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“Sunny Flocks” and the “Hollow Pit”: Blake’s *Book of Thel* and a Question of Sexuality

The text has been chosen since not only does it document my long lasting interest and fascination with the work of William Blake, but also because I believe that in the way in which it twists together the issue of human personhood constructed largely through the protocols of rationality on the one hand and desire which revokes the animal substance resistant to rational attempts to overwhelm it on the other, the essay can still find its place in contemporary debate in the field of humanities.

1.

The frame of the poem (and we cannot let go unnoticed the fact that it is also a frame, a set of covers for the “Book”) locates the text between a scene of the sun and that of a tomb. What begins on the meadows where women are tending “their sunny flocks”¹ finishes not only in a general landscape of death (“A land of sorrows

The daughters of Mne 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,
And thus her gentle lamentation falls like morning dew:
She wander’d in the land of clouds thro’ valleys dark, list’ning
Dolours & lamentations; waiting oft beside a dewy grave
She stood in silence, list’ning to the voices of the ground,
Till to her own grave plot she came, & there she sat down,
And heard this voice of sorrow breathed from the hollow pit.

& of tears,” Pl. 4; 5) but in a particular place where death becomes MY own demise (“Till to her own grave plot she came,” Pl. 4; 9). At the same time, this topography is marked by a double estrangement — of a person and of voice: in the spectacle of a morning Thel alienates

herself from her sisters, does not lead the “sunny flocks” but laments in a detached place. To be more specific, the only thing we hear is “her soft voice”: the alienated

¹ William Blake, “The Book of Thel,” in: Geoffrey Keynes ed., *William Blake: Complete Writings* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 127—130. Further quotations will come from the same edition and will be marked as Pl. (plate number) and a line reference. Quotes from texts other than “Thel” will be marked as K plus a page reference.

woman has left the company of other women and remains in an ambiguous relationship with her body which disappears behind her voice.

At the other end of the narrative, Thel dissociates herself from humanity by her decision to explore the sphere of death and from her own voice which is now replaced by a call not hers but uttered from her own grave (“Till to her own grave plot she came, & there she sat down,/ And heard this voice of sorrow breathed from the hollow pit,” Pl. 4;9–10). What begins as a case of alienation of a human person from his/her kin and of his/her voice from the body ends as an ultimate estrangement from the living and a replacement of the human voice by mourning (“this voice of sorrow”) which — stemming from man’s final absence (“the hollow pit”) — remains in a dubious relationship to man.

A movement of the poem leads us then from morning to mourning, from the sun to a tomb.

2.

We cannot too quickly leave aside the question of voice. For at least two reasons: first, the voice of Thel decisively breaks a convention of the pastoral which links shepherds with singing. As the Music Master explains to Moliere’s M. Jourdain: “Singing has always been associated with shepherds.”² Thel either indulges in “gentle lamentation” (Pl. 1; 5) or in the inarticulate vocal outbursts (“The Virgin started from her seat, & with a shriek/ Fled back [...]” Pl. 4; 21); even if we could assume that the former still remains within the orbit of singing performance (Blake’s “gentle lamentation” seems to invite such a hypothesis through its similarity to the standard rhetoric of pastoral madrigals which, for instance in Andrea Gabrieli’s work, talk about *dolce duol*, a “sweet lament”³), the latter certainly radically undermines such a possibility.

Second, the vocal pronouncement which concludes the poem, the utterance of the “hollow pit,” is not just a voice but “THIS voice [emphasis added]” where the pronoun highlights its object not merely in terms of deixis but also as a final destination, a thing towards which the whole process of expecting and reflecting is directed. THIS not only prepares us for the enunciation to come (where its function resembles that of the “following”) but also announces the arrival of the long expected, the actualization of something which was anticipated (as in a phrase, “and finally came this man” uttered after a long period of intense waiting).

The ambiguities of THIS “voice” prepare us for the dilemmas of narcissism: if one has to come to terms with the voice of the “hollow pit” before one understands

² See any edition of *The Shopkeeper Turned Gentleman* by Moliere.

³ Quoted in Howard Mayer Brown, “The Madrigalian and the Formulaic in Andrea Gabrieli’s ‘Pastoral Madrigals,’” in: John Dixon Hunt, ed., *The Pastoral Landscape* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1992), 91.

one's being and identity, then the voice must necessarily come simultaneously from outside and inside of myself (is “my” grave truly, and if so then in what way, “mine”, and who is this “I” to whom this grave “belongs”?). Godard is right when he claims that Thel's denial of life paves a way for Freud's analyses (“This narcissistic denial of life provides a rich anticipation [...] of Freud's theories about the development of consciousness, conversion of libido, and formation of Anticathexes”⁴), but when unequivocally describing Thel as “the incurable adult narcissist [who is] unable to accept mortality through sexuality,”⁵ he does not see what we will be trying to demonstrate in this essay — that there is an inherent and inexorable narcissism which constitutes the very mechanism of desire and which cannot be totally overcome by the acting out of passions.

At the end of the soft voice of gentle lamentation there is always THIS voice of the hollow pit which goes beyond the clear identity marking strategies and in which I hear myself speak from the realm of death, in which “I” no longer can identify myself as an “I” (but neither can I categorically deny that there is no link between this voice and “me”) and, therefore, it will be better to say (purposefully and inevitably transcending the discipline of grammar) that in THIS voice “I” hear oneself speak (where “oneself” refers to this non-identifiable speaker who/which only through its topography of death suggests itself as an “I”).

3.

The deictic pronoun announces a thing that only partly becomes available for me: I can hear it but its visibility is permanently sealed off. Thel does not see who is speaking from the hollow pit, and the phrase “THIS voice” doubly deludes our attention: first, because it indicates an object which manifests itself to us only in part, only through a synecdoche, second, because despite its deictic character the pronoun can only indecisively suggest some object without naming it, can only make a gesture towards it without bringing it fully to our presence. THIS both points out the object and shows it to be unavailable for any specific naming; THIS replaces the name of the object which defies appellation.

THIS is where the inarticulate darkness emerges to the light of language without reaching the positivity of a substantive.

4.

We are facing the problem of loss: at the end, the deprivation is easily definable (death, splintering of the self which no longer controls what is and is not his/hers —

⁴ Jerry Caris Godard, *Mental Forms Creating: William Blake Anticipates Jung and Rank* (New York: University Press of America, 1985), 46.

⁵ Godard, *Mental Forms Creating*, 46.

“This voice” speaks from Thel’s grave while she — still alive — listens to its pronouncements), at the beginning of the poem the loss is less specific. It does not convey the threat of death but yet its work is no less perturbing. One could detect in it a working of a paradoxical mechanism which enhances our concern with reality only to bring about the effect of disappointment and ultimate lack of interest in the external world. The drama of Thel is that of a melancholic as described by Freud in his 1917 essay on “Mourning and Melancholia” where melancholia is characterized as “a profoundly painful dejection, abrogation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings [...]”⁶

But, as we have said, in one of these characteristics Blake takes a different course from Freud: Thel’s melancholia seems to derive less from the “abrogation of interest in the outside world” and more from a sudden disruption of the temporal scheme which reveals the abysses of nothingness within the previously predetermined operations of time. In such a process of unsettlement, time empties out and leaves nothing but void.

Before Thel comments upon the mortality of man, i.e. on the passage of time as the device of death, she is keenly aware of the passage of time as a process of becoming and production. Before time begins to signify death (“Why fade these children of the spring”), it intimates life (“O life of this our spring!”). What in the pastoral tradition appears as a critical moment in the sequence of time in which mourning is overcome (a new life of spring replacing the stagnancy and grief of winter, as in Blake’s juvenile poem dedicated to “Spring” in which we read about the season coming “upon our love-sick land that mourns for thee [spring],” *K, l*) now is presented as a point at which grief begins: love-sickness is not cured by spring but awakened by the sense of loss which inheres in the presence(s) of life. A grief announced by Thel concerns the premonition of loss which, as yet, remains unknown but which modifies the world and presents it as the doubly unfulfilled erotic: the loss is represented as a purely disembodied vocal phenomenon which, additionally, is ascribed to “evening,” a time of waning and decline (“I lay me down [...] and gentle hear the voice/ Of him that walketh in the garden in the evening time,” *Pl. 1; 12,14*).

A distortion of the erotic results from the unspecified loss which will have taken place in the future but which is being already enacted now in the phenomenal world.

5.

Let us again turn to Freud, who diagnoses the disturbing uncertainty at the heart of melancholia. Whereas mourning and grief always allow us to determine its cause, melancholia is the symptom of the loss which remains unnamed: “The unknown loss in melancholia would also result in an inner labour of the same kind [as grief]

⁶ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in: *Collected Papers: Authorized Translation under the Supervision of Joan Riviere*, Vol. 4 (New York: Basic Books, 1959), 153.

[...]. Only the inhibition of the melancholic seems puzzling to us because we cannot see what it is that absorbs him so entirely."⁷

Freud's emphasis on the unavailability of the cause of melancholia must in the case of Thel be concerned with the literal understanding of that which cannot be seen and is anticipated as an alien time pocket developing within the temporal "now" (an "evening" envisioned in a "morning") and as a mere voice ("of him that walketh in the garden in the evening" and "of sorrow"). But it is significant that, unlike Freud's melancholic, Thel does not sever her links with the world, and the crisis of her relationship with reality is not so much due to the "abrogation of interest" as to the intense problematization of the connection between herself and the Other. Thel's melancholy enacts a complicated drama in which, on the one hand, one recognizes the relentless necessity of the Other and, on the other hand, one is not certain whether the Other precedes the formation of one's self or is a result of the self's solidification. A series of Thel's philosophical interjections testifies to this uncertain location of melancholy between the grieving for the absence of the Other and the narcissistic confirmation of one's exclusivity for which the Other is only needed as a reflecting mirror. In her questions Thel certainly struggles with mortality, but this is not merely a reflection of despair over the inevitability of dying; more importantly, it is an examining of time as an element in which one constantly "dies" in his/her relationships with the Other, in which man reaffirms his/her identity through a nervous repetition of a personal pronoun which is answered by the indefiniteness ("no one") of the absent partner ("I pass away: yet I complain, and no one hears my voice," Pl. 3; 4) and which however leaves behind it nothing but emptiness ("I vanish [...] and who shall find my place?" Pl. 2; 12). The senses "allure humanity to sexual pleasure, though that pleasure is also a part of the inevitable destruction of the body in its mortal day."⁸

The placelessness of man who realizes that the relationship with the Other must be preceded by the recognition of one's self as a realm of "death" (see Clod of Clay and her "My bosom of itself is cold, and of itself is dark," Pl. 4; 12).

In the absence of the Other one has to "die" oneself in order to provide for the otherwise unidentifiable cause for sense of loss and thus a melancholy process of dejection is as much a self-reprobation as it is a self-mourning.

6.

There are three responses to Thel's queries which reveal certain common features. All three of them are based on the principle of recognized weakness which is redeemed by the investing of energy into objects other than the speaking sub-

⁷ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 155.

⁸ John Howard, *Infernal Poetics: Poetic Structures in Blake's Lambeth Prophecies* (London: Associated University Presses, 1984), 52.

ject. The Lilly of the valley is “very small” and “so weak, the gilded butterfly scarce perches” on it (Pl. 1; 16, 18) but it “nourishes the innocent lamb” (Pl. 2; 5); the Cloud “passes away,” but it bears “food to all our tender flowers” (Pl. 3; 10, 16); the Clod of Clay presents itself as “the meanest thing,” but she “bow[s] over the weeping infant” in a gesture of solicitude (Pl. 4; 11, 8). This economy in which weakness is a source of power makes it also clear that this empowerment does not come from the being itself but from a larger force; hence the Lilly is “visited from heaven” (Pl. 1; 18), the Cloud is overwhelmed by the “raptures holy” (Pl. 3; 11), and the Clod of Clay is exalted by “he, that loves the lowly” and who “pours his oil upon my head” (Pl. 5; 1).

The answers come then all not only from the perspective of the openness to the Other but, more dramatically, from the position of one who has been overcome and engulfed by the all powerful Other. If Thel enquires about the purpose of human life, then the three answers suggest that one’s existence is justifiable only on the ground of it being claimed by a force over which one has no control.

The Other is one who/which descends and who/which equips being with a purpose which is not being’s but which either belongs to the domain of public use (“bearing food to all our tender flower,” Pl. 3; 16) which also includes death (“Then if thou art the food of worms [...] How great thy use [...],” Pl. 3; 25), or eschatological plan of salvation (“thou shalt be clothed in light,” Pl. 1; 23).

7.

Thel’s resistance to this philosophy and her retreat to melancholia seem to stem from three sources. First, she refuses to see herself and her being as measured in the categories of “use;” at least, she cannot find for herself the equivalents of the “uses” all her interlocutors talk about. She can see the purpose of the Lilly but the ontology of her being cannot find access to this kind of purposiveness (having sketched the design of the pragmatic uses of the Lilly she exclaims: “But Thel is like a faint cloud [...] I vanish from my pearly throne, and who shall find my place?” Pl. 2; 12).

Second, she cannot find a middle path between the category of “use” and the temporal structure of being which seems to preempt any pragmatic discourse of “functions” and “applications.” In a characteristic answer to the Cloud’s exhortation, Thel clearly lets know that her melancholy does not arise from questioning the very category of “use,” but, rather, from its incommensurability with man’s temporal character. Time puts “use” under erasure and what is at stake is a possibility of working out a philosophy which would reformulate this category, produce its meaning different from a mere scheme of pragmatic usages, natural causes and effects represented poetically in the Cloud’s rendition of the water circulation process (“The weeping virgin [“the fair eyed dew”] trembling kneels before the risen sun, / Till we arise link’d in a golden band [...] bearing food to all our tender flowers,” Pl. 3; 13–15). Thel responds to this with “But Thel delights in these no more

because I fade away” (Pl. 3; 21), where the “no more” clearly allows us to see that the scheme of purposes and “uses” delineated by the Cloud is not alien to her but perceived as one which has exhausted its potential.

Third, the sense of some ontological menace and the resulting melancholy is amplified by the crisis of knowledge protocols which no longer seem to fulfil their contract on the strength of which they are to provide man with a network of procedures ordering the world and making it comprehensible. Thel, referred to as a “pensive queen” (Pl. 3; 29), is not satisfied with the answers because the submissiveness from which they stem implies the futility of knowledge which is replaced by the acceptance expressed best by the Clod’s statement “I know not, and I cannot know,/ I ponder, and I cannot ponder; yet I live and love” (Pl. 5; 5—6). The revelation of man’s temporality invalidating the elaborate scheme of natural and social “uses” prevents Thel from approving of this solution; in the situation of melancholia one can be saved neither by knowledge nor by ignorance (“Alas! I knew not this [...]” Pl. 5; 8) as both responses are paralyzed by the inability to formulate a language, an articulate, rational discourse which would be in a position to deal with the purposiveness of being which transcending the structure of biological or human needs, causes and effects can only very imprecisely be addressed as “shining” (“Without a use this shining woman liv’d” Pl. 3; 22; “I [...] leave my shining lot,” Pl. 5; 13).

Thel’s melancholia, which marks the disturbance in the sphere of relationships between her and the Other, is also a sign of a crisis of rationality which does not reject knowledge but looks for a new discourse which would be able to inscribe man again within a structure of meaningful relations with the Other and recognize independence of both sides from the social and biological immediate “uses.”

8.

The problem of “use” and “purpose” implicates Blake’s protagonist in a situation delineated by Kantian aesthetics. Having asked himself in the Third Movement of the “Analytic of the Beautiful” a question “What is a purpose?” Kant proceeds to link the notion of the purpose with that of a cause (“a purpose is the object of a concept insofar as we regard this concept as the object’s cause”⁹) and then, moving towards a judgment of taste, announces that aesthetic pleasure originates in a discovery, in the semiotic aspect of work, of the purposiveness without purpose which is the way in which an object offers itself to us (“[...] the liking [...] can be nothing but the subjective purposiveness in the presentation of an object, without any purpose [...] and hence the mere form of purposiveness [...] in the presentation by which an object is given us”¹⁰). Thel’s dilemma consists in her inability to find a formula

⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 64.

¹⁰ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 66.

for the “mere purposiveness” which would go beyond the concepts and “uses” of the purpose as defined in cognitive judgments.

In fine, Thel's melancholia derives from (an oddly Nietzschean touch in a Kantian interpretation) *the impossibility of finding an aesthetic formula for human life. A viable suggestion if we remember about Blake's insistence upon creative impulse as a formative power of man's ethical structure* (“A Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect: the Man or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian,” K, 776).

9.

To use a pair of terms introduced by Kant in 16 paragraph of the same “Analytic,” we could also say that Thel on the one hand remains within the realm of “accessory beauty” (*pulchritudo adhaerens*) with its conviction that “the beauty of a human

Other etymologies suggested for the name of Thel hint at its close connection with the notion of “delay” or “hang in doubt” (from the Hebrew *tela*) or fragile transitoriness (the Hebrew *Thel* meaning “dew”) thus suggesting either her indecisiveness or the paralysing sense of mortality. A link between Thel and “dew” gets additional support from the early sections of the poem where the Lilly refers to her being “clothed in the morning manna” which may thus be an allusion implicating Thel as an “ornament,” a “dress” of nature, something that hides and covers while, ironically, simultaneously looking for the “naked truth.”

Mark Schorer enhances the centrality of the death motif by linking the name of Blake's protagonist with a distorted reading of the subterranean river Lethe which supports his interpretation of the poem as a neoplatonic drama of a reluctant birth (“Thel [is her name to suggest Lathe?] is an unborn spirit unwilling to enter life, yet she knows, as her first two questions indicate that if she is to learn the lesson of Experience, she must mix with its inhabitants”).

Howard, *Infernal Poetics*, 51;

Mark Schorer, *William Blake: The Politics of Vision* (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), 202.

being [...] does presuppose the concept of the purpose [...] and hence a concept of its perfection[...]”¹¹); on the other hand, however, she tries in her constant probings to move towards “free beauty” (*pulchritudo vaga*) where “we presuppose no concept of any purpose.”¹² The very impossibility of solving the problem, of not being able to either remain in the sphere of purpose or radically move beyond it is coded in the protagonist's name; “Thel” may be derived from a Greek word signifying “will”¹³ which operates both on the level of a self-assertive desire (“I desire something”) and an

external scheme of targets (“I desire *something*”). As Kant recognizes it, such a positioning of will sends it back to the domain of purpose: “The power of desire, inso-

¹¹ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 77.

¹² Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 77.

¹³ See Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant, *Blake's Poetry and Designs* (New York: Norton, 1979), 61.

far as it can be determined to act only by concepts, i.e. in conformity with the presentation of a purpose, would be the will.”¹⁴

Thel operates within the irreducible difference between the aesthetic and the ethical: in the former she wants to abandon the concept of “purpose” and “use” (and remain in the sphere of “presentations”), in the latter she is constantly reminded about the impossibility of evading “purpose”; thus the dilemma shifts from the mere deciding between the two towards locating a chance for the mediation, a protocol of knowing and living which would enable man to accept the purpose for what it is — an operation of will as modified by concepts (if Thel stands for “will,” her interlocutors present the varieties of reasonableness).

10.

Thel’s melancholia is a disease of purpose, or rather, a dis-ease of purpose, i.e. a position in which one feels ill at ease with one’s own life as oriented towards generally recognized purposes, a position where a purpose is perceived as alienated from myself (whereas the guides insist on the total internalization of their “purposes” which are actualized without mediation of knowledge and reflection, Thel repeatedly notices a fissure between herself and the “uses”). And where the notion of the purpose has been mentioned the social cannot be far away, whereas Thel’s “use” applied to the female life prompts the proximity of the sexual. It is to the garden scene that we have to turn to reconnoitre these two aspects and their common denominator — productivity.

Thel’s complaints clearly refer to the purpose from the perspective of some “useful” labour. Having delineated for herself the “uses” of the Lilly, she, in a stark contrast, projects the image of her own uselessness (or, Kant’s term, “unpurposiveness”): “But Thel is like a faint cloud kindled at the rising sun” (Pl. 2; 11). The conclusion of her barrenness is even more straightforward in the exchange with the Cloud: “But I feed not the little flowers [...] I feed not the warbling birds [...]” (Pl. 3; 19—20). A problematic relationship with work and its traditional system of connections in which family was closely affiliated with the division of labour and the structure of consumption (*via* the law of primogeniture, for instance, not an indifferent fact, perhaps, if one remembers that Thel is a daughter and “the youngest” - facts that alienate her from the structure of inheritance) cannot be a neutral factor in a poem which begins with a triple renunciation: of the unquestionable loyalty to the family (she separates herself from her kin), of work — which one has been allotted in the process of the division of labour (Thel refuses to “lead sunny flocks,” like her sisters) — and of the established ideal of the feminine behaviour (“paleness” defying models of beauty as well as a rebellious mien unbecoming of a young female):

¹⁴ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 65.

The daughters of Mne 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 [...] (Pl. 1; 1—3)

The garden pastoral scenery evoked at the beginning of the poem, then systematically assaulted by Thel's rejection of internalizing of natural purposes as her own, and finally deconstructed by the graveyard imagery of the final episode, poses two fundamental problems: (1) of the social consequences of the model of the "unproductive" existence in which the adjective "shining" (used by Thel to describe her life) refers not to the ontological quality of being (like in Heidegger's analyses) but serves as a description of a mere polish of cultivation which lacks social "purpose"; (2) of the functioning of productivity on the level of human sexuality where it finds its extension in the ethics of nourishment and maternal care.

Thel, referred to in the poem five times as a "virgin" and three times as a "maid," inhabits a space which even before the final slippage into the churchyard scenery

is infected by death as an essential element of the amorous longing. The scene of lamentation takes place "Down by the river of Adonis" (Pl. 1; 4) which in two ways conjures the scene of death: first, it evokes the presence of Adonis and thus draws upon the incommensurability of love as divine energy and human mortality (Adonis was a mortal lover of Venus), second, by a detour leading us through the first Book of *Paradise Lost*, it summons the scene where women mourn a dying god. A correlation between the movement within the erotic (from Eros towards Thanatos) and a shift in the spatial design (from a garden to a graveyard) is a central theme in the poem.

A mention of "Adona" is also linked with the rhythmic changes of seasons and, in this way, also related to the motifs of the pastoral aesthetics and ethics which Blake discusses in the poem. A succinct illustration of the motif is to be found in the First Book of *Paradise Lost* where, in a feat of poetic anthropology, Milton combines the story of amorous conquest (Astaroth) with that of death and decay, or to use Thel's phrase, "fading away," only to present Christianity as their overcoming:

"Her Temple on th' offensive Mountain, built
 By that uxorious King, whose heart though large,
 Beguil'd by fair Idolatress, fell
 To idols foul. Thammuz came next behind,
 Whose annual wound in Lebanon allur'd
 The Syrian Damsels to lament his fate
 In amorous dityyes all a summer day,
 While smooth Adonis from his native Rock
 Ran purple to the Sea, suppos'd with blood
 Of Thammuz yearly wounded: the Love-tale
 Infected Sion's daughters with like heat,
 Whose wanton passions in the sacred Porch
 Ezekiel saw, when by the Vision led
 His eye survey'd the dark Idolatress
 Of ancient Judah."

John Milton, "Paradise Lost," Book 1, 2. 443—457, in: John Milton, *Poetical Works*, ed. Henry Charles Beeching (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938).

It translates the sexual from the discourse of aesthetic and social conventional eroticism of taste (the erotic as a social game as shown in Boucher and Restoration

Comedy) *and measure* (sexual relationship as an economic transaction) *into the domain of the ethical question of the openness towards the other* (desire as a force which refuses to be accommodated by the socially and aesthetically articulate discourses and reaches out towards the sphere of death and suffering).

11.

What happens in *The Book of Thel* is then a major transformation of the sexual which, from the level of an ego gratificatory strategic game, becomes open to a serious probing of the question of the Other. As we have said, a shift in the spatial arrangement is central in this respect as it allows us to trace Blake's critique of a fashionable aesthetics of the picturesque culminating in the garden architecture theory of the day. One can claim that the picturesque of self is replaced by the sublimity of the other (one of Blake's proverbs of hell maintains that "The most sublime act is to set another before you," *K*, 151). A retreat from the picturesque is a withdrawal from what is merely visually pleasing towards what shatters, through the experience of displeasure, the conventional stability of vision. Cochin, in 1759, defines the picturesque as a careful balancing of elements which achieves the standard of naturalness and its purposiveness of action which is, however, invisibly subtended by the artificiality of the artist's intervention: "It is what is distributed so as to render natural attitudes in their most pleasing aspect without losing anything of the truthfulness of the action [...]."¹⁵ Thel's move towards the tomb explodes the pastoral picturesqueness of the "sunny flocks" and disrupts the correlation between the "most pleasing aspect" and the "truthfulness of action."

Such a disruption inheres also in human sexuality which finds its ultimate representation in the final episode of the poem. Thel learns the lesson of the erotic from the sorrowful voice of the hollow pit having first listened to two stories of usefulness (Lilly's and Cloud's) and then having confronted the problem of maternity (Clod of Clay) which itself introduced a different tone into the presentation of the child. The infant appears as a worm ("Is this a Worm? I see thee lay helpless & naked," *Pl.* 4; 4) which has previously been shown as a part of the iconography of death ("did she only live to be at death the food of worms?" *Pl.* 3; 23). There is at least a triple significance in the image of the worm: first, it directly implicates sexuality in the scene of death thus problematizing again the question of productivity and "use"; second, it interrogates the expressivity and carefree joyfulness traditionally attached to sex in the 18th-century aristocratic culture. "Ah! weep not, little voice, thou canst not speak, but thou canst weep" (*Pl.* 4; 3) — the worm is speechless (thus casting doubt upon the tradition of pastoral erotic poetry and expressivity) and able to produce only

¹⁵ In Mary Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 83.

an inarticulate discourse of mourning (hence displacing the unproblematic character of sexual fulfilment). Third, a worm could also insinuate sexuality in a different way: through its etymology relating it to both to a dragon and the seraphim (let us remember that Thel is a daughter of Mne Seraphim and thus a daughter of a passion and a serpent, a child of the sexual impulse which must rediscover its power) it evokes the sacred (Christ is a serpent in the Orphic doctrine) and thus would give a theological sanction to the union of the sexes which, however, in keeping with Blake's unorthodox views, would support the transgressive, alternative interpretation of divinity as overtly sexualized ("Blake may have known of the Orphite gnostic cosmologies which identified the serpent with Christ. It is also conceivably relevant that a second traditional etymology of 'seraph' traces it to *sa ra ph* translated in the Authorized Version as 'fiery flying serpent' (e.g. Isaiah 14.29)"¹⁶).

The worm as a critique of expressivity and articulacy is also a renegotiation of the standard sexual symbols which in the tradition of 18th-century art frequently linked the controlled naturalness of the garden with the images of aggressive domination. The initial scenery of Blake's poem is that of Fragonard's garden paintings. In a series of four panels in the Detroit Institute of Arts Fragonard compiles a classic anthology of the horticultural motifs correlating the garden with sexuality. Without aiming at a detailed analysis, let us only note five things of importance for our discussion of Blake.

Mary Sheriff provides us with a more detailed reading of sexual imagery in the Fragonard series whose "pastoralized seasons also imply an analogy between the natural cycle and human sexuality." Thus, we read about *The Gardener* that "In his extended right hand he holds the bird, a well established image of the male genitals [...] the spout is positioned below the bird so as to point toward the young man's pubic area, which is further emphasized by the knot at his waist. We can thus discern a triangular configuration of three points — bird, spout, and knot — that converge on erogenous zone [...] at a distance from the bird, the gardener holds a sign of the female, a basket filled with the flowers that identify the season. Although the configuration of the main symbols suggests that the actual coupling has not yet occurred, the other object lying at the gardener's feet, the rake, may point towards the activities to come: 'to rake' (*ratissier*) was a euphemism for coition. Finally, the entwined trees bending over the figure also suggest the impending union."

Mary Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 103, 109.

First, a privileging of the activist male element of Spring (*The Gardener*) and Summer (*The Harvester*) which displace the conventional feminine embodiments of the two seasons.

Second, a removal of the feminine to the domain of Autumn (*The Grape Gatherer*) and Winter (*The Wanderer*) and its close affiliation with the female productivity (children) which emphasizes fertility but then, with the accent on the withering and decline of productive force, shifts most of formative energies of spring and summer unto the realm of the masculine.

¹⁶ Michael Ferber, "Blake's *Thel* and the Bride of Christ," *Blake Studies* 9 (no. 1 and 2 1980), 55.

Third, whereas the Spring and Summer are the time of production (or insemination), it is important to notice that this takes place due not so much to the operation of natural powers but to the action of implements and tools (a scythe, a rake, a watering can) which differentiate the masculine reality from the female world of “matural” production (see the baby lying on the ground in the Autumn panel, as if to suggest its “growth” from soil). The male world is that of utensils and instruments, of mechanisms of control; the female space belongs to the sphere of “natural” enjoyment, and the word “labour” seems to slip in this context away from the toil and pain of child-bearing process (shown as a natural, easy, painless occurrence) to comfortably nest in the male world of scientific instrumentality.

Fourth, the 4th panel representing winter finalizes the movement of seasons as it shows the feminine as the itinerant force expunged from the domain of the settled and human (most fully hinted at in the Spring panel in the details of man-made garden architecture); the series of seasons ends with the expulsion from the realm of territorialized existence and labour (from Blake’s meadows of “sunny flocks”) which reflects the banishment of Adam and Eve from the paradise with a caveat that this time it is only Eve who is exiled from the garden domain of the male productivity. The scene of expulsion is in Fragonard a literal movement of expatriation, a removal from the father-land, a banishment from the father, a dislodgment from the regulated productivity and territorializing social roles.

Fifth, the frontal position of the woman suggests the act of offering which, in turn, implies that the eviction from the male world will cease and the paternal paradise will be retrieved on condition of the seductive offering carried out from the position of total subservience (the woman is shown as an itinerant, picturesque beggar).

Thel’s refusal to comply with the role imposed upon her by the parental authority leads eventually to the collapse of the garden scenery and its replacement by the “hollow pit,” but such a movement also implies an activation of the energies of

Thus *The Book of Thel* can be read as a critique of conceptual knowledge which causes the paralysis of the life impulse and misrepresents being as a one sided process in which man is a victim of destruction, and thus introduces a state of arrest in which man is unable to experience pleasure. Thel is unable to listen to the questions because her attention, motivated by the western knowledge formation protocols, expects answers perpetuating the already holding solutions. Blake’s protagonist is left speechless (which is a situation she finds unbearable) in front of the knowledge which is [dodane] (un)founded upon the principle of “Gelassenheit” which does not require the elaborate reconstruction of causal links. In Angelus Silesius we read “Die Ros’ ist ohn’ Warum; sie bluhet, well sie bluhet, / Sie acht’t nicht ihr selbst, fragt nicht, ob man sie siehet,” and another great Silesian mystic Daniel Czepko adds in a poem explicitly called *Ohn Ursache*: “Die Sonne scheint. Warum? Sie schein, well sie muss scheinen, / Ihr Art zwingt sie dazu. So solt du Gott bloss meinen.” [bez odwołania? Ne mogę tego odnaleźć] See also a sudden intervention from Magritte’s notes: “I don’t know the reason (if there is one) for living or dying.”

Angelus Silesius, *Le Pelerin Cherubinique* (Paris; Presse Universitaires de France, 1964), Vol. 1, 136; Vol. 2, 61;

Harry Torczyner, *Magritte: The True Art of Painting* (New York: Abradale Press, 1979), 76.

the “Contraries” which disrupt the conventional parcelling and territorializing of gender roles and its accompanying modes of fertility (hence, for instance Thel’s refusal to tend the “sunny flocks” and her problematic attitude towards maternity). A replacement of the garden by the “valleys dark” is also an act of a sympathetic understanding for the social transformation which cannot be incidental if we remember that the date of *The Book of Thel* coincides with the outbreak of the French Revolution. A movement not absent from the late Fragonard of his *Fete at Saint-Cloud* (1774) where a nature of the picturesque gives way to a world of darker premonitions and turbulent powers of the uncontrollable outburst of natural (and social) forces. “The props in his painting appear in paintings by others [...]. But Fragonard was a visually intelligent man with urgent emotions. In this painting, he takes a traditional motif, the fete, and invests it with a new meaning to correspond to his intimations of a waning cohesion. The fallen trees were cultivated by man who hoped to dominate nature through artifice. We do not know, in Fragonard’s painting, whether man or nature overturned these comely trees. We can only feel the melancholy that these supine living objects induce.”¹⁷

The melancholy of Thel and the dejection noticeable in the shift of the scenery from the picturesque garden to the terrifying “hollow pit” speak not only of the crumbling of ontological grounding of man and its supplementary aesthetic force of the horticulturalist ordering of nature by artifice but also of the abysmal origin of a new order which in his voice of sadness was announcing the epoch of the political revolutionary terror (“Fragonard painted this embellishment for a rich man’s house at a time when the social order was being questioned on every side [...] The world of forms was being expanded despite the new regime’s effort to control it ever more strictly”¹⁸). From this perspective, the act of abandoning her herds acquires a significance which is transgressive both politically and religiously: the “flocks” are let loose, liberated from the authority of the shepherd, and the adjective “sunny” qualifying the flocks may refer to the features of Christ thus opening a possibility of commenting upon Thel’s quest as a critique of Christian orthodoxy maintained by the Lilly, Cloud, and Clod: “Thel the shepherdess has left her charge by the second line of the poem and so she has risked eternal life in the love of Christ in order to question her role [...] The three creatures she talks to all tell the same tale [...] that by selfless love one will attain an intimate union, a marriage, with the sunlike Christ.”¹⁹ The denial of “sunny flocks” can then be looked upon as (1) a refutation of the concept of the imposed duty (even if the duty in question has to do with exercise of care and tenderness), and (2) as a denial of Christ as an intimate, though mystical, partner; a disavowal of the physical body turns out to be a rejection of the spiritual Body. The first perspective is liberating as it allows Thel to ask questions,

¹⁷ Dore Ashton, *Fragonard in the Universe of Painting* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 173.

¹⁸ Ashton, *Fragonard in the Universe of Painting*, 173.

¹⁹ Ferber, “Blake’s Thel and the Bride of Christ,” 48.

i.e. to investigate the possibility of acquiring her own knowledge (“It is precisely Thel’s insistence on asking questions and striving for knowledge which identifies her as the only fully human character in the poem”²⁰).

The other outlook shows that her attempt at forming a new type of cognizance shuts out, prematurely, sexuality and thus, from the very beginning reduces the chances of the whole operation and opens a wide thoroughfare along which repression moves from the sexual to other areas of being (“To Blake and Yeats sexual repression is at the root of political aggression and revolution [...] They cannot achieve the vision of Eternity until she becomes disintegrated and re-integrated in the process of experience, having accepted the vision of the Marriage. Wisdom is not found above the clouds but in the suffering of the pit”²¹).

The voice from the “hollow pit” is a pronouncement of the uncontrollable force which disturbs the system of sensual perception and ordering of social exchange by uncovering a mechanism of difference in what previously was constituted as a, supposedly, one homogeneous body (social and individual).

12.

A series of questions articulated by the “voice of sorrow” precedes two important events in the text. First, it predates Thel’s response to them which looks like an escapist gesture (“The Virgin [...] with a shriek/ Fled back [...] into the vales of Har,” Pl. 6; 21—22). Second, it antecedes the vignette which frames the text and which is overtly sexual in its phallic imagery of a woman straddling a writhing body of a serpent). It seems that considering the presence of the engraving (which, if we realize its position between the body of the text and the ultimate closing of “The End,”²² can function as a summary of the argument) sexuality gains priority

“Why cannot the Ear be closed to its own destruction?
 “Or the glist’ning Eye to the poison of a smile?
 “Why are Eyelids stor’d 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?”
 The Virgin started from her seat, & with a shriek
 Fled back unhinder’d till she came into the vales of Har.

²⁰ William J.T. Mitchell, *Blake’s Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 88.

²¹ Rachel V. Billigheimer, *Wheels of Eternity: A Comparative Study of William Blake and W.B. Yeats* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), 23—24.

²² In the original version of the essay, the text is here accompanied by the illustration found at the end of Blake’s poem. Electronic versions of the illuminated copies of this and other works are available at The William Blake Archive: <http://www.blakearchive.org/blake/>. Editors’ note.

in the debate, and hence the last two questions acquire a particular importance (one cannot pass indifferently the fact that some copies do not have these lines which must have been deleted by Blake himself on request of a prospective buyer for whom they must have appeared to be too controversial): “Why a tender curb upon the youthful burning boy? / Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?” (Pl. 6; 19—20). These inquiries appear at the end of the interrogation which, without providing any answers, seems to present human existence as profoundly opened and vulnerable to destruction. In fact, the very rhetorical form of this philosophy of vulnerability constitutes one of its ideological cornerstones: where there is no answer, there can be no solidity of foundations, no affirmative or negative statements which could be used as general indicators or signposts to follow by the individual. The question both enfeebles and strengthens the social sphere; the enfeeblement comes from the subversive role the question plays *vis à vis* social conventions and routines which always assume the form of answers (like in a book of catechism), the strengthening derives from the rejuvenation of the social energy produced by the individual effort to slough off the superficial aspects of sociability.

*The question problematizes the social ordering of the answer and, in turn, prepares the ground for a new social contract which would not be founded upon a mere restrictive operations of Blake’s “One Law,” the situation clearly depicted by Blake in his “Marriage of Heaven and Hell” cantered on the doctrine of moral/bodily “impulse” rather than premeditated “rules” (K, 158) (this is strikingly evident in Nietzsche’s verdict of the Death of God followed, in the 125th aphorism of *The Gay Science*, by a list of questions as new non-affirmative non-indicators given to humanity, and in Blake’s famous poem “The Tyger,” where the identity of God is allowed to be probed only in the rhetorical mask of the question).*

13.

There are two things that need to be said about the voice’s sorrowful interrogation, First, that the destructiveness to which being is vulnerable through its sensual structure is, at least in part, balanced by pleasurability of impressions (“Eye of gifts & graces,” “Tongue impress’d with honey”) and also by the fact that the senses not only are mere channels through which being is available for “destruction” but also means of destroying (“An Ear a Whirlpool fierce to draw creations in”). The essence of our vulnerability is this: we perform destructive operations while being, at the same time, ourselves destroyed. This certainly refers also to the sphere of the sexual which either brings about the crisis provoked by a contrast between eroticism and mortality, or — when repressed through, for instance, family politics — a predicament of repression. In the former case, one is opened unto the other but must (which Thel cannot do) remain affirmative about death and suffering (i.e. according to later Freud in his *Problems of Anxiety*, about a possibility of castration, a fear by no means

limited to the male sex); the latter condition involves a process in which the "repressed libido produces a deflection from the sexual aim so that love is experienced as depletion and the re-enrichment of the ego can be affected only by a withdrawal of libido from its objects."²³ The sublimity of sexual *ethics* implies a necessary confrontation with suffering and loss which, however, does not lead to the narcissistic turning towards one's own self but to the affirmative acceptance of evanescence. Thel relies on two different solutions: first, she (in her complaints) rejects the very idea of mortality and the possibility of loss; second, she grasps the sense of death impulse in the language of the senses but returns to the previous situation, this time, however, aware of the confrontation with terror. She returns to the ethics of closure which has already been punctured by the inarticulacy of her response ("a shriek"). Thel is presented in the border situation in which narcissism evolves towards the opening through which the object of desire is shown either as the other (with the inevitable element of loss and death) or, as we shall see, as the self-critical work of desire upon itself ("Thel is at the very point of embracing mortality through sexuality, poised on the brink of transferring libido from self to object"²⁴).

Thel's escape at the end of the poem is an attempt to evade the violence constitutive of being; in aesthetic terms — to circumvent the ethics of sublimity (of "whirlpool," "terror" met with "trembling and affright") in which suffering plays an essential role by turning towards the pastoral ethics of the picturesque (suggested in the opening section by the shepherd, pastor-like, occupations of "leading sunny flocks") which, however, now contains a possibility of the other either as a physical other or its equivalent enclosed in the very structure (see point 15).

An interplay of the ethics of beauty, of the pastoral, and pleasure based on closure and that of sublimity of suffering and death founded upon opening; a move from the "sunny flocks" to the "hollow pit" followed by a return which suggests that the latter is always present in the former. Not only Bataille in his doctrine of the black sun but also Rene Magritte knew this truth. His 1938 painting *The Beyond* shows the sun suspended in the anonymous and unidentifiable sky above the tomb which fills the foreground: a landscape which synthesizes that of Blake's *Book of Thel* with its movement from the "river of Adona" to the "valleys dark." Yet another aspect of Blake's thought — death is a part of sexual experience, there is no sun which would not shine upon a tombstone. Magritte: "In answer to the sun, I have come up with: a tomb [...] the problem of the sun. It was death, indeed, so that it is not possible for fruitless doubts to arise." Additional argument behind Blake's critique of doubt if the poet launches a bitter attack against Bacon and Newton as prophets of doubt, it is also for this reason — they represented the binary thought of oppositions which did not allow for the discovery of death (of anus, of vagina) in the sun but kept the two strictly apart as the deist theology turned God into a *deus absconditus*.

Torczyner, *Magritte: Ideas and Images*, 122.

²³ Diana Hume George, *Blake and Freud* (London: Cornell University Press, 1980), 95.

²⁴ George, *Blake and Freud*, 95.

14.

The second observation refers to the opening pronoun (out of ten lines spoken by the voice “from the hollow pit” seven begin with “why”). Questions posed in

Marginally, let us note the importance of inarticulacy, and thus of a muted, distorted speech in alternative discourses of rebellion (rock'n'roll) and art. It is significant that “inspired by Freud’s analyses Dali frequently portrayed himself without a mouth (*The Great Masturbator*, 1929; *The Persistence of Memory*, 1931); this symbolised his own impotence by equating his mouth with the closed female genitals. In Luis Bunuel’s and Salvador Dali’s 1928 film *Un Chien andolou*, a woman’s auxiliary hair grows in place of man’s disappearing mouth [...] Hans Bellmer [...] often shows the congruency between the orifices of eye, ear, and mouth and vagina and anus.”

One must also remember Margitte’s famous 1934 painting called *The Rape*, which literally equates the mouth with the vagina.

Uwe Schneede, *Rene Magritte: Life and Work*, trans. Walter Jaffe (London: Barron’s, 1978), 68.

this manner want to establish a certain order in which answers arrange themselves in a view of the world regulated by the relationship of cause and effect (“why?/ because”). The sense and “use” of being is measured in terms of causation and its rationality. But if this is the case, then Thel’s panic and “shriek” is a sign of the frustration effectuated by a series of questions which invalidate themselves by not proposing, nor leaving any room for, an answer.

In Kantian terms, she rejects the possibility of non-conceptual grasping of being as belonging to the sphere of *pulchritudo vaga* and sees it rather in terms of the accessory beauty of *pulchritudo adhearens* for which one must necessarily have the notion of the “concept” and “purpose” (“Free beauty does not presuppose a concept of what the object is meant to be. Accessory beauty does presuppose such a concept [...] and as such is attributed to objects that fall under the concept of a particular purpose”²⁵). Her failure to understand being in terms of “free beauty” is signalled earlier in a conversation with the Lilly who does not specify the purpose of its existence otherwise than in the categories of the anticipated splendour and shining of being (“Thou shalt be clothed in light,” Pl. 1; 22) and is corrected by Thel who provides for the Lilly a list of most immediate purposes (“Thy breath doth nourish a little lamb,” “Thy wine doth purify the golden honey,” Pl. 2; 5, 8).

That the voice of the “hollow pit” is answered only by a “shriek” can be, in fact, taken as a promising sign, i.e. a response which through its inarticulacy recognizes the power of the non-rational and thus allows for Thel’s return to the ethics of the pastoral to be a return with a difference: it is not a withdrawal to the same list of problems, not a relapse into melancholia, but a retrieval of a previous mode of being on a different level upon which the inarticulate will now counter the repres-

²⁵ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 76.

sive forces of the purpose-oriented discourse. It is this process of returning to the same with a difference which makes it possible to look at Thel's evolution as a case of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence: Thel has problems with imagining life according to the edifying messages of her instructors (which try to impose upon her a sense of general purpose and destination consummated in and by the act of final redemption) and instead is willing to repeat a horrifying experience of questioning ("The most intense effort of will that Nietzsche himself usually called for [...] was not the will to live alone or publish unpopular books, but to imagine eternal recurrence and love the truth of his fate [...]")²⁶).

That Thel's exclamatory shriek is a sign of a major breakthrough can also be argued on another ground: it announces an opening of her being so far sealed off either in the discourse of inquiry or in silence. It is not incidental that in the last episode Thel remains a speechless wanderer ("She stood in silence," Pl. 6; 8); the paralysis of speech is a continuation and a result of the failure of her previous interrogations. Thus, an outburst, "a shriek," is an unsealing of mouth in a new discourse which belongs neither to articulacy of logic nor to the chaos of silence; if the disappearance or gluing of mouth stands for impotence, then Thel's shriek could be a violent parting of lips, an opening of mouth (but also of a vagina) which gives birth to a form which inscribes her within the domain of fertility but, at the same time, shows that its product is monstrous, deformed, "untrue" (if measured by the standards of the articulacy of discourse or conventional, "pastoral" schemes of human beauty). "A shriek" is an act of gargantuan and outrageous birth; a shriek is a monster of Thel's previous discourses in the same way as a monster is a distortion of Frankenstein's genuine, though unrestrained, pursuit of knowledge. Without subscribing to the overtly militant feminist reading of *The Book of Thel* produced by Helen Bruder one ought, however, to endorse her claim that "the final shriek is one violent denunciation and Thel flees back to Har to reanimate her dissenting 'sighs' and 'moans' which the patriarchally saturated Clod had momentarily called down."²⁷ A rebellion against patriarchy (and its victory suggested by the engraving) is due to the awareness of stimuli, the arousal and excitement which refuses to be contained by the articulate discourse. Recognizing desire (for which Thel needs death and suffering) and thus overcoming the melancholia (a "shriek" as opposed to "sighs" and "moans"), Blake's protagonist locates herself in what Nietzsche calls the "aesthetic state" and her trip through "the lands of clouds" (Pl. 6; 6) is also a journey to the origin of language at the spring of passion, suffering, and body ("This is where languages originate: the languages of tone as well as the languages of gestures and glances [...] even today one still hears with one's muscles, one even reads with one's muscles"; "Compared with music

²⁶ Harvey Birenbaum, *Between Blake and Nietzsche: The Reality of Culture* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1992), 101.

²⁷ Helen Bruder, "The Sins of the Fathers," in: *Historicizing Blake*, Steve Clark and David Worral, eds., (London: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 156.

all communication by words is shameless; words dilute and brutalize; words depersonalize; words make the uncommon common"²⁸).

Nobody analysed this ambiguity of the body better than Rene Magritte. The problem is complicated but, for our purposes, it suffices to look at it from the perspective of the body which denies its own stability and fixedness: a metamorphosing body of Magritte. Putting aside the cases of metamorphosing objects (like a rock transforming into an eagle in *The Domain of Arnheim*, 1962), let us comment briefly only on the work in which it is the human body that forms the centre of the metamorphic process. In 1934 Magritte paints his *Homage to Mack Sennet* with its motif of the sleeping gown which takes over the feature of the female nakedness, the motif made famous 13 years later by another of his paintings *Philosophy of Boudoir* upon which it is amplified by an image of female feet caught in the moment of transmogrification into a pair of shoes. A mystery of the body is outlined in the work in at least three ways: first, by its placement in a wardrobe which suggests closure and darkness, second, by its immobilization on a coat hanger which locks it in a somewhat uneasy relationship with the notion of the body as an animated matter, third, by the ambiguity of the direction and stage of the process of transformation — we do not know whether it is the body that is metamorphosing (or has metamorphosed) in a night gown or vice versa. Besides, the very interior of a dark wardrobe, symbolic of the womb, remains in a synecdochal relationship with the body bringing us in the immediate vicinity of the process of a monstrous birth: a body produces (and we learn about it only due the brutal opening of a door, the opening which, most probably with a squeak, with “a shriek,” forms an orifice letting our gaze in) a being, a body, another body, which covers its nakedness by its nakedness, and — paradoxically — reveals the nakedness by the concealment “The covering up of sexual features is thus revealed as a technique of exposure.” The body cannot be naked, there is no way of getting round the difference which separates desire and its “bed” from “a little curtain of flesh.

Schneede, *Rene Magritte*, 70.

The “shriek” does not eliminate speech but *certainly punctures it and perforates its smooth surface uncovering the domain of purposiveness subversive towards articulate concepts of language. The embodies human inability to confront existence as principally non-causative in character; her return to the practices of the pastoral is a sign of the difficulty of conceiving of being as not explainable in the categories of “because.”*

A sense of touch, omitted from the main list of interrogations, returns (as the repressed always does in Freud’s theory) in the final questions which we have already approached in section 10 and which directly precede Thel’s escape. What is at stake in these two lines is a confrontation with sexuality (Harold Bloom notes with regard to the final list of questions that “the vocabulary of this lament is drawn from Elizabethan conventions of erotic poetry,”²⁹) a complicated engagement with, as we already know, most important consequences (a failure

of the ethics of the sublime accompanied by a partial withdrawal towards the ethics of the pastoral). *Philosophically*, sexuality is presented as profoundly entrenched

²⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and Reginald John Hollingdale (New York: Random House 1967), #809, #810.

²⁹ Harold Bloom, *Blake’s Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 61.

in violence (the adjective “tender” does not invalidate the disciplinary character of the “curb” but points at the sublimation of the regimens of restraints) and in the regressive operations of desire which stimulates and, at the same time, evades and defies the body’s efforts directed at fulfilment. Restrictive activities are not of a merely conventional type; rather, the problem goes deeper and presents them (“tender curb”) as a necessary element of the sexual which, despite being the most radical opening unto the other, is presented as already penetrated by the violent character of being. That the “curb” is “tender” emphasizes a desperate amorous effort of masking the violence by the involved parties who, attempting satisfaction, cover up the nakedness of vehemence with the intricate play of the bodies already, despite their efforts, implicated in the very violence of being. “The bed of desire” is concealed behind “a little curtain of flesh.”

Desire is, for Blake, a key mechanism of man’s ontological structure, but this is precisely why it is so dramatically misunderstood. Its operations are considered to lead to the utmost fulfilment and therefore desire has, over centuries, acquired a characteristic script which allows for its unequivocal readability (from the sentimental signals of tears and blushing to the pornographic ostentation of erection), whereas, for Blake, desire uses these semiotic instruments not to reveal but, just the opposite, to conceal itself. The drama of man’s desire is of a radical character: we know it to be the guarantor of sanity and health on condition of prompt and unhindered operation (in Proverbs of Hell we read: “He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence”), we know that it is the ultimate point of openness unto the other (“My bosom of itself is cold”), and yet it is also the realm where we realize that our body (supposedly a most perfect instrument of desire) must fail in its attempts to answer the call of desire. This failure is not trivially due to the limitations of physical strength and stamina (voiced so well by Shakespeare in *Troilus and Cressida*); the delinquency is of a much more fundamental type and is linked directly to the character of desire which uses its physiological machinery (the body) to secure its own enigma: the body acts out desire but does not reveal it, does not show what its essence and truth is. The mystery of desire is that it belongs to the body and, at the same time, goes beyond it: the body is a passionate machine, but it also masks desire and thus veils both itself and desire. George suggests that the “little curtain of flesh” is the hymen, “the final and decisive boundary for Thel,”³⁰ a point supported from yet another perspective by Godard who, invoking another of Blake’s female characters, claims that “Rank might well appreciate the torn hymen as a symbol of the terror of separation following Birth Trauma, an emblem of Experience best worn in the manner of Oothoon — first naively, then with boldness.”³¹ If we read the “bed” in Blake’s “bed of our desire” as an ultimate grounding, a final point beyond which one cannot go, a stratum which is impenetrable and thus in its mystery can

³⁰ George, *Blake and Freud*, 97

³¹ Godard, *Mental Forms Creating*, 126.

serve as a foundation (in the same way as we do when we speak about a “river bed” or a “bedrock”), then we would be able to see that desire must remain an ever secretive layer of being, a foundation which cannot be revealed but whose operations we enact every minute through and in the activities of our body.

Virginitie of Thel which is a mark of closure and the “failure to embrace experience” and therefore of distortion of the ethical potential (“Deform’d I see these lineaments of ungratified desire,” *K*, 298; “Abstinence sows sand all over/ The ruddy limbs and flaming hair,/ But Desire Gratified/ Plants fruits of life & beauty there,” *K*, 178) of the openness unto the other. But it certainly reinforces Blake’s attack upon the establishment and restrictiveness of political and intellectual strategies of confinement (“the mind-forg’d manacles” of London, *K*, 216; “When Satan first the black bow bent/ And the Moral Law from the Gospel rent,/ He forg’d the law into a Sword [...]” *K*, 683). Virginitie, for Blake, is the same vehicle of political manipulation as celibacy in Hume’s analysis of the policies of Rome: “The Roman pontiff, who was making every day great advances towards an absolute sovereignty over the ecclesiastics, perceived, that the celibacy of the clergy alone could break off entirely their connection with the civil power, and depriving them of every of every other object of ambition, engage them to promote [...] the grandeur of their own order [...] Celibacy, therefore, began to be extolled, as the indispensable duty of priests.”

David Hume, *History of England*, vol. 1 (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1983), 91.

Thel escapes from the truth of sexuality which points, first, at its violent character moderated by sublimatory mechanisms of the amorous behaviour (which is by no means reducible to a mere conventionality but which results from our most intimate and radical effort to practice the sublime ethics of opening unto the other), and, second, at the abysmal nature of sexuality which draws us to the bottom (“*bed*,” “*whirlpool fierce*”) of being (the moment of the sublime ethics of openness) only to push us back to the surface of the self while both actions are made possible through the operations of the body (one can reflect on how this situation resembles

Foucault’s description of the development of modern sexuality towards two processes: “[...] we demand that sex speaks the truth [...] and we demand that it tells us our truth”³²; Blake’s correction of Foucault’s statement would be that indeed desire evokes truth, but its “untruth” is a part of the fundamental truth of desire). Desire activates the body and distances itself from it; a renunciation of the body, blindness to its energies and a total subjection to the elaborate protocols of its erotic practices produce the same result — an inarticulate cry, a moan, or a sigh (“a shriek”) in which, in an unknown discourse defying the rationality and abstractions of Cartesianism, we express both the fascination and disappointment with desire which does not merely reveal the truth but masks it while revealing (“Sexuality, the lust to rule, pleasure in appearance and deception, great and joyful gratitude for life and its typical states [...]”; see also Nietzsche’s criticism of virginitie charged with Thel-like

³² Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 69.

existential “anemia”: “priestly = virginal = ignorant, physiological characteristics of idealists of this sort-: the anemic ideal”³³).

Again the inarticulate sound is what must bother us here; through this collapse of the ordered discourse (partly already suggested by the insistence on the question as a main rhetorical strategy of the poem which at the end assumes a form of questions bereft of answers as if it were a parody of catechism) we try to stop, at least for a moment, to name, to relate, to form concatenations of causes and effects, in fine — to regulate the world. In an act of violence to language (inarticulacy perforates a smooth skin of discourse), we violently restrain the right of speech to do violence to things (Foucault: “[...] discourse does not passively reflect a pre-existent reality but is a violence which we do to things”³⁴).

Thel escapes (“with a shriek”) because she cannot face a revelation of the ungroundedness of being: in the same way as the ground opens underneath her feet (the voice speaks from “the hollow pit”), the structure of her existence and ontological modality is shown as retying on the foundation (“bed of desire”) which must for ever remain covered by the very mechanism and operations (“a little curtain of flesh”) which it has produced in order to signal and enact its presence. Nakedness conceals, but in this concealment it speaks of a nakedness beyond the nakedness of the body which only a body can painfully relate to.

*The body is both a true and false key to desire.*³⁵

Source

Tadeusz Rachwał and Tadeusz Sławek, eds., *Representations of the Erotic*, Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 1996.

³³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, # 1047, # 341.

³⁴ In Lois McNay, *Foucault: A Critical Introduction* (London: Polity Press, 1994), 96.

³⁵ Originally to the essay were appended black-and-white copies of the following paintings: Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Grape Gatherer*, c. 1751 (©The Detroit Institute of Art, Founders Society Purchase, Mr. and Mrs. Horace E. Dodge Memorial Fund); Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Harvester*, c. 1751 (©The Detroit Institute of Art, Founders Society Purchase, Mr. and Mrs. Horace E. Dodge Memorial Fund); Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Wanderer*, c. 1751 (©The Detroit Institute of Art, Founders Society Purchase, Mr. and Mrs. Horace E. Dodge Memorial Fund); Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Gardener*, c. 1751 (©The Detroit Institute of Art, Founders Society Purchase, Mr. and Mrs. Horace E. Dodge Memorial Fund); René Magritte, *L'au-delà* (The Beyond) 1938. Oil on canvas, 283/8 x 195/8” (72 x 50 cm) (private collection, Brussels, Belgium); René Magritte, *38 Homage to Mack Sennett*, 1934; René Magritte, *La philosophie dans le boudoir* (*Philosophy in the Boudoir*) 1947 (Oil on canvas, 317/8 x 24” [81 x 61 cm], private collection, Washington, D.C.). Web browsers offer easy access to digital copies of all these works. Editors’ note.