



Blake’s “Book of Thel” And the Stimulus Barrier

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Abstract

The Book of Thel concerns an adolescent girl, whose voyage to adulthood is cut short by a flood of new sensations that sends her fleeing back to a protected world. This article studies her experience in the light of Freud’s stimulus barrier, its revisions by Mahler, Shapiro and Stern, Esman, and Anzieu, and such ideas as the parental supplement of the stimulus barrier, stimulus-seeking in the neonate, the screening rather than blocking of stimuli, and the psychic envelope, as well as Winnicott’s “holding mother.” Thel’s trauma at the end of her voyage shows the delayed impact of a trauma at the poem’s beginning that prompts her search for some helping authority, but she finds no functioning parental supplement and develops no psychic envelope within which she might pursue a quest beyond childhood that did not end with a panicked return into the kind of neonate’s stimulus barrier that Freud described.

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William Blake’s illuminated poem *The Book of Thel* (1789-91) tells the story of its title character’s voyage, prompted by her questions about her world and herself, into a “land unknown” (6:2),¹ where she is assaulted by a flood of new sensations that drive her into a catastrophic psychological retreat. In this experience she seems to be disturbed as much by pleasurable sensations as by painful ones: “Why cannot the Ear be closed to its own destruction?” “Why a Tongue impress’d with honey from every wind?” (6:11, 16). The concept of the stimulus barrier as developed in psychoanalysis may add to an understanding of her distress. The stimulus barrier, or protective shield, appears in Freud’s account of trauma, “an experience which within a short

¹ In the works he illuminated Blake engraved his poems and illustrations on copper plates, and my in-text citations indicate plate number followed by line number. In my quotations I follow Blake’s punctuation as transcribed by Erdman in Blake (1988).

period of time presents the mind with an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with or worked off in the normal way” (1917, p. 275). He finds the stimulus barrier, however, not only in exceptional overwhelming experiences but also in the normal experience of the neonate: “This little fragment of living substance . . . suspended in the middle of an external world charged with the most powerful energies . . . would be killed by the stimulation emanating from these [energies] if it were not provided with a protective shield against stimuli” (1920, p. 29). As René Spitz puts it (1961), “in the neonate the threshold of the stimulus barrier is so high that the incoming stimuli simply do not penetrate unless they literally break through the protective layer, swamping the organism with unmanageable quantities of excitation” (p. 632; cited in Esman, 1983, p. 195). Thel is no neonate, but “swamping” is what she describes in the questions she—or, literally, a voice from her own future grave—asks about the onslaught on her body and emotions:

*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?
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. (6:11-18)*

Although these lines are commonly read to mean that the pleasurable experiences Thel is exposed to are seductive and deceitful,² the sweeping generalization in the passage suggests the possibility of another reading: she is overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of whatever sensations—a thousand fighting men, showers of fruit, honey from every wind—pour in upon her. Every experience becomes traumatic. Everything she hears becomes a “creation,” as if it were an entire world; every breath is a source of terror. Her manifest complaint is less against the outside world than against her own senses, which are too “wide,” “fierce,” and powerfully “impress’d.”

In the psychoanalytic literature, Freud’s original concept of the stimulus barrier has seen additions, criticisms, and modifications. Aaron Esman, in a 1983 summary of research, cites Margaret Mahler (1965) that “the mother complements the more or less deficient innate stimulus barrier, performing the vitally important ego functions that the infant’s primitive ego cannot execute and serving as a buffer against excess stimulation” (pp. 559-560; Esman, p. 197), and Harold Blum (2007), while criticizing the concept of a stimulus barrier, speaks of “the vital role of the parent as a protective shield for

² See, e. g., Bogen (1971), who speaks of the pleasurable sensations in terms of “cunning” and “dissimulation” (p. 27).

excessive and inappropriate stimulation” (p. 65). John D. Benjamin (1965) suggests that the neonate has “a purely passive” stimulus barrier, but “the older infant . . . often exerts active efforts to protect himself from excessive stimulation” (p. 60; Esman, p. 196). T. Berry Brazelton (1980) finds, together with a capacity in the neonate to follow with his eyes and head “a stimulus that appeals to him,” an active capacity to avoid or “shut out repetitious disturbing visual stimuli” that “protects him from having to respond to visual stimulation and at the same time frees him to save his energy to meet his physiological demands” (pp. 407-408); Esman, p. 200). Heinz Hartmann (1939/1958) writes that the infant has a stimulus barrier against the external world but not “at first” against the instinctual drives (p. 57), but later the defenses will serve that function; Spitz (1961), for example, suggests that “The stimulus barrier is an extremely elementary form of prototype for the very complicated mechanism of repression” (p. 135). Esman, in his important reevaluation of the stimulus barrier, argues that “Freud’s notion of the ‘protective shield against stimuli’ was a characteristically brilliant effort to conceptualize the means available to the infant for maintaining a homeostatic balance” but that “the innate protective device of which Freud spoke is best seen, not as a shield or barrier, but as a screen, admitting those stimuli most consonant with adaptive needs and excluding those that overtax adaptive capacities. It is here that the universally recognized role of the mother as buffer and facilitator becomes crucial—not simply as a prosthetic substitute or replacement for a constitutionally inadequate or maturationally declining shield, but as a source of appropriate stimuli and of protection from inappropriate ones at each stage of the infant’s development” (pp. 204-205).

Thel’s culminating lament, however, shows no discrimination among stimuli. She seems like the neonates in a study cited by Esman, a group of underweight newborns “who show poor responsiveness and inability to ‘lock into’ social stimuli, and who give the overall impression of stress when handled” (p. 202). The authors of the study (Als, Tronick et al., 1976) say of one such infant, “One feels that he is overwhelmed by the environment . . . he wants to be left alone” (p. 599). Esman comments, “These definably deviant infants show clear defects in their capacity to process stimulus input and appear to attempt to cope with this deficit with a massive reflex shutdown process; i.e., they appear to show the kind of global active stimulus barrier which Freud and Spitz postulated” for all neonates (pp. 201-202). After her disastrous visit to the land unknown, Thel “with a shriek / Fled back unhindered till she came into the vales of Har” (6:21-22), the protected world she lived in before her voyage, and there her story comes to an end.

Thel may wind up in a condition like that of Freud’s neonate, but literally, in Blake’s illustrations, she is a young but grown woman. The poem portrays her as on the borderline between childhood and adulthood, with characteristics of both. She is referred to as a queen (repeatedly), a mistress, a maid, and (also repeatedly) a virgin. She imagines being an adult and having a purpose:

foreseeing her own death after an unfulfilling life, she laments, “And all shall say, without a use this shining woman liv’d” (3:22). But she talks to flowers, clouds, clods of clay, like the children in Blake’s world of *Innocence*, where everything is connected to everything else, as in “The Lamb”: “I a child & thou a lamb, / We are called by his name,” that is, the Lamb of God (1789, lines 17-18.). The speech from the grave closes with two questions that extend Thel’s complaint about the senses to the sense of what Harold Bloom calls “touch and sexuality” (1988, pp. 895-896): “Why a tender curb upon the youthful burning boy! / Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?” (6:19-20). These questions combine a knowledge of sexual anatomy with a childlike misunderstanding of that anatomy as an apparently absolute barrier to intercourse³ and are consistent with Thel’s combination of childlikeness and precocity at the beginning of the poem. She is introduced as the youngest of the daughters of Mne Seraphim but also the only one who is troubled in a springtime, pastoral world, the only one who withdraws into “the secret air” (2:2) from both work and social pleasure with her sisters, as they care for their sheep. She lives in the magically protected world of a mother named after the angels. Why is it the youngest who first emerges, questions, and goes off on an adventure? Why is she alone troubled?

What prompts her apparently sudden discontent in a beautiful world is an overpowering sense of transience and death:

*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 infant’s face.* (1:6-10)

The beautiful things around her seem about to pass from infancy directly to death. Everything is insubstantial; everything is vanishing; the poem, which ends with an overwhelming of the ego, begins with an anxiety of such dissolution. Thel is an adolescent, and “the adolescent situation,” in Peter Blos’s account of it (1962), is so intense and so flooded by new sensations and stimuli that it “no doubt calls for extreme measures to avert trauma or disintegration” (p. 172). While Thel’s response to the overstimulation of her senses in her final lament shows an extreme regression to an infant-like state, it also suggests the way in which adolescence may normatively produce a new and much more complex version of the archaic stimulus barrier, insofar as, for Blos, the ego must strengthen its capacities to deal with increased demands

³ The curtain of flesh is the hymen, but while the tender curb is commonly read as also the hymen, it could refer to the foreskin. If so, both the knowledge of genital anatomy and the misunderstanding of it are intensified. In another dimension of Thel’s two closing questions, critics have seen the social and moral impact of virginity in a patriarchal culture. Bruder (1997), for example, finds a protest against “the patriarchal fetishing of the hymen” (p. 52).

from the drives in puberty and does so on the model of the early reaction to “threats emanating from the environment” (p. 171). Blos writes that “Any psychic mechanism which protects the mental organism against overstimulation serves a positive function; this is equally true for early childhood and for adolescence. The developing psychic apparatus must, so to say, constantly catch up with maturational conditions.” For that progress to occur, the ego’s integrative capacities must develop in “fluid” interaction with the id. Alternatively, the relationship between ego and id, losing fluidity, “produces . . . a premature crystallization of character or neurotic symptom” (p. 172).

For Thel, the catching up never takes place. She enters the land unknown of adult experience with a young child’s mind in an adult’s body, and to her the routine perceptions and stimuli of adult life, when suddenly imposed on her, are wildly unmanageable. Similarly, when she thinks of dying at the beginning of the poem, she wishes for a death consistent with the spirit of her childhood: “Ah! gentle may I lay me down, and gentle rest my head, / And gentle sleep the sleep of death” (1:13-14). The prospect that the world might not continue to be gentle to her is catastrophic. Nancy Bogen (1971), Kelvin Everest (1987), and Helen Bruder (1997) argue well that Thel is struggling with the limited options of a young woman of her culture, and Bruder, especially, stresses that those women would have been expected to be weak and childlike; but I think that a cultural analysis of the poem needs to be complemented by a psychological analysis, especially since the poem engages not only female experience in particular but the experience of childhood and adolescence in general and since Thel’s reactions seem so extreme: Everest writes of her as “one whose neurosis may at any moment fracture the surface of behavioural norms” (p. 205).

The critique of Freud’s original formulation of the stimulus barrier centered on the results of empirical research showing that infants from birth were attentive and responsive to both people and objects in their environment: “the young organism [is] programmed not so much to shut out stimulation but to seek it because it [is] needed for neural growth” (Roffwarg et al., 1966, p. 78, in Esman, p. 200)⁴. For John Bowlby the infant must seek attachments in the outside world to survive and develop (Blum, 2004, pp. 535, 537). Peter Wolff (1966) observed a state of “alert inactivity,” in which even the newborn shows interest in the environment once “all controllable visceral and external irritations have been alleviated by the mother” (p. 84). On the basis of such empirical research, Daniel Stern (1985/2000) concluded that the concept of the stimulus barrier “should simply be discarded” (p. 234). Freud (1920) did say, however, “Protection against stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than reception of stimuli,” and I would call attention to the

⁴ I follow Esman in taking the Roffwarg quotation from Emde and Robinson (1979) in their discussion of the activeness and “stimulus needs” of the newborn (pp. 73, 78).

“almost” (p. 27). In 1925 he also portrayed the stimulus barrier not as blocking entering “excitations” but as lessening them to a manageable level. In any event, the emphasis in recent psychoanalysis has shifted to reception or to a balance, as in the screening concept or the following formulation by Stern in an earlier contribution with Theodore Shapiro (1980) that acknowledges both the psychoanalytical and observational descriptions of infancy, taking into account stimulus seeking, a “need to regulate both the amount and quality of stimulation . . . within a range that is optimal to [the infant’s] given constitution,” “a constitutional barrier to further stimulation,” and “a need for protection that is provided by the mothering individual” (p. 286); Esman comments that “further” means “overwhelming” (p. 202). Late in her adventures Thel learns from the “matron Clay” (5:14), or mother earth, that God loves and actively cares for even the meanest of his creatures, and with that knowledge Thel indicates that her complaining has come to an end. Why then does she immediately accept the matron clay’s invitation to visit the land of adulthood? She does so because she is driven by curiosity as well as by avoidance. She has the need to explore and know her world that is apparently characteristic of even the newborn and that reaches a hungering intensity in adolescence. The insistent questions she asks of everything she meets—a lily, a cloud, and a worm—are also evidence of her drive to know and to experience, which is in conflict with her need to protect herself against stimuli.

Her questioning manifestly concerns death. The poem and its questions begin with “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?” (plate i).⁵ The Motto’s most prominent theme is knowledge: where does one go for it and how can it be communicated and learned? Knowledge of what? Death may appear in “pit,” as at the end of the poem, where Thel’s grave plot is a “hollow pit” (6:10), but sex appears symbolically in the rod and bowl, and sex, not death, is typically the latent and sometimes manifest theme of the insistent questions of young children.⁶ Throughout this childlike adolescent’s researches, which take the form of questioning of objects of nature, Thel is addressed as “virgin” or “maid,” and she in turn addresses one of those objects, the lily, as “virgin” (2:3), keeping the topic of sex on the verbal surface. In her last speech, Thel is asking questions about her own body, a subject of utmost concern to the early adolescent dealing with the changes of puberty. Her final two questions, about the genitals, may seem to come out of

⁵ In one of the surviving 17 copies of the poem, the Motto, which was added later, appears at the end of the poem. Placed at the beginning, the Motto calls attention to the questions that drive Thel; placed at the end, it generalizes Thel’s problems or, perhaps, suggests that her questions were never answered. Plate 6, with its visit to the land unknown, was also added later.

⁶ Diana Hume George (1980) puts it that “In *The Book of Thel*, fear of mortality is ultimately revealed as a cover for fear of sexuality—not that death is not itself a real fear, but in Thel’s case, the deeper and causative factor is sexuality” (p. 95).

nowhere, but in them an undercurrent that we can note in the rod and bowl of the Motto bursts to the surface. Questions about sex are the ones she really wanted to ask from the beginning. But the manifest theme of death was not a disguise. Rather, death and sex seem associated in her mind. That association emerges early as Thel seeks the secret air to lament “Down by the river of Adona” (1:4), the name bringing into the poem the thought of Adonis, lover of Aphrodite, killed by her sacred animal, the boar. For Thel the mysteries of death and sex arise together as issues for research that preoccupy her life and break apart her former pastoral existence as a child and as a daughter and sister, a part of a family, propelling her into sorrow and isolation.

The issue of sex arises naturally for any child; the onset of the issue of death is more difficult to understand in general terms. The death of Blake’s deeply loved brother, Robert, in 1787 when William was 29 may have contributed to *The Book of Thel*; Bogen suggests that Blake may have begun the poem shortly after that death (p. 3). But purely in terms of the poem, where does the thought of death come from for Thel? Does it arise from the observed fact of fading spring flowers, the manifest starting point of Thel’s opening lament? But that observation wouldn’t give us a source for the association of death and sex. We recall that Freud’s development of the stimulus barrier began with his concern to understand trauma. Thel suffers trauma in her experience at her own grave plot, but that trauma is the culmination of her suffering and not the beginning. Harold Blum notes that trauma “reactivates prior traumatic experience” (2007, p. 65). Is there any suggestion of a trauma at the beginning of the poem?

The illustration on the title page answers that question in a virtually textbook way. The primal scene of *The Book of Thel* is indeed a primal scene. The picture shows a young woman with a shepherd’s crook looking at two small figures, a male and a female, seeming to leap from flowers into an embrace. We might as well call them flower children. Thel sees an act of sex and then, in the opening lines of the poem, is consumed with thoughts of death. The sequence is clear, psychologically plausible, and vivid: she sees sex and responds traumatically.⁷ Specifically, she sees flowers having sex and then thinks of the death of flowers and then of the death of other young and fragile things, like herself.

All the flowers die, but what she sees has destructive implications for the woman in particular. In the picture the man is leaping or flying in horizontal posture, with his hands grasping the woman’s waist; the woman is vertical, leaning slightly backward, with her hands raised over her head. Is she welcoming his embrace or shrinking from it? Is this a picture of mutual love or of a rape? There is no way to know for sure. But the ambiguity of the picture is true to two of the responses typical of a child who witnesses or overhears

⁷ Brenda Webster (1983) notes that Blake “shows children watching adults copulate” (p. 4) in several poems, and “primal scene” is an entry in her index, but she does not mention *The Book of Thel* on that topic.

intercourse: stimulation and the interpretation of sex as a fight or struggle, with the mother or woman as the one being hurt. This so-called sadistic interpretation of intercourse is found in children of both genders. Everest writes that in the questions from the grave, Thel is “both terrified and excited” by the thought of sex; that “merging of fear and desire” (p. 207) would be expected in the childlike watcher of sex at the beginning of the poem, who would both want to be part of a new and stunning pleasure and fear destruction if she were indeed part of it. In the illustration Thel is not visibly frightened; later, in her final questions, the idea of pleasure emerges in her complaint about the restrictions on the fulfillment of sexual stimuli. But fear is the reaction she articulates as the verbal part of Blake’s text begins. And the thought of death is intensified by the very mysteriousness and sheer power of what she sees; it is more than her mind can manage; it makes her feel as if she is dissolving, like “shadows in the water” (1:9). The youngest of the daughters, whose sisters are still with the mother in the land of innocence, Thel is not ready psychically for what she has seen. The voyage that is prompted by this early exposure to sex ends in a graveyard and a kind of psychic death.

But, again, all the flowers die, not just the female ones. *The Book of Thel* concerns a female character in particular, but its larger topic involves the dynamics of maturation in children in general. Death also comes into the poem as a punishment for seeing. Blake was familiar with such a cause and effect in his own childhood in that he was punished by his father when he reported his visions of God and of angels. The register is different, not sex and death but angels and parental punishment, but the theme of forbidden and punishable vision is common to both. Still another element in the connection of sex and death in the poem is suggested by the strange wording of the final complaint about the hymen: “Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?” Our? In this line Thel is given the viewpoint of a heterosexual male, as she is in the previous line: “Why a tender curb upon the youthful burning boy?” In the sudden expression of a male sexual frustration, the resonances of the poem expand manifestly beyond specifically female dynamics. In addition, in the poem’s use of a female character as a momentary vehicle, or disguise, for a male thought, we might see a male transformed into a female, that is, through loss of the phallus. The male child in the oedipal period has no real understanding of his own possible death; for him the catastrophe that may preoccupy him is castration, the punishment for forbidden sexuality, including the seeing of sex and the stimulating fantasies to which that seeing may give rise.⁸ But the concept of the stimulus barrier in conjunction with the poem’s

⁸ Webster (1983) sees a castration theme in the poem in a different way: “When Thel enters the pit [in the land unknown], her action suggests intercourse, which would change her role from female to male. The voice she hears in the pit has the point of view of a male.” In addition, “Blake sees the dark pit from a particularly male point of view in which intercourse is death, that is, castration—unless he who enters is entirely in charge and the woman is utterly passive” (p. 54).

sexual theme suggests a comparable anxiety of the little girl. Freud wrote that the stimulus barrier had as an “outermost surface” a “membrane resistant to stimuli” (1920, p. 27). That stimuli would, in Freud’s description, “break through” the membrane makes their reception seem like penetration of the hymen. *The Book of Thel* at its end portrays the experience of stimuli as traumatic penetration and at its beginning raises the issue of a female virgin’s thought of sexual penetration. Charles Brenner writes that if the oedipal boy fears losing the phallus, the girl in the same stage fears “genital injury which is consequent upon the wish to be penetrated and impregnated by her father” (1973, p. 109). We might say that Thel’s experience of witnessing sex evokes the oedipal child’s danger of being, in effect, killed by genitality, which the child at the same time seeks for pleasure; and that danger in turn evokes the archaic, infantine danger of being killed by stimulation, which the infant at the same time seeks for curiosity and exploration.

In line with the traumatic vision of sex on the title page, the Motto expresses a wish for help and protection, as if asking, “Who can explain these impossible mysteries?” The narrative then begins with the angelic mother of early childhood offering no help and, indeed, completely absent, partly because Thel in the grip of new desires and fears turns away from her own former childhood life. At the same time, Thel represents herself as small and weak, a mere child and certainly not someone with the aggressive desires of either the oedipal phase or puberty; she is nothing but a “little fragment of living substance,” as transient and insubstantial as a reflection in the water and on the very verge of vanishing. Thel’s fear of death is, in one of its aspects, a reaction formation, as if she were saying, “How could I be associated with such aggressive impulses? How could I seek such stimulation? I hardly even exist, and soon I won’t exist at all.” And, both turning away from and not helped by the mother, she turns for protection to a father figure: the wish for a gentle death in which her opening lamentation culminates includes her hearing, even after she dies, “the voice / Of him that walketh in the garden in the evening time” (1:13-14), the God of Eden before the fall.

The nature that she visits in her interviews with the lily, the cloud, the worm, and the clod of clay is the world to which she used to be connected, but it is now a realm of death and sex, and it is also a projection of her own inner world. The lily, a reflection or self-image of Thel, small, weak, and virginal, yet rejoices in her coming death in the summer heat for she will “flourish in eternal vales” (1:25). The “tender . . . little cloud” (2:13, 16) speaks of Luvah, Blake’s male god of sexuality and a sun god, and assures Thel that when he, the cloud, seems to die, he really is descending to the earth in the water cycle, in which he will join with the “fair eyed dew,” a “virgin, trembling,” kneeling “before the risen sun, / Till we arise link’d in a golden band” (3:13-15). Everest notes, in the sequence from the lily to the cloud and then to the worm—who appears both in the poetry and two illustrations (plates 4 and 5) as a human infant—and the matron clay, a young woman’s expected passage in Blake’s

culture from virginity to marriage to maternity (pp. 198-199). Bruder wittily sees the cloud as an aggressive male figure, who, in an illustration (plate 4), flies off, leaving Thel with an infant. Brenda Webster, however, sees the cloud as an “asexual innocent” and his joining with the dew as a “pregenital merger,” a “dissolution into nurturing showers” (1983, p. 50). While the sequence suggests an increase in the presence of genital sexuality and its consequences and also an allowable development of that sexuality predetermined by her culture, the passage from the “watry” lily (1:16) to the airy and dissolving cloud and then to the worm is regressive, with the worm too young even to speak. As Thel is growing up, her own sense of herself is receding to insubstantiality and smallness.

That regressive passage shows a consistent wish for parental care: the lily is “visited from heaven” (1:19), comforted by the gentle divinity who promises her the eternal vales; the cloud becomes a gentle fatherly figure, who with the dew brings “food to all our tender flowers” (3:16). Thel is upset that the helpless worm has “none to cherish thee with mothers smiles” (4:6). But the matron clay, speaking for the worm, emerges as a new mother in Thel’s psychic journey, bowing over the worm in “milky fondness” (4:9); she speaks of God, who loves her as the “mother of my children” and, even though she herself is lowly like Thel, gives her “a crown that none can take away” (5:3-4). God too becomes maternal, cherishing the worm with “milk and oil” (5:11). So a parental stimulus barrier, not supplied by the original mother in the poem, is wishfully formulated to keep Thel protected in a loving and gentle environment.

But Thel is still dissatisfied. The more she learns about the natural objects she encounters the less she can identify with them. Unlike the lily, whom the lamb depends on for food, Thel fears that she will not be missed when she dies; unlike the cloud, who waters the things of earth, Thel has no use, and is not comforted by the cloud’s assurance that being “at death the food of worms” is a “great . . . blessing” (3:23, 26). For Webster, a central theme of the poem is the association of the mother’s nurturing and self-sacrifice with her being devoured by the infant in its “boundless egoism” (pp. 53-53. 60).⁹ But the issue of knowledge remains part of the poem’s concern. Although the matron clay accepts her place in an order of connectedness, in which, as the cloud says, “every thing that lives / Lives not alone, nor for itself” (3:26-27), she does so without understanding that order or needing to: “But how this is, sweet maid, I know not, and I cannot know, / I ponder, and I cannot ponder; yet I live and love” (5:5-6). Thel, in contrast, has human curiosity that she cannot put aside, a progressive drive toward knowledge and exploration; and in contrast to the lily’s glad giving of herself to be “crop[ped]” by animals (2:6), the cloud’s acceptance of self-loss, and the self-sacrifice of the clay, who “her life exhal’d”

⁹ Webster sees in Blake’s work in general the fantasy of a cannibalistic infant countering the fantasy of a “murderous mother” (p. 50).

(4:8) in devotion to the worm, she has impulses toward separation from the environment, toward individuation, toward the ambition—oedipal, adolescent, adult, idealistic—of doing great and important things. Together with her special need for stimulus avoidance is a need for stimulus seeking, and so she accepts the clay's offer to visit the land unknown, the adult world of sex and death.

There she finds herself suddenly parentless and overwhelmed, like a small child thrust all at once outside the protective shield of childhood. She finds in the adult world "Dolours & lamentations" (6:7) and discovers that her own experience of dissatisfaction and tangled yearnings is general, for "every heart on earth" has such "restless twists" (6:4). She finds death with no sense of a middle of human life, a maturity. She finds the human body with its vulnerability to all kinds of stimulation, and yet she finds herself inexplicably barred from any fulfillment. She finds a plenitude that threatens her and an unknown that defeats her.

Where is the male divinity with his gentleness and cherishing care? Where is the mother? Mne Seraphim was absent during Thel's beginning lamentations, and now the mother clay has left her alone in the frightening new realm to which she has invited her. The father of conventional Christianity and the mother of earth and nature are not sufficient parental figures for her, and neither are the original angelic mother, the wishful motherly father, and the wishful magical mother who can offer a provisional trip into the future. The Motto posed the issue of the right source of knowledge, and none of Thel's sources worked. Could a human, adult source have helped? As it is, she goes straight from a world that seems prior to questions to one in which all questions seem unanswerable. At the end of the poem Thel is given a precocious journey into adulthood that is a manifestly more intense and terrifying version of the precocious journey into adulthood imposed on her in the title picture. Her early experience now has its delayed, fully traumatic effect. The questions of the voice from her grave about aggression and pleasure are those originally prompted by what she saw among the flowers. The land unknown, while in part a new phase of experience, is also in part a land she knows all too well, the land pictured in the opening illustration, now returned from repression. Now, in a climactic regression, Thel flees from her future grave, and from the traumatic penetrations and the giant and senseless phenomena of adulthood, into the shelter of a new stimulus barrier, more rigid and impermeable than any she has known, one from which there is no indication that she will ever emerge.

In the psychoanalytic literature, the idea of the stimulus barrier, after undergoing criticism and modification, has made a kind of comeback in the expanded form of the "psychic envelope," as developed by Didier Anzieu, who pointed to Freud's description of the stimulus barrier as one of his sources. The protective psychic envelope exists in many forms, such as the dream envelope and the memory envelope, and in general has many functions, such as screening, providing cohesion, and serving as an interface between inner and

outer. In Moshe Halevi Spero's summary, it "'shapes' . . . the fluidlike sense of archaic mental experience" and "lend[s] form to and contain[s] the confusing array of internal and external sensations that impinge upon the neonate from birth or even earlier" (2008, p. 197). Contributing to the psychic envelope is the internalized mother and the internalized mother and child together. Ronnie Solan (1998) discusses the psychic envelope together with Winnicott's "holding mother" (p. 164); Winnicott (1960) defines holding as "not only the physical holding of the infant"—which began in the womb—"but also the total environmental provision," "the management of experiences" that depends upon "the awareness and empathy of the mother" (p. 589). Such holding enables the infant to develop a sense of "continuity of being," and indeed "The holding environment . . . has as its main function the reduction to a minimum of impingements to which the infant must react" with an anxiety of disintegration or annihilation (pp. 590-591, 594). Here is still another possible source for the sense of dissolution and death that erupts in Thel at the beginning of the poem, another element in the reactivation of infant trauma provoked by the witnessing of the sexual scene. What the infant also develops in the holding phase is the sense of "a limiting membrane, which to some extent (in health) is equated with the surface of the skin and has a position between the infant's 'me' and his 'not-me'" (p. 590). Anzieu calls an early form of the psychic envelope the skin ego. Around the psychic envelope "the infant's mind will take shape" (Spero, p. 197), and so too will the ego in all its complexity.

In a discussion of a particular patient, Anzieu (1993) writes that "the psychic envelope consists of two layers. The external layer receives and filters the excitation: Freud's excitation shield. The internal layer receives, deciphers, and registers the significances."¹⁰ In the patient, "the excitation shield is overinvested (overcathected): she continuously feels over- or underexcited. On the other hand, the inscription surface is underdeveloped: she either does not understand the signs emitted by others or misunderstands them and subsequently feels threatened by them. Her psychic envelope, too fragile and too poorly structured, does not allow her to contain the violence of her feelings (panic, rage, distress, etc.). She has hardened her excitation shield, which has become a 'shell,' a 'wall'" that not only protects but also "prevents her from live human exchanges" (pp. 47-48). Thel too seems, like this patient, "hidden and sealed" (p. 48); she has recreated a holding structure but without the internalized human presence of a holding mother that would provide a basic security and sense of well-being within which pleasurable interactions with the environment would be possible.

¹⁰ Anzieu is making use of Freud's metaphor of the "mystic writing pad" (1925), in which a double layer of transparent material, the upper a sheet of celluloid and the lower a sheet of waxed paper, covers a "wax slab." The celluloid sheet "acts as a protective sheath for the waxed paper"—the system of perception and consciousness—"to keep off injurious effects from without. The celluloid is a 'protective shield against stimuli'" (p. 230).

The poem, however, gives us an alternative to Thel's fate. The closing illustration (plate 6) shows a huge serpent with three children, in order of size, riding on its back. The lead child, a girl, younger and smaller than Thel, holds reins and is directing the serpent; the second and third children, with shorter hair, are boys, and the older one is looking back at the younger one, as if to make sure he's all right, and holding his hand to help keep him balanced. The boys' legs straddle the serpent's flanks, while the girl, more confident and relaxed, stretches her legs before her along the serpent's back. Behind the last child the serpent's body coils into three circles, again in descending size order. These circles may perhaps be interpreted as female symbols, complementing the serpent's phallic symbolism. There are no parents; in their place, represented by the girl's control of the serpent and secure direction of the ride, is a functioning and capable ego. That ego is apparently sufficient to the situation, since the children do not seem endangered and seem to be having a good time. It is important that the girl is younger than Thel. The picture shows sexual symbolism, not an actual sexual act. The excitement of adventurous childhood play provides a stimulation that is appropriate to childhood and, according to the sexual symbolism, prepares, as part of a process of maturation, for later genital sexuality. In Thel's case the world of childhood was suddenly ruptured, and Thel then sought to recover it even as she also sought a land unknown. The size order of the children on the serpent's back suggests that here there is no such rupture and no regressive attempt to return to what was lost; rather, the previous phases of childhood development come along in a natural progression, integrated into the ego as it matures. The two younger children have their own appropriate experience of the ride, and what they learn and enjoy leads to what the girl can enjoy and do, holding the reins, taking the younger children along with her as, unlike the second child looking back and the third looking down to make sure he's safe, she looks straight ahead.

Another positive alternative to Thel's fate appears in a passage in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), in which Oothoon answers the questions of Thel's Motto:

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

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

The final picture of *The Book of Thel*, of stimulus seeking rather than stimulus avoidance, is consistent with the bold, open, adventurous vision for which Blake is famous and which Oothoon celebrated with her defiance of social restrictions and her championing of individuality and the fulfillment of desire,

although, fighting alone, she could not realize her goals. But the story of Thel, more than giving an example of failure, shows Blake as an explorer of the complexities of childhood and adolescence. In general, Blake speaks for our most extraordinary potentialities, but he is also a student of our more common human needs, one of which is portrayed in Thel: a child's sheer need for protection by parental figures, which includes both screening and providing appropriate knowledge. Joyce Maynard (2013) speaks of writing a novel, *After Her*, about two girls coming of age "in the shadow" of their detective father's hunt for a serial rapist and killer "as a metaphor for the uncertainty and terror many girls experience"—"(and I was one)," she interjects—"about leaving childhood and becoming a woman." Blake wrote about that uncertainty and terror in *The Book of Thel*. While the terror of adulthood takes gender-specific forms, versions of it can also be found in boys. Perhaps Blake chose a female protagonist because such fears were too deeply hidden within, or inadmissible, for a male. Blake understood youthful resilience—Oothoon overcomes the psychological impact of rape and is, at the end of her poem, still fighting for her vision against enormous opposition—and he also understood, and thought worthy of analysis, youthful fragility. Even the bold Oothoon "trembled" in fear (iii.3) on the verge of the adult world.

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