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by HARRIET KRAMER LINKIN

In *The Book of Thel* the series of exchanges Thel shares with the pastoral creatures of Har constitute a dialogic pattern that breaks down at a significant moment in the text; Blake creates and then disrupts the pattern to provide an interpretive hermeneutic for the reader.[1] By examining the function—and dysfunction—of dialogue we gain useful insights into what most critics consider Thel's imaginative failure to pass from Innocence through Experience to Organized Innocence.[2] Although readers sometimes blame Thel's flight from the land unknown on the presumably inadequate information she receives from her three mentors in the vale—the Lilly, the Cloud, and the Clod—Thel is not really as passive a listener as she is generally accused of being: the contrary responses Thel voices qualify the applicability of her instructors' words.[3] Because she shares only a surface likeness to her mentors, she finds an easy excuse to dismiss their offerings; I believe her interactions teach Thel a useful strategy, however, that she neglects to adopt when she reaches the land unknown. Consistently inverting or transposing the dialogue of her conversation partners, Thel fails to maintain her patterned response at the one point where it might save her: when she confronts her own voice issuing forth from her grave. The function of dialogue in *The Book of Thel* provides both an interpretive key for the reader and a means of unlocking the door to Higher Innocence for Thel, but Thel drops that key in her flight back to the protective, stifling vales of Har.

The first two lines of the poem contextualize all that follows by contrasting Thel with her stable older sisters:[4] "The daughters of Mne

1. Although all studies of *Thel* examine the poem's language, only two others concentrate on the effect dialogue has on the action of the poem: Levinson's and Heppner's. Levinson argues that the act of speech is foregrounded (296), demonstrating how the speeches offered to Thel "constitute the primary events of the poem" (288), while Heppner views the poem as a vehicle for Thel to interpret herself: "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" (86).

2. For an excellent overview of previous critical responses to *Thel*, see Pearce (25–27), who contends that most critics interpret Thel's shriek and flight towards the vales of Har as her inability to meet the challenge of maturity. Since Pearce's article, Johnson's long awaited survey of Blake criticism has appeared in *The English Romantic Poets*, and contains a useful (and fruitfully selective) section on *Thel* (214–216).

3. Pearce suggests "she has been the victim of pernicious instruction and abominable advice" (24).

4. Gleckner believes "Thel's identity can be made clear only when we see the older daughters of Mne Seraphim as higher innocents, who have gone through the state of experience to achieve eternal delight among the 'sunny flocks' " (163).

Seraphim led round their sunny flocks. / All but the youngest; she in paleness sought the secret air" (1:1–2, E 3).[5] Unlike the healthy, older daughters of Mne Seraphim, tending their flocks under the light of a strong sun (and perhaps sharing the "sunny" disposition on which the modifier might pun), Thel languishes in delicate morning beauty, lamenting the passing of her spring. Blake never tells us why Thel needs to worry about fading away "from her mortal day"—no mysterious illness separates Thel from her sisters, only age—but Thel herself seems convinced of her imminent death. Her first words catalogue her sense of kinship with other fleeting ephemera, despite the opening line's implication that daughters of Mne Seraphim achieve the ripeness of summer:

> O life of this our spring! why fades the lotus of the water?
> Why fade these children of the spring? born but to smile & fall.
> 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;
> 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. (1:6–14, E 3)

She sees analogues to her own situation in physical manifestations that are reflections of reflections, a series of similitudes Heppner defines as "epiphenomena" ("appearances which exist only as temporary modifications of an underlying substance felt to be more real than they," [81]): not a cloud but a parting cloud, not a dove but the dove's voice, not air but music in the air. Thel's diction heightens her representation of insubstantiality; she is only *like* a shadow in the water. Despite her list of likenesses, Thel possesses clear identity: she *is* a daughter of Mne Seraphim. Instead of asserting kinship with her sisters, and seeking information from siblings who have surely weathered the crisis she currently experiences, Thel retreats into the closed "secret air" that dooms so many of Blake's figures,[6] addressing her lamentations to the vague "life" of spring.

The namesake wish[7] she voices at the end of her open lamentation reveals Thel's characteristic tendency to misinterpret received information. Expressing her desire for a gentle death, Thel refers to a biblical passage that models anything but a gentle passing away. Although critics still debate whether "the voice / Of him that walketh in the evening time" indicates God calling to Adam after he and Eve commit the primal disobedience or Christ's voiced doubts in the garden of Gethsemane, neither

5. All references to and quotations from Blake's *The Book of Thel* will be from Erdman's 1982 edition of *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* unless noted otherwise.

6. Johnson notes Thel's likeness to other "pale" figures trapped in Experience: the pale virgin of "Ah! Sun-flower," the nurse of "The Nurse's Song," or the worm of "The Sick Rose" ("Beulah, 'Mne Seraphim,' and Blake's *Thel*" [264–265]).

7. Critics have long held that Thel's name derives from the Greek word for "wish" or "desire," but Murray convincingly argues a new derivation—"woman"—based on his rediscovery of a late eighteenth-century tract on polygamy containing the word "Thelypthora" or "the ruin of woman."

passage offers the comforting vision Thel draws for herself.[8] She treats her biblical source as another epiphenomenon, ignoring the substance of the text to attend to the mirror-like modifications her consciousness enacts upon it. Like all of Blake's characters, Thel observes (and half creates) a world that confirms the level of her consciousness. Just as she inverts the potential relevance of the biblical source, she inverts or transforms the information volunteered by other sympathetic creatures in the vale. As each pastoral mentor makes an offering, a gap widens between their words and Thel's, demonstrating the dysfunction of dialogue in the vale. Though the Lilly of the valley, the parting Cloud, and the Clod of Clay (all of whom conveniently match the epiphenomena Thel lists) try to help Thel through her critical moment, their words fall upon ears all too ready to deny the message.

The sympathetic Lilly of the valley volunteers a very literal response to Thel's first question—"Why fades the lotus of the water?"—failing to recognize the egocentric nature of Thel's query;[9] although she never does explain why she fades away, the Lilly tries to assuage Thel's concerns in delineating how "he that smiles on all" cares for the needs of her present form and promises a glorious transformation. Each morning her visitor from heaven spreads his hand over her, urging her to rejoice, "for thou shalt be clothed in light, and fed with morning manna: / Till summers heat melts thee beside the fountains and the springs / To flourish in eternal vales" (1:23–25, E 4). Instead of taking comfort from the Lilly's gentle tale by maintaining her initial analogy, Thel holds a mirror to the Lilly's vision to describe a curious reversal of images. Her reply fully ignores the plenitude Christ extends to emphasize the Lilly's nurturing capacity: "Thy breath doth nourish the innocent lamb, he smells thy milky garments, / He crops thy flowers. while thou sittest smiling in his face / Wiping his mild and meekin mouth from all contagious taints" (2:5–7, E 4). Lauding the Lilly's gifts to those who cannot crave, "the voiceless, the o'ertired" (2:4, E 4), Thel demonstrates greater knowledge of the workings of the vale than we anticipate, given her opening questions; that knowledge incorporates surprisingly violent imagery: the Lilly ministers to fire-breathing steeds and flower-cropping lambs (who encounter contagious taints). Her language briefly foreshadows the shocking change that occurs when she enters the land unknown; here both knowledge and phrasing hint that Thel perches on the edge of Experience.[10] Fears undiminished by

8. Ferber, for instance, believes Thel refers to Genesis: "God walks in the garden 'in the cool of the day,' a time Thel prefers to warm mornings" (50). At the same time, he outlines the pervasive image of Christ throughout the poem, noting how Milton has Christ performing the activity in *Paradise Lost* (55).

9. Johnson and others point out how Thel fails to initiate the dialogues that constitute the poem: "The Lilly, 'giving to those who cannot crave,' takes it upon herself to approach Thel; the succeeding speakers are summoned by characters other than Thel, who remains passive throughout these encounters" ("Beulah" [266]).

10. Gillham claims Thel cannot simply be an Innocent refusing to enter Experience, for "to undertake a decision in such a matter would be to announce that Innocence had already been lost" (175).

the Lilly's description of how the Lamb feeds her, Thel points out how the Lilly actually feeds the lamb.

Though the Lilly's lesson seems lost on Thel, the exchange does her good; once the Lilly invokes the Cloud, Thel takes a more active role by directly "charging" the Cloud to explain "Why thou complainest not when in one hour thou fade away: / Then we shall seek thee but not find; ah Thel is like to thee" (3:2–13, E 4). Her question shifts from the initial "Why does life end?" to the new "Where do I go when I die?" (as we know from the conclusion to her exchange with the Lilly: "I vanish from my pearly throne, and who shall find my place" [2:12, E 4]). Perhaps the Lilly does provide some answers, then, if Thel feels able to move on to a different question. The Cloud offers a much richer description of his transition to what may well be the Lilly's "eternal vales":

> when I pass away,
> It is to tenfold life, to love, to peace, and raptures holy:
> Unseen descending, weight my light wings upon balmy flowers;
> And 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. (3:10–16, E 4–5)

For the Cloud death assumes a familial aspect: he "dies" into a sexual merging with his bride, the dew, that results in the pair's nurturing their offspring-like flowers. Thel tries to ignore the sexual implications of the Cloud's death, but his speech evidently rattles her; unlike her off-handed dismissal of the Lilly, she repeatedly asserts her lack of resemblance to him: "I fear I am not like thee; / For I walk through the vales of Har. and smell the sweetest flowers; / But I feed not the little flowers: I hear the warbling birds, / But I feed not the warbling birds" (3:17–20, E 5). For the first and only time Thel refers to herself as a "woman"[11]—and once again discloses greater awareness than her professed ignorance leads us to expect in expressing her dismay at the single function she associates with human death: "all shall say, without a use this shining woman liv'd, / Or did she only live. to be at death the food of worms" (3:22–23, E 5). As she did with the Lilly, Thel transposes an image: her horror at being food for worms actually displaces her deeper fear of the phallus. The Cloud touches a chord Thel refuses to hear but inadvertantly acknowledges in her response. Instead of finding comfort in his vision of sexual transformation, she anxiously inverts the message's application. Unperturbed, the Cloud accepts her modification, but pointedly explains "every thing that lives / Lives not alone, nor for itself" (3:26–27, E 5)—a philosophy the Clod of Clay repeats fourteen lines later ("we live not for ourselves" [4:10, E 5])—before he calls forth the Worm.

Thel's brush with sexuality predetermines her responses to both the

11. See Murray for the relationship between "Thel" and "woman."

Worm and its spokesperson, the Clod of Clay. Her real surprise in viewing the Worm derives from denied expectations; certainly the infant before her bears no likeness to the phallus she imagines: "Art thou a Worm? image of weakness. art thou but a Worm? / I see thee like an infant wrapped in the Lillys leaf" (4:2–3, E 5). We already know that the Lilly is so weak she scarcely supports the weight of a butterfly (1:18, E 4); the Worm is even lighter than that.[12] No wonder Thel finds herself able to feel pity for someone other than herself. Thel's confrontation with the Worm and Clod of Clay introduce several innovations in the poem's larger pattern: generally Thel suggests her likeness to another creature, and that creature is drawn into the dialogue by the preceding mentor.[13] Now, although the Cloud invokes the Worm (with whom Thel asserts similitude only after she views it in infancy), the Worm's weeping noises call forth the Clod.[14] While Thel might recognize a real model in the Clod, since both are formed of clay, she persists in maintaining her focus on the Worm.[15] The Clod initially reinforces the nurturing image Thel wills herself to see in earlier encounters; like the Lilly, whose breath nourishes the lamb when he smells her "milky garments" (1:5, E 4), the Clod feeds the Worm by exhaling her life "In milky fondness" (4:9, E 5). These maternal actions might comfort Thel, but the Clod's words heighten the threat of sexuality introduced in the Cloud's speech: "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" (5:1–3, E 5). The golden band of haze produced by the merging of the Cloud and the dew turns into the real nuptial bands signifying the Clod's marriage.

Thel absolutely refuses to accept the Clod's simple message, transforming both the Clod's words and the evidence of her own senses to come up with a "lesson" that suits her needs. Implicit in being a daughter is recognizing what mothers do, and Thel willingly ascribes the role of nurturer to all with whom she comes in contact; what she remains unwilling to acknowledge is the necessarily sexual role mothers assume in creating the life they nurture. With blinders firmly in place, Thel reinterprets the sights and sounds before her to change the sexual relationship the Clod

12. Like the butterfly and the Worm, the Cloud also weighs down the Lilly's leaf when "raptures holy: / Unseen descending, weight my light wings upon balmy flowers" (3:11, E 5). Though Thel finds momentary comfort in the Worm's image of weakness, all three images hint at sexuality: the Cloud's raptures precede his merging with the dew, Damon associates the butterfly with the "joy of essential life" and resurrection (139–140), and the Worm is the phallus.

13. Heppner notes the pattern of the poem as the way "in which each creature chooses a key phrase or image from Thel's speech to materialize into the next speaker" (86). Levinson observes how Thel's pastoral advisors copy her diction (288); Johnson suggests the repeated words and images entail repositionings that set "Thel's sick self-involvement over against the robust vitality of the other characters" ("Beulah" [266]).

14. Heppner adds another shift in the pattern by suggesting that Thel hears an echo of her own unhappiness in the Worm's weeping, and "the Worm comes from the 'silent valley,' as if echoing Thel's pursuit of the 'secret air' " (90). Cf. Johnson's "Beulah" (266).

15. Johnson considers the Clod Thel's best teacher for a different reason; she cannot make easy identifications and then dismiss them because the Clod clearly states their dissimilarities: Thel is a beauty whereas she is the meanest thing ("Beulah" [269]).

shares with "he that loves the lowly" to a paternal one between God and the Worm:

> Alas! I knew not this, and therefore did I weep:
> That God would love a Worm I knew, and punish the evil foot
> That wilful, bruis'd its helpless form: but that he cherish'd it
> With milk and oil, I never knew; and therefore did I weep,
> And I complaind in the mild air, because I fade away (5:8–12, E 6)

Thel contradicts what we know to be true—that the Clod provides milk for the Worm, and God oils the Clod—by claiming that God cherishes the Worm with oil and milk.[16] This contradiction follows her equally serious inversion of the crucial biblical passage delineating human and divine interactions with the worm; according to Thel God punishes the foot that bruises the worm, but Genesis tells us a different story: in listing the consequences of the fall God curses the worm, describing how man "shall bruise your head, / and you shall bruise his heel" (3:14–15). Even the syntax of Thel's response indicates her confusion and disturbed mental state; though she uses three causatives to indicate why she felt the way she did—"therefore" (in two places) and "because"—her reasoning collapses under the strain: first she says she wept through lack of knowledge and then she explains she wept because she fades away.[17] Thel persuades herself she is ready for the change in condition she steadily anticipates, but in fact the increasing disparity between her instructors' words and her own responses demonstrates a dangerous lack of preparedness. Consistently inverting the images of her epiphenomenal advisors, Thel examines the face of her world through a mirror as if she battled some Medusa; perhaps she fears direct appraisal might turn her to stone.

Because the Clod of Clay urges her towards the land unknown by promising " 'tis given thee to enter, / And to return; fear nothing. enter with thy virgin feet" (5:16–17, E 6), critics suggest Thel is given a "total gift."[18] Thel herself, convinced of the nurturing force of life, probably believes in a safe return. Nevertheless, the Clod merely offers passage back and forth, not a haven from change. If Thel does come home to the same vales of Har, surely her perspective undergoes conversion; movement from Innocence to Experience or Organized Innocence involves mental shifts, as Blake makes clear later on in his writing: "Man Passes on but States remain for Ever he passes thro them like a traveller who may as well suppose that the places he has passed thro exist no more" (*A Vision of the Last Judgment*, [E 556]). No reader questions the vast difference, however, between the vales Thel inhabits for the first five plates of the poem and the startling land unknown she views in plate six. When Thel

16. Mitchell also points out how Thel makes God into a kind and loving father who anoints his children, ignoring the Clod's assertion that God is a husband; he persuasively demonstrates that Thel adds milk into the catalogue of gifts, thereby diluting the sexual implications of the oil (92). Heppner believes the maternal milk of the Clay also signifies sperm, citing similar images in *The Four Zoas* (90).

17. Johnson comments on Thel's "faulty expression of causation" as an indication of error even though Thel believes "she has radically changed her outlook" ("Beulah" [270]).

18. Johson's "Beulah" (272).

passes through the northern gate she enters a world of harsh and frightening description, demarcated linguistically by the cold language of Experience: "She saw the couches of the dead, & where the fibrous roots / Of every heart on earth infixes deep its restless twists" (6:3–4, E 6). Although Thel's language in the vales sometimes hints at Experience, particularly when she inverts images (of the flower cropping lamb, for instance, or the bruised worm), her plunge into the land unknown unearths a new linguistic and perceptual environment.[19]

Unprepared as she is for this new environment, Thel manages to wander about in its terrifying landscape for quite some time, passively accepting the sorrows unveiled: "She wanderd in the land of clouds thro' valleys dark, listning / Dolours & lamentations: waiting oft beside a dewy grave / She stood in silence. listning to the voices of the ground" (6:6–8, E 6).[20] Only when she approaches her own grave plot and hears what is most likely her own voice asking yet another series of questions does she start, shriek, and flee:

> 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 an Ear, a whirlpool fierce to draw creations in?
> 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? (6:11–20, E 6)

What makes Thel run away from the disembodied voice that becomes her last advisor? Surely not the mere listing of horrors, since she has already seen them in her wanderings (and perhaps even heard them from the other "voices of the ground"). Does the entire catalogue of perverted senses make her flinch, or only the explicitly frustrated sexuality unveiled in the final two items? If sexuality in the vales of Har unnerved her, the direct confrontation here might make her flee to a place where she succeeded in denying it. Could it be the warring rather than nurturing view of love, which critics sometimes identify as a parody or echo of Renaissance expressions of love?[21] Or does she run away from her own voice because she cannot bear hearing herself still asking questions? Any or all of these explanations provide reasonable motivations for Thel's act; be-

19. Blake's revisions to the poem might account for the horrific shift in language; since we have no copy of the original ending, we should assume Blake's change was intentional and not an inadvertant result of his evolving style. See Erdman's *Illuminated Blake* (40) and "Queries" (24). For a contrasting view, see Bentley, who believes the dramatic shift in the final plate was not a late revision but always intended: "I think that the differences on the last plate are deliberately contrived by Blake and are carefully prepared for on the title page and elsewhere" (139).

20. Gleckner points out how the land unknown mirrors the vales of Har by tracing the connection between images: "instead of flowers there are 'fibrous roots / Of every heart'; instead of the infant smiles there is 'a land of sorrows & tears where never smile was seen'; instead of a rainbow and pleasant daylight there is 'a land of clouds thro' valleys dark' " (164).

21. See Bloom (58), Heppner (94), and Mitchell (93).

cause Thel never speaks again, readers hazard guesses without confirmation. Thel simply runs back to the vales of Har.

Although several critics see Thel's flight as a positive rejection of Experience,[22] most believe Thel's inability to confront the images of the land unknown signifies her failure to pass into a new stage of development.[23] Because Thel actually does respond to the images of the land unknown by laying down in her grave, I contend Thel's failure stems from her inability to do more than shriek in response to the catalogue that provides the last piece of dialogue in the poem. If Thel learns anything from her interactions with the pastoral creatures in the vales of Har, it is a certain mode of conversation; perhaps that mode is faulty, given her subsequent misinterpretations, but at least she shares the responsibility of dialogue: though she never initiates conversation with her instructors (except, in a sense, the Cloud), she always responds and maintains her part. She forgets that lesson when she hears the haunting voice issuing forth from her grave. For the first time Thel fails to invert, contradict, or transform the words she hears, and for the first time, holding a mirror up to language would teach her a valuable lesson. Each perverse sense in the land unknown matches an innocent counterpart that celebrates the joy of the senses: the ears that listen to the sounds of destruction "hear the warbling birds" (3:19, E 5), the eyes that see poisonous smiles view the Lilly's gentle smile, the lying tongues "impress'd with honey from every wind" taste the golden honey purified by the Lilly's wine, the nostrils inhaling terror still "smell the sweetest flowers" (3:18, E 5), and the curtains of flesh that seem to limit desire enable the "raptures holy" the Cloud and dew experience as they merge.[24] When Thel breaks the pattern of her responses, she loses the opportunity to discover how "Without Contraries is no progression" (3, E 34), as Blake later declares in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. To interpret her shriek as a rejection of Experience is to forget that Thel's rejections generally require an assertion of difference. Asserting difference might induce positive results; even better would be her application of the real message her mentors repeat: merging with the other. Could Thel integrate the self that lies down in the dewy grave with the emanative voice, she might find herself able to join her

22. Bogen feels Thel runs away from a loveless land unknown back to "her innocent youth, where she belongs" (31), Gillham speculates that she flees back to Har to experience what she has been missing (187), Mellor sees Thel's return as a triumph of Innocence over Experience for "Thel neither can nor should tolerate the evil and unnatural repressions of rational Experience" (205), and Johnson congratulates Thel's shift from passive questioner to active runner: "Starting from her seat, shrieking, and fleeing are at least signs of life; she is no longer an onlooker" ("Beulah" [272]).

23. As Pearce demonstrates, most critics "concur in attributing Thel's flight to weakness of character" (24). See Bloom (52), Damon (401), Duerkson (19), Frye (238), Gleckner (168), Heppner (80), Hilton (31), Paley (34), Wagenknecht (158).

24. Johnson contends that Thel finally confronts the identity she has tried to evade in uttering those tormented questions: "She is like someone who sees her image for the first time in a relentlessly accurate magnifying mirror. . . . Thel has tried shutting her senses to their own destruction – but also to exquisite fulfillment" ("Beulah" [271]). Interesting as Johnson's thesis is, we need more evidence from Thel herself that she now comprehends how "one who cautiously 'sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern' (*MHH* E 39, K 154) misses out on the moment that opens into Eternity."

older sisters. She neither merges with the other nor asserts difference through her habitual reversals. Instead she runs back to a Har that, for her, degenerates from Beulah—the married land of the Clod, the Cloud, and the Lilly—to Ulro, dooming herself to the very solipsism that marks the opening of the poem.

By strategically disrupting the pattern of Thel's dialogue at her most critical moment, Blake hopes to activate his readers' imaginations, urging us to recognize the truths Thel misses in her desperate flight: combining the images of Experience with their counterparts in Innocence provides a fuller vision of existence. He matches the dialogic hermeneutic with a visual disruption; although every other illumination for *The Book of Thel* tends to illustrate the part of the story it accompanies,[25] the final plate contains a startling visual clue right above Blake's lettered "The End": three children astride a serpent gleefully ride off to the left, perhaps in the direction of Har. Although the poem presents two images of the worm interacting with adults—Thel's notion that worms feed on bodies in the grave and the infant Worm being fed by the maternal Clod—the illustration reverses both pictures. Instead of Thel's helpless worm we see a frightening snake, but its present manifestation seems less threatening than useful; despite its sinister appearance Erdman compares it to the serpent of *America* 11, where "a rather more cheerful serpent is carrying a more securely mounted but similar family inland from the fires of war" (40).[26] Just as Blake turns images inside out through this last illumination, he invites his readers to invert the negatives of Thel's final catalogue of horrors into positives. Like those adventurous children, we learn to straddle both perspectives. If we persist in our ignorance after both the dialogic disruption and visual clue, Blake provides one last opportunity to jolt our awareness in the postscript labelled "Thel's Motto": "Does the Eagle know what is in the pit? / Or wilt thou go ask the Mole: / Can Wisdom be put in a silver rod? / Or Love in a golden bowl?"[27] For Thel herself the motto demonstrates defeat; reduced to rhetorical questions, she advises us to seek knowledge from appropriate sources—eagles for information on the skies, moles for data on the earth—and denies the possibility of locating wisdom and love in material form.[28] For imaginative readers the motto captures essential truths: we need both perspectives—the mole's close

25. Mitchell comments that although "most of the designs illustrate a specific scene in the text . . . the poem concludes with a picture of three children astride a serpent [that fails to call] up a clearly appropriate caption from the text" (79).

26. Erdman also likens the serpent to "the useful serpents of *Jerusalem* 9, 39, 72, and 98" (*Illuminated Blake* [40]).

27. I follow Erdman's version of *The Book of Thel* in *The Illuminated Blake* for the placement of "Thel's Motto" rather than its positioning in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* because Erdman himself believes the motto is part of the revision to plate 6. See Erdman's "Textual Notes" (790) and "Queries" (24).

28. Gleckner suggests Blake's point in the motto is that one does not ask questions about Experience, one experiences it: "Thel's great tragedy is that she feels she can learn by merely asking" (161). Mellor argues that asking questions is enough: "we need only *ask*: we need not ourselves participate in such evils" (206).

reading and the eagle's broader overview—for a comprehensive vision of our world.[29] By combining perspectives we learn how the merging of material forms ushers in the knowing love beings of Organized Innocence share.

Blake foreordains the very different journeys Thel and the reader make in *The Book of Thel* on the title page. As Mitchell notes, Blake prints Thel's name in rigid, blocked letters but spells the word "Book" in a wonderfully curving, flowing script, "a charmingly literal way for Blake to tell us that even if Thel is incapable of resolving the dualities of experience, the 'Book' which tells her story may contain an implicit resolution" (99). If we look very closely at the figures among the letters of the title, we see an image of Thel trapped within the second "O" of "Book," encircled by the letter as she is by her own reasoning. In opposition to Thel, two readers flank the outer edges of the title: a shepherd facing left of the "B" in "Book" and an angel facing right off the "L" in "Thel." Like her motto, carefully enclosed in a square formed of vines, Thel remains locked within her articulations; the reader, however, looks outward, free to unite the visions of Innocence with Experience for the "raptures holy" of loving wisdom. By creating and disrupting the patterned dialogue of *The Book of Thel*, Blake begins the great task he later sets for Los in *Jerusalem*, "Striving with Systems to deliver Individuals from those Systems" (11:5, E 154); breaks in the system teach readers how to approach a Har bathed in light.

29. In looking at the earth we combine the perspectives of eagles and moles this way; in looking at the sky the opposite is true: we combine the eagle's detailed knowledge with the mole's larger outline.

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