

I was angry with my friends,  
I sold my wisdom, my wisdom did err;  
I was angry with my foe,  
I did not know that he was my foe.

And I wanted it in vain,  
Night & morning with my tears,  
And I wanted it with sighs,  
And with sobbings and with cries.

And it grew both day and night,  
Till I bore an apple bright,  
And my foe he held a shiner,  
And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole,  
When the night had veiled the pole,  
In my morning glad I saw  
Where the thief had hidden his wares.

To Tirzah

Whatever is born of Mortal Birth,  
Must be consumed with the Earth,  
To rise from Generation free,  
Then what have I to do with thee?

The Sins spring from Shame & Pride,  
Blow'd in the womb, to cunning dead,  
But Mercy chang'd Death in a Sleep,  
The Sins rise to work & weep.

Thou, Mother of my Mortal part,  
With cruelty dost mould my Heart,  
And with false self-deceiving tears,  
Dost hard my Nostrils, Eyes, & Ears.

Dost clove my Tongue in senseless play  
And me to Mortal Life betray.

1. Tirzah was the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel and is preserved in Blake's imagination in Jerusalem, capital of the spiritual kingdom of Jubah, whose gates had been shut since the captivity. In this poem, which was added to his version of *Songs of Experience*, Tirzah is represented as the mother—in the sense of the "mother and Generation"—of the "Mortal part" of the human soul.

2. To harden the words of Christ, the message to love one's neighbor as oneself.

15 The Death of Jesus set me free;  
Then what have I to do with thee?

ca. 1805

A Divine Image<sup>1</sup>

Cruelty has a Human Heart  
And Jealousy a Human Face,  
Terror, the Human Form Divine,  
And Secrecy, the Human Dress.

5 The Human Dress is forgèd Iron,  
The Human Form, a fiery Forge,  
The Human Face, a Furnace seal'd,  
The Human Heart, its hungry Gorge.<sup>2</sup> *mouth, stomach*

1790-91

**The Book of Thel** Although Blake dated the etched poem 1789, its composition probably extended to 1791, so that he was working on it at the time he was writing the *Songs of Innocence* and some of the *Songs of Experience*. *The Book of Thel* treats the same two "states"; now, however, Blake employs the narrative instead of the lyrical mode and embodies aspects of the developing myth that was fully enacted in his later prophetic books. And like the major prophecies, this poem is written in the fourteener, a long line of seven stresses.

Thel is represented as a virgin dwelling in the Vales of Har, which seems equivalent to the sheltered state of pastoral peace and innocence in Blake's *Songs of Innocence*. Here, however, Thel feels useless and unfulfilled and appeals for comfort, unavailingly, to various beings who are contented with their roles in Har. Finally, the Clay invites Thel to try the experiment of assuming embodied life. Part 4 (plate 6) expresses the brutal shock of the revelation to Thel of the experience of sexual desire—a revelation from which she flees in terror back to her sheltered, if unsatisfying, existence in Har.

Some commentators propose that Thel is an unborn soul who rejects the ordeal of an embodied life in the material world. Others propose that Thel is a human virgin who shrinks from experiencing a life of adult sexuality. It is possible, however, to read Blake's little myth as comprehending both these areas of significance. The reader does not need to know Blake's mythology inside and out to recognize the broad symbolic reach of this poem in ordinary human experience—the elemental failure of nerve to meet the challenge of life as it is, the timid incapacity to risk the conflict, physicality, pain, and loss without which there is no possibility either of growth or of creativity.

1. Blake omitted this poem from all but one copy of *Songs of Experience*, probably because "The Human Abstract" served as a more comprehensive and subtle contrary to "The Divine Image" in *Songs of Innocence*.

The Book of Thel

PLATE I<sup>1</sup>

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?<sup>2</sup>

PLATE I

I

The daughters of Mne<sup>3</sup> Seraphim led round their sunny flocks,  
All but the youngest; she in paleness sought the secret air,  
To fade away like morning beauty from her mortal day;  
Down by the river of Adona her soft voice is heard,  
5 And thus her gentle lamentation falls like morning dew:

"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,  
10 Like dreams of infants, like a smile upon an infant's face,  
Like the dove's 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."<sup>4</sup>

15 The Lilly of the valley breathing in the humble grass  
Answer'd the lovely maid and said: "I am a watry weed,  
And I am very small, and love to dwell in lowly vales;  
So weak, the gilded butterfly scarce perches on my head;  
Yet I am visited from heaven, and he that smiles on all  
20 Walks in the valley and each morn over me spreads his hand,  
Saying: 'Rejoice, thou humble grass, thou new-born lilly flower,  
Thou gentle maid of silent valleys and of modest brooks;  
For thou shalt be clothed in light, and fed with morning manna,  
Till summer's heat melts thee beside the fountains and the springs  
25 To flourish in eternal vales.' Then why should Thel complain?"

1. The plate numbers identify the page, each with its own pictorial design, as originally printed by Blake. These numbers are reproduced here because they are frequently used in references to Blake's writings.

2. Ecclesiastes 12.5-6 describes a time when "fears shall be in the way . . . and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets: Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken."

Perhaps Blake changed the silver cord to a rod to make it, with the golden bowl, a sexual symbol.

3. There has been much speculation about this curious term. It may be an abbreviation for the name "Mnetha," the goddess of the Vales of Har in Blake's earlier poem *Tiriel*.

4. Genesis 3.8: "And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day."



Title page of *The Book of Thel* (1789), plate ii, copy N, ca. 1815

PLATE 2

Why should the mistress of the vales of Har utter a sigh?"

She ceas'd & smild in tears, then sat down in her silver shrine.

Thel answer'd: "O thou little virgin of the peaceful valley,  
Giving to those that cannot crave, the voiceless, the o'erfired;<sup>5</sup>

5 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<sup>o</sup> mouth from all contagious taints. *humble*  
Thy wine doth purify the golden honey; thy perfume,  
Which thou dost scatter on every little blade of grass that springs,  
10 Revives the milkèd cow, & tames the fire-breathing steed.  
But Thel is like a faint cloud kindled at the rising sun:  
I vanish from my pearly throne, and who shall find my place?"

"Queen of the vales," the Lilly answered, "ask the tender cloud,  
And it shall tell thee why it glitters in the morning sky,

15 And why it scatters its bright beauty thro' the humid air.

5. Some scholars, looking to the taming of "the fire-breathing steed" in line 10, construe this word as "oerfired."

Descend, O little cloud, & hover before the eyes of Thel."  
The Cloud descended, and the Lilly bow'd her modest head,  
And went to mind her numerous charge among the verdant grass.

PLATE 3

2

"O little Cloud," the virgin said, "I charge thee tell to me,  
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.  
I pass away, yet I complain, and no one hears my voice."

5 The Cloud then shew'd his golden head & his bright form emerg'd,  
Hovering and glittering on the air before the face of Thel.

"O virgin, know'st thou not our steeds drink of the golden springs  
Where Luvah<sup>6</sup> doth renew his horses? Look'st thou on my youth,  
And fearest thou because I vanish and am seen no more,  
10 Nothing remains? O maid, I tell thee, when I pass away,  
It is to tenfold life, to love, to peace, and raptures holy:  
Unseen descending, weigh 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,  
15 Till we arise link'd in a golden band, and never part,  
But walk united, bearing food to all our tender flowers."

"Dost thou O little Cloud? I fear that 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,  
20 But I feed not the warbling birds; they fly and seek their food;  
But Thel delights in these no more, because I fade away,  
And all shall say, 'Without a use this shining woman liv'd,  
Or did she only live to be at death the food of worms?'"

The Cloud reclind upon his airy throne and answer'd thus:

25 "Then if thou art the food of worms, O virgin of the skies,  
How great thy use, how great thy blessing! Every thing that lives  
Lives not alone, nor for itself; fear not, and I will call  
The weak worm from its lowly bed, and thou shalt hear its voice.  
Come forth, worm of the silent valley, to thy pensive queen."

30 The helpless worm arose, and sat upon the Lilly's leaf,  
And the bright Cloud saild on, to find his partner in the vale.

6. The earliest mention in Blake's work of one of his "Giant Forms," the Zoas. Luvah is the mythical embodiment of the passionate and sexual aspect of humankind. He is represented here, like the Greek Phoebus Apollo, as the driver of the

chariot of the sun; he repairs to the Vales of Har simply to rest and water his horses. The cloud in this passage describes the cycle of water, from cloud to rain and (by the vaporizing action of the sun on water) back to the cloud.

PLATE 4

3

Then Thel astonish'd view'd the Worm upon its dewy bed.

"Art thou a Worm? Image of weakness, art thou but a Worm?  
I see thee like an infant wrapped in the Lilly's leaf;  
Ah, weep not, little voice, thou can'st not speak, but thou can'st weep.  
5 Is this a Worm? I see thee lay helpless & naked, weeping,  
And none to answer, none to cherish thee with mother's smiles."

The Clod of Clay heard the Worm's voice, & rais'd her pitying head;  
She bow'd over the weeping infant, and her life exhal'd  
In milky fondness; then on Thel she fix'd her humble eyes.

10 "O beauty of the vales of Har! we live not for ourselves;  
Thou seest me the meanest thing, and so I am indeed;  
My bosom of itself is cold, and of itself is dark,

PLATE 5

But he that loves the lowly, pours his oil upon my head,  
And kisses me, and binds his nuptial bands around my breast,  
And says: 'Thou mother of my children, I have lov'd thee,  
And I have given thee a crown that none can take away.'  
5 But how this is, sweet maid, I know not, and I cannot know;  
I ponder, and I cannot ponder; yet I live and love."

The daughter of beauty wip'd her pitying tears with her white veil,  
And said: "Alas! I knew not this, and therefore did I weep.  
That God would love a Worm, I knew, and punish the evil foot  
10 That, wilful, bruise'd its helpless form; but that he cherish'd it  
With milk and oil I never knew; and therefore did I weep,  
And I complain'd in the mild air, because I fade away,  
And lay me down in thy cold bed, and leave my shining lot."

"Queen of the vales," the matron Clay answered, "I heard thy sighs,  
15 And all thy moans flew o'er my roof, but I have call'd them down.  
Wilt thou, O Queen, enter my house? 'tis given thee to enter  
And to return; fear nothing, enter with thy virgin feet."

PLATE 6

4

The eternal gates' terrific porter lifted the northern bar:<sup>7</sup>  
Thel enter'd in & saw the secrets of the land unknown.  
She saw the couches of the dead, & where the fibrous roots  
Of every heart on earth infixes deep its restless twists:  
5 A land of sorrows & of tears where never smile was seen.

7. Homer, in *Odyssey* 13, described the Cave of the Naiades, of which the northern gate is for mortals and the southern gate for gods. The Neo-

platonist Porphyry had allegorized it as an account of the descent of the soul into matter and then its return.

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,  
Till to her own grave plot she came, & there she sat down,  
10 And heard this voice of sorrow breathed from the hollow pit:

"Why cannot the Ear be closed to its own destruction?  
Or the glistening Eye to the poison of a smile?  
Why are Eyelids stord with arrows ready drawn,  
Where a thousand fighting men in ambush lie?  
15 Or an Eye of gifts & graces, show'ring fruits & coinèd 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?  
20 Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?"

The Virgin started from her seat, & with a shriek  
Fled back unhinderd till she came into the vales of Har.

1789-91

### Visions of the Daughters of Albion

This work, dated 1793 on the title page, is one of Blake's early illuminated books, and like his later and longer works is written in what Blake called "the long resounding strong heroic verse" of seven-foot lines. Unlike the timid heroine of *The Book of Thel*, the virgin Oothoon dares to break through into adult sexuality (symbolized by her plucking a marigold and placing it between her breasts) and sets out joyously to join her lover, Theotormon, whose realm is the Atlantic Ocean. She is stopped and raped by Bromion, who appears as a thunderstorm (1.16-17). The jealous Theotormon, condemning the victim as well as the rapist, binds the two "back to back" in a cave and sits weeping on the threshold. The rest of the work consists of monologues by the three characters, who remain fixed in these postures. Throughout this stage tableau the Daughters of Albion serve as the chorus who, in a recurrent refrain, echo the "woes" and "sighs" of Oothoon, but not her call to rebellion.

This simple drama is densely significant, for as Blake's compressed allusions indicate, the characters, events, and monologues have diverse areas of application. Blake's abrupt opening word, which he etched in very large letters, is *Enslav'd*, and the work as a whole embodies his view that contemporary men, and even more women, in a spiritual parallel to shackled African slaves, are in bondage to oppressive concepts and codes in all aspects of perception, thought, social institutions, and actions. As indicated by the refrain of the Daughters of Albion (that is, contemporary Englishwomen), Oothoon in one aspect represents the sexual disabilities and slavelike status of all women in a male-dominated society. But as "the soft soul of America" (1.3) she is also the revolutionary nation that had recently won political emancipation, yet continued to tolerate an agricultural system that involved black slavery and to acquiesce in the crass economic exploitation of her "soft American plains." At the same time Oothoon is represented in the situation of a black female slave who has been branded, whipped, raped, and impregnated by her master.

Correlatively, the speeches of the boastful Bromion show him to be not only a sexual exploiter of women and a cruel and acquisitive slave owner but also a general

proponent of the use of force to achieve mastery in wars, in an oppressive legal system, and in a religious morality based on the fear of hell (4.19-24). Theotormon is represented as even more contemptible. Broken and paralyzed by the prohibitions of a puritanical religion, he denies any possibility of achieving "joys" in this life, despairs of the power of intellect and imagination to improve the human condition and, rationalizing his own incapacity, bewails Oothoon's daring to think and act other than he does.

Oothoon's long and passionate oration that concludes the poem (plates 5-8) celebrates a free sexual life for both women and men. Blake, however, uses this open and unpossessive sexuality to typify the realization of all human potentialities and to represent an outgoing altruism, as opposed to an enclosed self-centeredness, "the self-love that envies all." To such a suspicious egotism, as her allusions indicate, Oothoon attributes the tyranny of uniform moral laws imposed on variable individuals, a rigidly institutional religion, the acquisitiveness that drives the system of commerce, and the property rights in another person that are established by the marriage contract.

Blake's poem reflects some prominent happenings of the years of its composition, 1791-93. This was not only the time when the revolutionary spirit had moved from America to France with tremendous consequences in England, but also the time of rebellions by African slaves in the Western Hemisphere and of widespread debate in England about the abolition of the slave trade. Blake, while composing the *Visions*, had illustrated the sadistic punishments inflicted on rebellious slaves in his engravings for J. G. Stedman's *A Narrative, of a Five Years' Expedition, against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (see David Erdman, *Blake: Prophet against Empire*, chapter 10). Blake's championing of women's liberation parallels some of the views expressed in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in 1792 by Mary Wollstonecraft, whom Blake knew and admired, and for whom he had illustrated a book the year before.

### Visions of the Daughters of Albion

The Eye sees more than the Heart knows.

PLATE iii

#### The Argument

I loved Theotormon  
And I was not ashamed  
I trembled in my virgin fears  
And I hid in Leutha's<sup>1</sup> vale!

5 I plucked Leutha's flower,  
And I rose up from the vale;  
But the terrible thunders tore  
My virgin mantle in twain.

1. In some poems by Blake, Leutha is represented as a female figure who is beautiful and seductive but treacherous.