Thel with the potential patterns of her own life. The whole poem is made
up of Correspondences, in the full Swedenborgian sense of appearances
which reflect—or “Represent”—the state of Thel’s feelings and possible
life choices. Thel, however, does not recognize this, and consistently
relates herself to the surrounding world through the differences created
by simile, from her initial lament to her response to the Lilly and finally to
the Cloud: “Dost thou O little Cloud? I fear that I am not like thee.”

To continue the grammatical metaphor introduced by the discussion of
Hume, one can suggest that simile is the language of the doubting self­
hood, and metaphor the speech of the true self, the Poetic Genius:
“Demonstration Similitude & Harmony are Objects of Reasoning Inven­
tion Identity & Melody are Objects of Intuition” (Annotations to Rey­
nolds, E 648). It is the poetic self who articulates the identifying meta­
phors of “The Lamb” in Songs of Innocence, and who can overcome the
separation pointed at by questions such as that posed in Plate 7 of The
Marriage of Heaven and Hell: “How do you know but ev’ry Bird that cuts
the airy way, / Is an immense world of delight, clos’d by your senses
five?”

Swedenborg’s notions of Correspondence and Representatives, in
short, helped Blake in formulating a concept of identity as inclusive of
more than isolated consciousness, as something grounded inwardly in the
Poetic Genius, and expressed outwardly through the metaphoric acts of
imagination which identify the world as oneself, and oneself as the world.
Or, to put it in Blake’s later language, our human clothing is from within
(M, 20:27–31), and we must reclaim our emanations.

But behind such fundamentally poetic conceptions of identity lie the
terrifying implications of exchanges of substance, which so horrified
Urizen when he saw “that life liv’d upon death” (U, 23:27). In effect, such
fear as that aroused in Thel and Urizen is a questioning of the power and
adequacy of poetic vision itself, which continues in Blake’s poetry in such
passages as Urizen’s challenge to Los in The Four Zoas: “Art thou a
visionary of Jesus the soft delusion of Eternity[?]” (12:25). The Lilly and
Cloud are confident in their visionary understanding of their sacrificial
and yet self-fulfilling metamorphoses, but Thel’s attempt to approximate
their confidence leads to her image of herself as potential food for worms.

Blake’s vision of the exchanges of substance involved here seems very
close to Swedenborg’s idea of Use, as Davies has pointed out, though
briefly. Use, in effect, is Swedenborg’s term for all created things seen as
emanating from God and directed back towards him in a perpetual cycle,
like that suggested by the river of Adona and completed by the Cloud and
the Dew. All living things also contain cycles of descent and ascent within
themselves, moving from seed to root to stem and round to seed again, or, as Swedenborg summarizes it, in all things "there is a progression from first Principles to Ultimates, and from Ultimates to first Principles" (No. 316), a sentence to which Blake responded with "A going forth & returning" (E 597), an early announcement of a theme that was to occupy him until the last plates of *Jerusalem*.

Another very important aspect of the doctrine of Use is that "all Things of the created Universe, viewed from their Uses, represent Man in an Image; and that this testifies that God is a Man" (No. 319). There is a directed flow of energy behind this appearance, as can be seen in the statement that "the Uses of all created Things ascend by Degrees from Ultimates to Man, and through Man to God the Creator, from whom they proceeded" (No. 65). "Use" is thus a naming of the human form or meaning of all things, and in some passages describing this Swedenborg produced statements which Blake may have remembered when he came to write *The Book of Thel*, such as the following: "for as soon as a Seed falls into the Bosom of the Earth, it cherishes it, and gives Supplies out of itself from all Sides, that it may germinate, and show itself in a Form representative of Man" (No. 61). The language of *The Book of Thel* comes very close to this, the parallels extending to such echoes in phrasing as Blake's use of the word "cherish'd," and his description of the Clod of Clay tending the Worm: "her life exhal'd / In milky fondness."

Another passage is remarkably close to Thel's description of the Lilly's self-sacrificing life; in describing the Uses of "Mediates"—that is, the vegetable kingdom, between the mineral and animal kingdoms—Swedenborg writes: "the Uses of these are for all and everything of the animal Kingdom, as well imperfect as perfect; they nourish them, delight them, and vivify them; they nourish their Bodies with their Materials, delight their Senses with their Taste, Smell and Beauty, and vivify their Affections. An Endeavour to do these things is in them from the Principle of Life" (No. 65). Again, Blake's words come quite close, with the same dual focus on aesthetic as well as bodily nourishment, and an echo of "vivify" in Blake's "Revives."

In a further development of the idea of simultaneous order, described above, Swedenborg states that the inner degrees of Love and Wisdom are contained in the outermost degree of Use (No. 213), much as the higher senses of medieval allegory were held to reside in the literal sense, a useful point at which to remember that Swedenborg's ideas were developed as a method for interpreting the Bible. In the application of this doctrine that "all Things of the Mind, or of the Will and Understanding of Man, are included in his Actions, or in his Works, just as Things visible and invisible are in a Seed, in a Fruit, or in an Egg" (No. 277), Swedenborg uses images that are echoed by the images that Thel chooses in her initial description of herself as a consciousness without a use. Thus Swedenborg states that "unless the Will and Understanding, or Affection and
Thought, as also Charity and Faith, invest and involve themselves in Works or Actions, whenever it is possible, they are only like Things aereal which pass away, or like Phantoms (Imagines) in the Air, which perish” (No. 216). Even closer is the statement that “the Whole of Charity and Faith is in Works, and that Charity and Faith without Works are like Rainbows about the Sun, which vanish and are dissipated by a Cloud” (No. 220). Thel experiences her consciousness as an image or rainbow in the air because it is not rooted in acts, because it is not realized as a Use.

The doctrine of Use is linked with the doctrine of Correspondence in that both are described as being effective without registering any clear and distinct ideas within conscious experience, “because Thousands and Myriads of Powers operating in an Act appear as one; and because the Delights of Uses do not present Ideas in the Thoughts, but only affect without any distinct Perception” (No. 316).

Swedenborg’s doctrine of Use thus provided Blake with another useful tool in building a concept of identity as something more than conscious awareness. The exchanges of Use take the outward expansion of identity a large step beyond the metaphoric identifications that Swedenborg calls Representatives, and give the notion of identity a directed energy by describing the Human and Divine forms of all things as returning to God through Man (Divine Love and Divine Wisdom, Nos. 65–68, 170–171). Identity in such a model cannot be described as if it were a thing, but must be seen as a continual energetic process, as a striving towards self-transcendence.

Swedenborgian models, in other words, account reasonably well for the states of the Lilly and the Cloud, and for the way in which all things in the poem mirror Thel to herself, though in ways she does not quite recognize. Or, to use Kathleen Raine’s terms, I think that Swedenborg is Blake’s favourite philosopher of alchemical transformations in The Book of Thel. In a Swedenborgian system, however, Thel could be expected to continue the upward and inward flow of Use in some such way as this: “every Act or every Work of a spiritual Man is to the Angels as a delicious Fruit, useful and beautiful” (No. 279). But the poem offers no suggestions that this is the proper path, and instead of all things rising towards God through Thel, she fears that she is about to return to the worm and the clay that are the beginnings of all things. In fact, she is burdened by the guilt of being a consumer only: “I hear the warbling birds, / But I feed not the warbling birds.” The difficult wisdom of “The thankful reciever bears a plentiful harvest” (Marriage of Heaven and Hell, 9:51) might help her, but she, and the poem as a whole, seem headed in a direction contrary to that of the Cloud and the Dew, and this point needs exploration.

The voice that Thel desires to hear in the evening is heard by the Lilly

20. Gleckner, The Piper and the Bard, p. 307, n. 5, simply lists No. 216, among others, as relevant to Thel, but without explanation or quotation.
each morning, giving assurances of light and heat, which are, rather obviously, Swedenborgian Correspondences for Wisdom and Love. Thel, leaving the world of "sunny flocks," moves towards the world of earth, cold and dark. But in her despairing attempt to find a use for herself to balance her guilt and isolation, Thel conjures up the image of the Worm as simply a consumer like herself, and, with gruesome irony, of herself. The Worm, also like Thel, laments, but with a wordless weeping. For the first time in the poem the voice that Thel hears echoes her own unhappiness,21 and the Worm comes from "the silent valley," as if echoing Thel's pursuit of "the secret air."

As Thel considers the Worm, the tone of the poem darkens. When she described the Lilly's sacrifice, the imagery almost transmuted the substantial event into play and light; the innocent Lamb, she tells the Lilly, "crops thy flowers. while thou sittest smiling in his face, / Wiping his mild and meekin mouth from all contagious taints"; even the possibility of guilt on the part of the Lamb is cancelled by the manner of the offer. But now as Thel considers the Worm, she envisions evil feet wilfully bruising it. Her world has expanded to include both the possibility of deliberate injury and an "image of weakness" which is as incapable of self-defence as it is of self-sacrifice. The world of Lilly and Cloud was a world of joyful metamorphoses which were simultaneously self-sacrifice and self-fulfillment. The world of helpless vulnerability and wilful malice is a world in need of support and redemption. Thel, in brief, has moved from images of a world she could love and admire, though she felt separate and different, to the image of a world which resembles her more closely in some ways, and not least in actually weeping: Thel's earlier laments are described as complaints and sighs.

The episode as a whole seems to mark a turning away from Swedenborg, perhaps because of the inadequacy of his notions of sacrifice and redemption; years later, Blake criticized Swedenborg, quite accurately,22 for denying "the value of the Saviours blood" (M, 22:54). The vulnerable helplessness of the Worm, mirroring Thel's own desolation, seems to demand some further exploration of the world in which it is allowed to occur, in search of some voice of hope. In a mysterious way this is suggested by the Clay's revelation that she is a partner in a sacred marriage, and is supported by an inviolable mystery. Thel thus catches a glimpse of the voice that she sought at the beginning of the poem, and summons up a little courage before this evidence of a God who not only revenges injuries done to the Worm, but also cherishes it with his own anointing oil joined with the Clay's maternal milk. The imagery suggests sperm23 as well as milk, the bodily fluids that generate and nurture created life, perhaps in anticipation of the immersion in body of the next episode.

22. See, for instance, True Christian Religion (London, 1786), Nos. 84 and 95.
III

In the final episode of the poem Thel descends to explore the mysteries of a world in need of redemption, a world that turns out to be her own body. Instead of going forwards and upwards like the Lilly and Cloud, Thel is taking a downwards path, which brings with it a new emphasis on the imagery of feet and touch. She is invited to enter with her “virgin feet” to encounter her own sighs and moans in the form in which they have been “call’d . . . down” by the Clay; as before, at each step it is a realization of her own words that confronts Thel.24

As she explores this world, she finds herself among “the couches of the dead, & where the fibrous roots / Of every heart on earth affixes deep its restless twists,” the interior of a body visualized as an underground environment. There are analogies for this kind of image in Blake, including Plate I of For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise, and the illustration for p. 37 of “Night the Sixth” for Young’s Night Thoughts, which illustrates the following lines:

Here, dormant Matter, waits a call to Life;
Half-life, half-death join There; Here, Life and Sense;
There, Sense from Reason Steals a glimmering ray;
Reason shines out in man.

The line actually starred as the subject of the illustration is the second line quoted, but I think Blake is illustrating the whole progression in his figure of a woman embedded in the earth with skeletal legs ending in roots, while branches and leaves shoot up from her head and one arm. The illustration for “Night the Third,” p. 32 (fig. 1), shows Age and Disease plucking the speaker’s “Nerves, those tender Strings of Life,” and images this as an underground scene, the nerves portrayed as roots. Similarly, the illustration for “Night the Fifth,” p. 60 (fig. 2), shows a pair of naked lovers entwined within twisted roots to illustrate these words: “O the soft Commerce! O the tender Tyes, / Close-twisted with the Fibres of the Heart!”25 Clearly Blake could and did visualize the interior of the body as an underground scene of earth and roots, and could think of consciousness as rooted in this, and growing up out of it into the air—though of course its origins are elsewhere.

Thel in the last episode of the poem can be seen as consciousness exploring its own embodiment, which in another image is the soul descending to explore the recesses of the grave.26 She is entering her own living body, which is rooted in the insentient earth, and of whose interiors she is

25. Blake’s original watercolours for Night Thoughts are accessible in the colour microfilm distributed by Micro Methods Limited, East Ardsley, Wakefield, Yorkshire (n.d.).
Fig. 1. Blake, Design for Young’s *Night Thoughts*, “Night the Third,” p. 32; The British Museum
Heppner: "A Desire of Being": Identity and The Book of Thel

Fig. 2. Blake, Design for Young's Night Thoughts. "Night the Fifth." p. 60: The British Museum
normally unaware. The "northern bar" functions as a barrier to the penetration of consciousness, and as it is lifted, she is offered a glimpse of the activity of her own body. Her descent is distantly analogous to Los's entry with his lantern into the body of Albion at the beginning of Jerusalem.\(^{27}\)

As she wanders through this landscape that reflects her own feelings, she comes finally to her own "grave plot," and hears her own moans caught in the Clod's "cold bed," rising from the "hollow pit" of her own body, her private five feet of earth. A variety of sources have been offered for the imagery of this passage, including Young's Night Thoughts, Harvey's Meditations among the Tombs, and Blair's The Grave.\(^{28}\) John Beer, for instance, states that the passage is a re-working of some lines in Young, and cites the following passage about the insidiousness of death:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Behind the rosy bloom he loves to lurk,} \\
&\text{Or ambush in a smile; or wanton, dive} \\
&\text{In dimples deep; love's eddies, which draw in} \\
&\text{Unwary hearts, and sink them in despair.}\(^{29}\)
\end{align*}
\]

This scarcely fits the context, however. The lamenting questions Thel hears are not aimed so much at death as at life—and again we meet the paradox of a quasi-suicidal response to life itself, rather than a living response to the threat of death.

My sense is that the lines relate to the conventions of Elizabethan love poetry, and I offer the following passage from Romeo and Juliet as an analogy. Romeo is describing his soon to be forsaken first love, Rosaline:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{She'll not be hit} \\
&\text{With Cupid's arrow. She hath Dian's wit,} \\
&\text{And, in strong proof of chastity well armed,} \\
&\text{From Love's weak childish bow she lives unharmed.} \\
&\text{She will not stay the siege of loving terms,} \\
&\text{Nor bide th'encounter of assailing eyes,} \\
&\text{Nor ope her lap to saint-seducing gold.} \\
&\text{O, she is rich in beauty; only poor} \\
&\text{That, when she dies, with beauty dies her store.}\(^{30}\)
\end{align*}
\]

A much darker view of essentially the same activities is to be found in Canto XI of Book II of The Faerie Queene, in the assault of Maleger's troops on the Castle of Alma.

Thel perceives her body as vulnerable, and her senses as so many undefended openings into which the aggressively seductive motives of others may pierce. She is in fact experiencing in her own body something akin to

\(^{27}\) See the frontispiece to Jerusalem, and Erdman's comment, in The Illuminated Blake. pp. 280–281.


the vulnerability she saw in the Worm. For the first time in the poem, we become aware of the possible existence for Thel of other people, apart from sisters, and her anxieties about the stability and durability of her consciousness now become focused on the penetrability of her body's boundaries, the senses being key-points for entrances and exits. The voice of her fears shifts from the Ear and Eye of the speaking body in the first two lines, to the Eyelids and Eye of external tempters in the next lines; poison, arrows, fruits and gold are all imaged as threatening to enter and subdue by force or seduction. The Tongue, I think, is also that of an external flatterer, using "honey" as a Trojan horse to win entrance to her mind. The world of other people, in ways reminiscent of Sartrean existentialism, is perceived as a world of aggressive threats to the integrity of body and mind. Other people are hell in that they appear to encroach upon the speaker's identity; for Thel, other people make war and not love.

The next lines shift the focus from this implicitly sexual scene back to the vulnerable senses of the speaker, who describes the Ear as "a whirlpool fierce to draw creations in," sucking in such matter as a honeyed Tongue may express, a vortex driven by its own undiscriminating energy, beyond voluntary control. The Nostril draws in terror in the same way. The very senses which are so intimately mingled with consciousness seem paradoxically to involve an alienation from consciousness, to act as if they had malevolent and independently energized wills. This may well represent a parodic inversion of the Lockean idea of the passivity of the senses in perception, which Addison expressed so aptly: "It is but opening the Eye, and the Scene enters." The mourning voice has intensified this vision, to produce a nightmare picture of a kind of internal vacuum which draws things into itself, as if every breath, every whorl of the ear, every opening of the eyelids, set in motion an irresistible convergence of things crushing in upon the speaker, as if to fill the "hollow pit" from which the voice speaks. There is no intuition whatsoever of the senses as directed exploration or form-giving activity; nothing corresponding to Leibniz's image of the mind using the senses as a blind man uses a stick.

In the last two lines uttered by the "voice of sorrow," the indrawing energy of the senses implicit in the previous lines becomes explicit as sexual desire, and Thel's fear of a penetration of the boundary of her identity becomes mingled with a suppressed desire from somewhere in her body to welcome this penetration, this potential interchange of identity and energy. The voice asks why seals are set upon this potential flow and mingling of interior with exterior, and why identities are circumscribed in this physical way. This is the critical moment to which Thel's questioning of the nature of her identity has been leading; confronted

with the physical facts of the cost of breaking the barriers of her secure but mournfully defended prison, she flies back "unhindered" because there is no one else present to hinder her. She is again alone, the voices that she has conjured up having failed to move her far enough.

Thel has arrived at the point where the voices of her own body have begun to articulate the energies potential within her; the "Giants who formed this world into its sensual existence and now seem to live in it in chains" (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 16) have begun to speak. The whole pattern of the poem has been to urge some form of self-sacrifice upon Thel, though her own fearful suggestion that she may become the food of worms does not seem a satisfactory response. I think that Paul Miner is right in stating that "the sacrifice of self, or selfhood, is symbolized, in part, by the copulative act,"33 or, to put it differently, Thel must sacrifice what she presently experiences as her "self" to what she interprets as her "body" in order to be reborn through the latter as a realized identity.

Such a sacrifice is in effect a redemptive descent into her own time-limited body, for "Eternity is in love with the productions of time" (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 7:10). Her body is an undiscovered America calling upon her as a potential Orc to become incarnate and give it "life in regions of dark death" (*America*, 2:9), symbolized as in *The Book of Thel* by "roots that writhe their arms into the nether deep" (*America*, 2:11). Like her body, the "shadowy daughter of Urthona" fears that such a descent will bring death and pain: "This is eternal death; and this the torment long foretold" (*America*, 2:17).

Ironically, acceptance of this pattern would establish her true virgin and immortal identity as a being of the same kind as Oothoon. who describes herself as:

```
... a virgin fill'd with virgin fancies
Open to joy and to delight where ever beauty appears
If in the morning sun I find it: there my eyes are fix'd
In happy copulation; if in evening mild. wearied with work;
Sit on a bank and draw the pleasures of this free born joy (VDA, 6:21–7:2).
```

Such a state of openness, where the active indrawing of the senses is frankly recognised and welcomed as one part of a perpetual flow and exchange, is still far from Thel.

### IV

*As this last comment suggests, and as others have noted, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* can be read as a kind of sequel to *The Book of Thel*. But the situation that Thel faces is a recurring one in Blake, and I*

shall use passages from other poems to comment on Thel’s “Motto” as a bridge to considering briefly some analogous situations in Blake’s poetry. *Tiriel*, which is usually dated as just before or contemporary with *The Book of Thel*, used the line “Can wisdom be put in a silver rod or love in a golden bowl?” in a deleted passage (E 736), the context of which makes it clear that the answer to both questions is “no.” A passage from the later *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* takes us further:

Does not the eagle scorn the earth & despise the treasures beneath?
But the mole knoweth what is there, & the worm shall tell it thee.
Does not the worm erect a pillar in the mouldering church yard?

And a palace of eternity in the jaws of the hungry grave
Over his porch these words are written. Take thy bliss O Man!
And sweet shall be thy taste & sweet thy infant joys renew! (5:39–6:3).

Ooothoon’s implicit message to Thel is, I think, that “The Grave is Heaven’s golden Gate” (“To the Queen,” E 471), if we understand that by the grave Blake often means the body, as in the statement that if the spectator of his painting of *The Last Judgment* “could make a Friend & Companion of one of these Images of wonder... then would he arise from his Grave then would he meet the Lord in the Air & then he would be happy” (E 550). I think that the “Motto” is quite clear, and that Blake’s own punctuation gives the key to how it is to be read: the question marks all carry a negative intonation, while the second line, “Or wilt thou go ask the Mole,” ending in a determinate colon, carries the speaker’s recommendation.

At a later stage of Blake’s poetry, the following description of the cries of the “Human Odors” facing the wine presses of Luvah seems like an intensification in metaphor and myth of Thel’s situation:

... they obstinate
Tho pained to distraction Cry O let us Exist for
This dreadful Non Existence is worse than pains of Eternal Birth
Eternal Death who can Endure. let us consume in fires
In waters stifling or in air corroding or in earth shut up
The Pangs of Eternal birth are better than the Pangs of Eternal Death [.].

Like Thel, they are driven by “a desire of Being” (136:7), but unlike Thel they plunge into the vintage to taste “the sports of love” and “the sweet delights of amorous play” (137:2). Whether they become fertilizing dung or “the wine of ages” (137:22–27), they will play a role in the final consummation.

A more distant analogy is with Ololon, who “Could not behold Golgonooza without passing the Polypus / A wondrous journey not passable by Immortal feet” (*M*, 35:19–20), or with Milton himself, who descends in...
order to claim his true identity. Finally it seems not to matter very much whether we see Thel as about to be born, contemplating a loss of virginity, or about to die: the essential patterns of movement are the same in each case. The way upwards and forwards in Blake often involves an apparent descent.

Thel’s desire, as she first despairingly articulated it, was to hear the voice of “him that walketh in the garden in the evening time.” In a way that she has not recognized, this is the voice that she has heard throughout the poem speaking through the figures who are the Representatives of her own true identity as an imagination. The voice she seeks is that of a god of descents and identifications, “Therefore God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is” (There is No Natural Religion [b]), and to know him she will have to follow the same path.

She will also have to use her imagination, for in Blake’s view human identity is created by poetic energy, and without the continual activity of metaphoric identification it tends to collapse or rigidify. To try to grasp identity through literal self-consciousness is to short-circuit the activity through which it comes into being. It is the Poetic Genius or Spirit of Prophecy that leaps across the space always facing the present moment in order to claim the other as itself, and by so doing bring itself into being. Thel’s final act seems so explicitly a retreat from any such leap that I think one must feel a grave, parental concern for her, though the finality of “The End” is balanced by the playfulness of the design above, as if to recognize the continuing possibility of life as joyous energy.

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