The Speaking Garden in William Blake's *The Book of Thel:* Metaphors of Wisdom and Compassion

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Summary

Responding to the reductionist and objectifying dualisms of scientific mechanism and authoritarian Christianity, Blake's work evokes a view of being in which "everything that lives is holy". In *The Book of Thel* (1789) this is exemplified in the representation of an ecologically interdependent Garden of speaking subjects. In this environment, the insubstantiality and impermanence of all subjectivity (which for Thel is a source of distress) is shown to be the necessary condition for love and reciprocity. This article is an appreciative reading of *Thel* in relation to the late modern predicament of eco-social crisis, and in conversation with (simultaneously deconstructive and affirmative) views of subjectivity and liberation in Mahayana Buddhism. My purpose is to represent it as what might be called a "teaching text" for contemporary readers with regard to both the dualisms of self versus nature which habitually carve up the nondual world, and the dualistic oppositions of absolutism versus relativism and essentialism versus nihilism. In the imaginative space of the Garden, the jewelled network of what in Buddhism are called emptiness (*sunyata)* and dependent arising (*pratitya-samutpada)* is recognised as an interdependent network of care; for the speaking plants and animals, no-self means selflessness; the radical insight into impermanence and interdependence is shown to be inseparable from love; wisdom and compassion are inextricable. Blake's metaphors for this are simple and instructive.

Opsomming

In antwoord op die reduksionistiese en objektiverende dualismes van wetenskaplike meganismes en outoritêre Christendom, lok Blake se werk 'n siening uit van die bestaan van kreature waarin alles wat leef heilig is. In *The Book of Thel* (1789) word dit vereenvoudig in die voorstelling van 'n ekologies afhanklike Tuin van sprekende subjekte. In hierdie omgewing word die onsubstansialiteit en verganklikheid van alle subjektiwiteit (wat vir Thel 'n bron van ellende is) uitgewys as die noodsaaklike voorwaarde vir liefde en die beantwoording daarvan. Hierdie artikel is 'n waarderende interpretasie van *Thel* met betrekking tot die resente moderne penarie van eko-sosiologiese krisis, en in gesprek met (gelyktydig dekonstruktiewe en bevestigende) sienings van subjektiwiteit en bevryding in Mahayana Boedhisme. My doel is om dit voor te stel as wat genoem kan word 'n onderwysende teks vir die kontemporêre leser met betrekking tot sowel die dualismes van self versus die natuur, wat die nie-dualistiese wêreld verdeel, as die dualistiese opposisies van absolutisme versus relativisme en essensialisme versus nihilisme. In die verbeelde ruimte van die Tuin

word die versierde netwerk van wat in Boedhisme bekend staan as leegheid (*sunyata*) en afhanklike opstanding (*pratitya samutpada*), herken as 'n onafhanklike netwerk van sorg; vir die pratende plante en diere beteken geen-self selfloosheid; die radikale insig in verganklikheid en interafhanklikheid word uitgewys as onafskeidbaar van liefde; wysheid en deernis is onlosmaaklik. Blake se metafore hiervoor is eenvoudig en insiggewend.

> "Then tell me, what is the material world, and is it dead? ...
> "I'll sing to you this soft lute, and shew you all alive
> "The world, when every particle of dust breathes forth its joy."
>
> (Blake 1979: 237)

William Blake was writing poems and making pictures at a pivotal historical moment for the world system. Industrialisation, and with it a mechanised, instrumentalising view of human beings and the environment, was changing the landscapes of mind and nature. In America and France revolutions were taking place in the quest for individual freedoms. And beyond, European expansions were sowing the seeds of alien plants, foreign diseases and cultural imperialism across the Earth, and bringing home loot. In all this, interpretations of Enlightenment philosophy had instated an atomising, dualistic view of self and nature which elevated reason above other ways of knowing and provided ideological justification for the economic, political and social changes which were to alter irrevocably human beings' relation to the Earth and to nonhuman others. For modern people it is important to reassess the values and projects of this transitional time if we are to understand their inheritance in the ecological and social crises of our time, and be receptive to other ways of thinking and being.

Living as a struggling artisan in the growing metropolis of London, Blake was well situated to observe the human and environmental cost of the new developments, while reaping few of their so-called benefits such as increased access to commodities. He described his role as that of "seer", and certainly his crazy or visionary art recognised very early what was deathly to people, plants and all creatures about the industrial-capitalist-imperialist project in alliance with Science and the Church. Two hundred years later, the dark satanic mills are now called growth, development, modernity, but the fumes of their eco-social impact are darker than ever. So his work is useful in sharpening critique. But it is also valuable in its celebration of the qualities of heart and mind and spirit that are needed perhaps more than ever before if we are to discover creative, compassionate alternatives. If our work in literary and cultural studies is to respond to the awesome crises of environment and development, we need to muster all the resources we can. So while using the skills of analysis and criticism, we would also do well to give students and ourselves the opportunity to rediscover appreciative readings of cultural material, recognising that stories

and poems may be as important (and as dubious) forms of knowledge, even of teaching, as critical theory. The work of one of the most radical and visionary poets in English seems a good place to start.

Blake was not an environmentalist, yet reading his work in the light of some of the priorities of contemporary ecological discourses suggests images, metaphors and ways of seeing that might be "of use" in our present predicament, although not in a narrowly functionalist sense. Seen in this way, *The Book of Thel* (1789) can be interpreted as a primer on interdependence, impermanence and love, to be read against the tyrannical and deluded figures of egocentric isolation, fixity and coercive moralism in *The Book of Urizen* (1794) and *Songs of Experience* (1789-94).[1]

My reading of the poetry will draw on contemporary interpretations of Mahayana Buddhist teaching which address similar questions. Numerous recent ecological and feminist thinkers have argued the need for taking seriously ways of thought and cultural practices which do not share in the hegemonic certainties of post-Enlightenment Europe.[2] In view of these recent appeals, I am interested to interpret the work of a dissenting early modern Westerner such as Blake in conversation with views of subjectivity and liberation in eco-socially engaged Buddhism. In what follows, I begin with gardens and paradises, some ways of seeing them. I then go on to mention some of the salient features of Blake's intellectual and political environment, viewed from a late modern perspective. This enables me to suggest what may be valuable to contemporary readers in his representation of the Garden in *Thel*, and of the systems of control and uniformity which work to destroy its life in some of his other poetry from the same period.

1 Getting Away from the Garden of Desire

> Is there no change of death in paradise?
> Does ripe fruit never fall?
>
> (Stevens [1965]1978: 33)

In industrial societies, the idea of paradise as pastoral retreat is often invoked as part of the discourse which sees "nature" as a nonhuman realm of plants and animals, situated beyond the city, "out there". But this way of seeing, and the sort of conservationism that tends to go with it, is rather contradictory. In the last two hundred years, the increasing conceptual separation of "nature" and human society has obscured their inextricable relatedness in terms that serve the interests of industrial development.[3] In this context, the "ten-day escape-to-paradise" becomes a consumer product like any other, packaged as a necessary component of industrial culture, an opiate for the distress of its

cities.

The story of paradise is older than industrialism, as old perhaps as the desire for happiness and *heimat,* for a place beyond death. Yet appealing and pervasive though it may be, the ancient psycho-spiritual quest for the perfect Garden which satisfies the longing for permanence and certainty may well be as problematic as the industrialist's country retreat. After all, what sort of garden is it that never changes? We shouldn't need an ecologist to remind us that blossoming, ripening and decaying are what gardens *do*. There *are* no permanent entities in a garden since it is precisely the arising and passing away of all its phenomena that makes the system live. So the paradise of consciousness which is desired and imagined as an escape from death, change and suffering is premised on a confused metaphor. This confusion is significant. Instead of a way out of psycho-spiritual pain, the paradise of desires is more likely to be a symptom of it, a manifestation of the very distress it tries to remedy. In its place, a view of the garden as ecosystem, such as Blake's *Thel* suggests, evokes a fertile image of the living, changing network of being instead of an imaginary and static paradise.

But first, two possible objections. To begin with, "desire". When I use the term here I am referring to a Lacanian or Buddhist idea of the insatiable longings which create and perpetuate the Imaginary sense of a solid, permanent, autonomous "I". In Blake's system, by contrast, desire is usually a positive expression of Energy. Yet in numerous instances the poetry insists on the deluded tyranny of what we might now call desire: the attempt to secure a world which denies the reality of suffering and impermanence, and seeks to consolidate happiness for the solitary self. In *Thel*, the garden provides an image for another way of seeing through what we would now call an ecological metaphor.

A second objection might consider it perverse for an ecological reading to see the garden instead of the wilderness as paradigm for interdependence. Gardens are, as we know, cultural spaces: clipped hedges, constructed vistas, flowers for cutting and herbs for the kitchen. Whether its walls are visible or not, the plants alien or indigenous, the layout formal or "more natural", the garden is an ideological realm which foregrounds human intervention and desire even as these seek to be effaced. By contrast the wilderness seems to be free of this dimension. And in an obvious sense it is. Yet to see it this way perpetuates a dangerous and misleading dualism that ignores the inextricable relatedness of nature and culture. There can now be no place on Earth so wild and remote that it has not been affected by civilisation and its discontents.[4] Conversely, as Gary Snyder puts it "wildness is ... ineradicable", even in the most civilised of places (Snyder 1990: 14).[5] If we are to find a way around the dualism of nature/ culture it is necessary to recognise how our world is always made of both culture and wildness, both constructedness and freedom. This

means seeing, for example, that the walls of the garden, however solid, are also permeable. The wild is in the garden, even in the house. I can prune the roses and tend the topiary, but I can't make the new bud grow, or the green leaves open. The soil is alive with myriad creatures, the jacaranda tree is visited by birds, algae forms when the fountain pump stops, and fish eat the mosquitoes breeding among the water-lilies. Even in the smallest, most urban garden, you can discover what the colonial explorers used to call *terra nullius,* space without a master. Of course the air is polluted and the water so-called purified, the earth bears chemical traces, and the sun is more harsh than we remember. Yet the world is alive. Beyond the narratives of human dominion, the myriad elements of the system are in constant conversation, if even at the most microscopic levels. Which is another way of saying that it is fine to consider the garden as a natural ecosystem. Our problems begin when we imagine that it is not.

2 Modern Subjects in a World of Matter

The period in which Blake was working is often described by ecological theorists as a transitional time when new paradigms in science and philosophy had begun to have an irrevocable impact in human beings' economic, political, and spiritual relations with our human and nonhuman fellow beings. New technologies meant both the possibility of extraordinary new freedoms and a new kind of slavery. As Anthony Wilden puts it, if the legacy of Descartes in the ideology of bourgeois individualism

> was to strike a blow for the ethic of personal freedom in the Age of Reason, it was also a blow on behalf of an economic system which would lead to the most complex and irrational organisation of unfreedom man-and-womankind has ever seen.
>
> (Wilden 1980: 213)

Clearly, no ideological system, even the colonial enterprise, can be monolithic in its consequences.[6] Yet to recognise that the early modern imperialist project was more complex and contradictory than its critics are likely to acknowledge does not of course erase the more disastrous aspects of its impact on native peoples and the environment, or remove the need for critique of its founding beliefs.

Like other critical interpretations of the globalising impact of post-Enlightenment civilisation (postmodernist, feminist, postcolonial), ecological perspectives tend to focus on the ideological significance of its epistemology. We share in particular a distaste for its model of the world as an aggregate of

discrete autonomous entities (whether "things" or "selves"), its exploitative hierarchic dualisms, and its imperialist tendency to represent ethnocentric ways of seeing as totalising truths. Where ecological readings will differ from the more familiar approaches of critical theory is in drawing attention to the prevalence of the self/nature, reason/nature dualism: its relatedness to the other oppressive dualisms, its consequences for the health of the biosphere, and possible alternatives.

Anthony Wilden was one of the first theorists to identify the biosocial impact of the Cartesian error which "denies the relation between energy and information by splitting symbiotic wholes (ecosystems) into supposedly independent 'things'" (Wilden 1980: 210). His study of the oppositional, exploitative logic of Biosocial Imperialism is based in a critique of this "atomistic epistemology on which we still depend" (p. 213). More recently, from an ecofeminism perspective, Val Plumwood has explored in detail the reductionist, instrumentalising view of nature which it has implied, arguing that "in the paradigm of scientific mechanism, nature is nullified and defined as lack. It is seen as non-agentic, as passive, non-creative and inert ... a homogenous nullity, merely wanting in comparison with the superiority of human consciousness, human rationality, human creativity and freedom" (Plumwood 1993: 110). This view of the world has given ideological sanction to notions such as Locke's argument for private property, the reduction of nonhuman nature to a market commodity with the rise of capitalism, and a more general rendering of its status to that of a resource, or an instrument for human use without constraint. While stripping out "mind-like qualities such as agency and goal-directedness" from nature (Plumwood 1993: 115), this dualistic model attributes all consciousness to the human "self". As Plumwood describes it, "consciousness now divides the universe completely in a total cleavage between the thinking being and mindless nature, and between the thinking substance and 'its' body" (p. 116).

Ironically a result of the mechanistic project which renders nature lifeless, homogeneous and passive, has been a "machine economy" in which people too have become market resources. Neil Evernden shows how what he calls the "nihilistic understanding of the lifelessness of nature" (Evernden 1992: 90) we have inherited has in recent years come to invade our view of the human subject. As long as the wall of the human/nature dualism was intact, our unique qualities of mind and soul were assured. Yet the scientific study of nature has now made possible dissections of body and brain that reveal "consciousness" to be no more than an epiphenomenon: "We have examined the brain and found nobody home" (Evernden 1992: 91). Like Plumwood, Wilden and others, Evernden insists on the contemporary importance of questioning the hierarchic dualisms which have enabled dominant humans to objectify and exploit the earth and their fellow beings, and ultimately them "selves".

Like his Romantic contemporaries Blake was acutely conscious of what was being lost in the progress towards a modern society. As Meredith Veldman shows, the Romantic protest which emerged as a vociferous undercurrent during these years was the beginning of a tradition of dissent which continued into the twentieth-century Green movement. Dismayed at the consequences of the triumph of the machine, the victory of the middle class, and the intellectual revolution which elevated reason to new heights and objectified Nature, they sought "to reconnect, in new ways, the fragments of a society and a soul shattered by the economic, political, social and cultural changes of the previous decades" (Veldman 1994: 12). The new world marched on, of course, and the English Romantics' form of protest remained marginal. Had it found ways of engaging with the political agendas of other resistance movements, our story might have been different.

Two hundred years later, there is an urgent need for such dialogue. Within what remains of the intellectual Left and in some eco-anarchist tendencies, some people still insist on a strictly "materialist" response to the present global crisis. Yet increasingly both radical eco-activists, eco-philosophers and others seem to be asking for a wider interpretation of our experience, seeking to include rather than deny the dimensions of mind or consciousness or heart or spirit in their interactions with nonhuman nature and in their acts of resistance.[7]

Yet if Blake is an important ancestor "in the struggle", as for many reasons he must be, his work offers a more "crazy" wisdom than what one would expect from a Founding Father. His response to the mix of late-eighteenth-century or early-modern values and attitudes he encountered was inevitably complex, sometimes contradictory. For readers to try to extract a consistent, non-contradictory philosophical model from the many noisy, visionary, lyrical, idiosyncratic voices we meet in the stories and images of his work would be futile and silly, a demonstration of precisely the totalising, monologic impulse Blake called Urizen. So in the work produced around the time he was writing *Thel*, there is both delight in the fruits of Enlightenment individualism (the American War of Independence, the French Revolution, the anti-slavery movement, the first glimmerings of women's rights) and horror at the dehumanising, instrumentalising, dispiriting impact of the new technologies. Like his antinomian forebears, Blake rejects what he describes as the orthodox Church's hypocritical, oppressive Moral Law for curbing desire, and interprets the Bible as an expression of the Everlasting Gospel of love. He abhors the hierarchic dualism which elevates Reason, Mind and Soul over Energy and the Body, and proposes in its place a dialectical or dialogic "marriage of contraries."

In relation to the human/nature dualism, the poetry is well-known for its scornful rejection of what he called the "Vegetable Universe" of Nature, and a corresponding celebration of the human and the Imagination. "Where man

is not, nature is barren" Blake asserts (Blake 1979: 152), apparently voicing quite precisely the hyperseparation of conscious human and reified nature that eighteenth-century philosophy inherited from Descartes. To foreground "man" in this way may well derive from this influence, yet in the light of his wider body of work, I don't interpret it to mean that human beings are all that matters, and that everything else is peripheral. Rather, Blake's focus on Imagination seems, at least in part, to be a way of making the point that human consciousness is that which confers value in the world, and has the capacity for the acts of imaginative identification that are involved in sympathy or love or compassion. Instead of working as a way of elevating the reasoning mind to preeminence, this view of mind and heart confers rather a sense of the impermanence and contingency of one's own perspective, its relatedness to the subjectivity of others. So the poetry insists again and again in different terms that "*everything* that lives is holy": not only poor and oppressed people, but also plants and animals.[8] The problem is that most people don't see it this way. Long before postmodernism or eco-philosophy, Blake recognised that the totalising systems he called State Religion and Science were collaborating in reproducing a rationalistic, mechanistic, reifying view of the environment which constructed it as matter, resource or property in the interests of early industrial capitalism. From this perspective, nature does become a "dead" world, useful only as the storehouse of raw materials for human profit. Using metaphors derived from the contemporary suffering of real slaves, Blake famously described this deluded, dualistic, exploitative view of the world as "mental chains" or "mind-forg'd manacles". In response, his entire project might be seen as an inquiry into how people might liberate themselves from this deathly way of responding to the living universe, how to recover the capacity for Imagination that might make a difference.

Like Buddhist texts that deal with transforming a dualistic *samsara* into nondual *nirvana,* Blake's poetry (although more attentive to the social and political dimensions of the problem) suggests that liberation, or awakening, requires a profoundly subversive act of consciousness. I interpret the cosmology he constructs to evoke this as the communication of an insight into nondualism. Certainly the resulting images and metaphors could be read as an unwitting confirmation of the very elements of the Enlightenment paradigms he seeks to overturn. His approach is often anthropocentric, his representations of talking plants and animals anthropomorphic, and the whole project potentially a deep ecologist's nightmare. You could argue it this way, but I'd say there's much more to be gained from a more sympathetic reading. A textual representation of insight or awareness can never be more than a textual representation. Maps and stories can retell, remember or point the way, but their dualistic logic means that they are of a different order from that which they represent. So, drawing on the contradictory narratives that shape any

person's experience, using the impossible tools of a language made up of binary oppositions, and working in relation to a hegemonic philosophical paradigm which makes man the measure of all things, Blake's illuminated poetry works to "Create a System" in order to evoke another (nondual or unitary) way of seeing which can "deliver" us from systems and theory, and celebrate the minute particular joy of every thing that lives. This project takes many different forms. In this discussion I am interested in the more accessible alternatives to human/nature, self/other dualism suggested in *Thel*.

3 No Self-Existence = Selflessness

The Book of Thel is short and readable. Focalised through Thel, the story it tells is a simple one, rather like those in the *Songs*, which "every child may joy to hear". Thel is a young virgin who is lamenting the fact that everything in the gentle, beautiful world she inhabits seems insubstantial and transient. Nothing lasts, least of all Thel herself. Her distress leads her into conversations with the small, humble inhabitants of a Garden: the Lilly of the Valley, the Cloud, the Worm, and the Clod of Clay. But instead of soothing her fears about death and impermanence, she is told that it is precisely these realities that she must learn to understand in a new way. Transience is inevitable in gardens, but it need not be a source of distress. Instead, the Garden reveals to her joyful patterns of reciprocity which give substance to its central teaching that "We live not for ourselves". The Lilly feeds the Lamb, the Cloud waters the fields, Thel will feed the Worm, and the Clay nurtures everyone. All seems to be going well until Thel is invited to enter the Earth. There, from out of the ground, she hears a "voice of sorrow" which enables her to encounter her own grave, and the fact of her sexuality. This so terrifies her that she runs in terror, back to where she came from.

Whatever the particular historical origins of the poem,[9] what interests me now is the opportunity it gives for reflections on some of the "big" questions of our own time, viewed through a late-eighteenth-century or early-modern frame. Thel's problems are, after all, most people's: Why don't things last? Why do we suffer? Is death a flaw in the universe, or in ourselves? How can we be happy? Where is paradise? Most of us, most of the time, prefer to avoid thinking about these fundamental questions, although terminal patients or people recently bereaved are often more open to them. Blake, characteristically, doesn't mind raising such embarrassingly big concerns, and we, as inhabitants of a possibly terminal civilisation, shouldn't either. In this poem, rather like a Buddhist response to the problem of suffering, the "answer" involves looking more closely at who is asking the questions. This process reveals that the problem lies not with the universe, but with the point of view

that Thel's questions represent. According to this, her problem is not impermanence, but rather her attachment to a conception of "self" as separate and distinct from other beings. As long as she is looking for a paradise that will secure the desires of this Imaginary self, she will be fearful, unhappy and unsatisfied. If she could accept what the Garden's ecological metaphor is trying to teach her, everything would be different.[10]

The poem is introduced by Thel's Motto. Like the Proverbs of Hell in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-1793), the "motto" genre raises readers' expectations of those confidently reasonable and common-sense eighteenth-century aphorisms, only to subvert and redefine them. Here, the motto is not an assertion of fact, belief or opinion, but a series of questions:

> 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?
>
> (Blake 1979: 127)

The first two lines suggest a receptivity to difference and multiple viewpoints that will be made explicit in Oothoon's insistent questioning in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793): "have not the mouse and frog / Eyes and ears and sense of touch? yet are their habitations / And their pursuits as different as their forms and their joys" (Blake 1979: 191). Here, as elsewhere, Blake is asserting an alternative to the deathly "Single Vision" which he identified in the reductionist gaze of eighteenth-century rationalism. As Wilden describes it, "the Imaginary seeks to deny difference by seeking actual identity" (Wilden 1980: 93). So where a mechanistic view can only see the world as an aggregate of interchangeable units, Blake consistently rejects what he perceived as the tyranny of the Same. High-flying, clear-sighted, airy, imperial, spiritual Eagles are certainly powerful, even hegemonic, but what use is their transcendent insight for understanding what is underground? The lowly Mole who lives there, his weak eyesight, strong claws and sense of smell wholly adapted to the dark world of the pit, knows what there is to know. Mole and eagle are surely to some extent metaphoric, symbolic figures here. Yet what is more interesting from an ecological perspective is that, like Oothoon's mouse and frog, they are represented as being possessed of consciousness and particular knowledge. This explicitly challenges the mechanistic paradigms of Blake's (and our) contemporaries that deny mindlike qualities to nonhuman nature.

Would it be anachronistic to see in the representation of the mole a simultaneous plea for the validity of subjugated, situated knowledges? Certainly Blake's sympathy during this period with French Revolutionary discourse, early feminism, his involvement in anti-slavery propaganda, his

relentless indignation at the oppression of common people, especially children, at the hands of the rich and powerful, his association with antinomian religious groups, and what we now see as his identification with the emerging tradition of Romantic critique should be evidence enough of an impassioned identification with viewpoints which the discourses of the powerful worked to marginalise. As regards the idea of situated knowledge it is clear that Blake rejected totalising truths wherever he found them. He understood the coercive, "narrowing" power of Single Vision, and constantly emphasised the need to resist assimilation. "I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Mans" (Blake 1979: 629), he wrote of his artistic work, indicating in the use of the word "Create" the recognition that his own truth-telling is at best a construction. At the same time, the reference to "System", both for his own and the "other Mans" project, is an ironic reminder that even fictional universes are potentially totalising and oppressive. This characteristic ambivalence means that Blake's texts tend to subvert the certainties they appear to assert. This is not to say however, that these texts are simply deconstructive of all assertion.[11] As will become clear, I think Blake, like the Mole, does have something to affirm, though this is not uttered in the voice of unchallengeable authority. The Mole's view is obviously conditioned and limited by his experience. But the fact that it is not absolute does not mean that his "truth" is without validity. He does have knowledge which nobody else can offer: specific, local, embodied, situated and absolutely inextricable from the environment in which it takes shape. In reading Blake's poetic assertions in this way, I am choosing to see them exemplifying the possibility for a "middle way" between absolutism and relativism, essentialism and nihilism, affirmation and deconstruction.

The next two lines of the Motto refer to modes of knowledge and experience which Blake's contemporaries sought to codify, and postmodernism has tended to destabilise. They are also the primary dyad in Mahayana Buddhism, and perhaps in most spiritual traditions. By asking whether Wisdom and Love, these intellectual or spiritual or embodied states that are crucial for transformation, can be contained within precious metal objects (a phallic rod, or its contrary, a vulvic bowl), Blake gives an opportunity for endless critical speculation about what these metaphors "mean".[12] Beyond this, the questions which the Motto poses enable readers to develop the ideas about truth and deconstruction which the previous lines initiated. Like the paradoxical Zen assertions that "it [enlightenment, realisation] is not to be found in the teachings," the text raises the question of whether it is possible at all to contain or stabilise or enclose wisdom or compassion in any cultural or discursive artefact. The attempt to do so would be, in Blake's terms, to replicate the repugnant abstractions of Enlightenment science, philosophy and religion.

His clearest embodiment of this tendency is in the representation of the mythic creator Urizen, "your reason" or "horizon". All of Urizen's life-

denying work finds its focus in the deluded hope of writing "the secrets of wisdom" in "books formed of metals", and controlling the expression of peace, love and forgiveness in codes of law made from "eternal brass" (Blake 1979: 224).[13] Yet even as Blake finds Urizen's project abhorrent, the ironic correspondence with his own work of etching books, such as *Thel*, in metal plates is not coincidental. In this respect the representation of Urizen is partly ironic, self-satirical, even deconstructive of Blake's great System.

At the same time, the poetry does not offer a point of view that nihilistically relativises all truth or value. This is because of its insistent emphasis that (even though our attempts to formalise and "fix" their meaning are always flawed, most often logocentric) wisdom and love are basic to our humanity. The rejection of codified, coercive Law that Blake shares with the Antinomians is accompanied by celebration of what was called the Everlasting Gospel. For Blake this is only made real in "minute particulars". The abstraction into "General Good" is what he calls "the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite, & flatterer" (Blake 1979: 687). Two hundred years later, the Antinomian believers who may have influenced Blake are no more. But the simultaneously de-constructive and affirmative approach that Blake uses may be compared with that of Madhyamika Buddhism, an old tradition which is alive and well. Although its texts are relentlessly deconstructive of all propositions, the purpose of this philosophy is the practical transformation of suffering into realisation. The primary tools for this transformation (and the fruits by which it may be apprehended) are wisdom and compassion.

In *Thel* the Motto is followed by Thel's lament which is characterised by imagery associated with transience and fading. In this her diction is very similar to that of some of the *Songs of Innocence*, although her tone of voice is very different:

> 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 wat'ry 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;
> Like the dove's voice; like transient day; like music in the air.
>
> (Blake 1979: 127)

Thel's description of her own insubstantiality foregrounds the contradiction inherent in the Cartesian model of self which Blake's contemporaries were assimilating, and the dualistic relation of self/nature which it implies. We believe ourselves to be separate and distinct, yet our experience is of wat'ry impermanence. In a discussion of Montaigne's *Essays*, Wilden finds this contradictory state exemplified in the words of "the subject who says 'I'" at the

historical frontier of the ideology of bourgeois individualism. According to this, "Montaigne's ideology of the self – his view of the *moi* as a substantial, Cartesian-like rock of stability – is an expression of the central contradiction between desire (for certitude and solidity) and experience (of doubt and fluidity)" (Wilden 1980: 89). From one perspective, then, Thel's complaint foregrounds an existential problem that the dualistic certainties of Enlightenment Humanism were rendering particularly acute.

Yet we can also read her distress as an expression of the perennial and pervasive sense of lack which in Buddhism is called *duhkha*. As Aitken Roshi, a contemporary Zen teacher, describes it, *duhkha* refers to the fact that "as human beings we agonise about death, and about our lack of freedom. We have the greatest difficulty in acknowledging our impermanence and our dependence" (Aitken 1991: 79). Viewed from this perspective, Thel's problem is impermanence, the anguished recognition that even the most solid-seeming phenomena are insubstantial; that, as the young Buddha discovered, old age, sickness and death attend us all. It was the recognition of this, the First Noble Truth, that impelled his journey: out of the walled paradise his wealthy parents had constructed for him, and into the world, in search of liberation. This story is a paradigm for anyone for whom the recognition of *duhkha* becomes the catalyst for transformation. For Thel it sets her on a journey out of the would-be paradise of Innocence, and into a Garden where she hopes to find some answers. I assume here that the Worm, the Clod and so on which she meets may first of all be read "straight" (as phenomena in the world), rather than as metaphors. Clearly it is also possible to interpret the poem at other (metaphoric or symbolic) levels.

The Garden in which Thel's story takes place is not a "setting" in the traditional literary sense of a backdrop for the activities of human protagonists. Neither is it a paradise on a remote island such as some of Blake's Romantic contemporaries were keen to imagine.[14] Thel's Garden is also not a "landscape", whether constructed to foreground the gaze of a human landowner or traveller, or to illustrate the artist's capacity for faithfully recording the scene as it was projected on his passive retina.[15] Instead of a landscape, a setting, a remote paradise or a collection of natural objects, in *Thel* it is to an imaginative environment of what we might now call "speaking subjects" that the young woman turns for teaching. This, and the fact that she engages in conversation with them, is suggestive for readers in our own time.

The environmental movement, particularly in North America, has in recent years made much of the need for policy-makers and the general public to "listen to the voices of nature", a constituency that has seldom been represented, and ecological theorists have discussed the analogy between the silencing of nonhuman nature and similar treatment of marginalised people.[16] Similarly, an example from recent South African literature, in *The Lives of*

Animals, J.M. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello argues against the elevation of reason as the faculty which distinguishes humans from other animals. Instead, she proposes that her audience of philosophers recognise the fullness of being that we have in common with them. Like Blake, she calls this experience of aliveness joy: "To be full of being is to live as a body-soul. One name for the experience of full being is *joy*" (Coetzee 1999: 33). In a number of other recent literary texts, attempts to articulate alternatives to the othering of nonhuman nature have involved narrative choices which foreground "place" rather than "character" as protagonist, or represent animals and even plants as "persons".[17] Of course these late-twentieth-century experiments in ecopolitics, theory and writing are a long way from Blake's way of seeing. Yet what they have in common is an urgent (if differently situated and expressed) attempt to realise our community with other living beings which the instrumentalising Cartesian dualisms have denied us.

In *The Book of Thel*, the sad young woman takes the first step towards such an experience when she perceives something beyond her own distress. She notices the Lilly of the Valley "breathing in the humble grass" and, unlike the early modern developers who were her contemporaries, is able to hear its voice. The Lilly describes herself as a precise manifestation of the very impermanence Thel has been lamenting. She is "weak" "a watr'y weed" and destined to "melt" in Summer's heat. Curiously for Thel, none of this is a problem for the Lilly. She says "I am very small and love to dwell in lowly vales". She is "visited from [a smiling] Heaven", and "clothed in light", and the fact that she is transient means that she is renewed through participating in a seasonal cycle (Blake 1979: 127). Hearing this, Thel's sighs take a slightly different focus. Impermanence might be bearable if one's life nurtured those of others, as the Lilly's does. She feeds the lamb and the cow and horse, giving to the powerless, the marginalised and the meek: "to those that cannot crave, the voiceless, the o'ertired". Thel, however, does none of this. Her life seems quite ephemeral and unmemorable: "But Thel is like a faint cloud kindled at the rising sun: / I vanish from my pearly throne, and who shall find my place?" (p. 128). The Lilly responds to this simile by introducing her to a real cloud. Thel asks her question again:

> "O Little Cloud", the virgin said, "I charge thee tell to me
> "Why thou complainest not when in one hour thou fade away:
> "Then we shall seek thee, but not find. Ah! Thel is like to thee:
> "I pass away: yet I complain, and no one hears my voice.
>
> (Blake 1979: 128)

The Cloud emerges in its bright form, "golden" and "glittering", and gives a very similar response to Thel's questions. Although it has no permanent

essence or identity, this is no argument for fear or nihilism: "And fearest thou because I vanish and am seen no more / Nothing remains?" Instead the Cloud describes a "shining", "golden" world of reciprocity, in which the transformations into nurturing rain and dew are infused with love, peace and "raptures holy". Again Thel whines that she is not like this. The Garden nurtures her, but she feeds nothing, gives nothing back: "And all shall say 'Without a use this shining woman liv'd, / Or did she only live to be at death the food of worms?'" (p. 129).

If the voices of the Garden sound to modern readers rather like contemporary ecologists, they are also quite similar to those of Buddhist teachers, particularly the contemporary ones who emphasise correspondences between the tradition and ecosystems thinking. In a verbal explanation of the concepts *sunyata* (emptiness or devoidness) and *pratitya-samutpada* (dependent arising) in the *Prajna paramita Sutra*, the Buddhist teacher and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh once introduced teachings on the empty and interconnected "self" by saying, "I was once a cloud ..." (Nhat Hanh 1990: s.p.). Elsewhere, using imagery as simple and direct as Blake's in *Thel* or the *Songs*, he explores the same issues by telling an ecological story of interdependence.[18] Using such examples, Nhat Hanh introduces the idea of "interbeing" to illustrate the central Buddhist teaching of *pratitya-samutpada*, according to which "things derive their being and nature by mutual dependence and are nothing in themselves" (Nagarjuna quoted by Succitto 1989: 19). But to suggest as this does that all things, all "selves" are empty, or devoid, of selfhood would seem to confirm Thel's worst fears. She explicitly does not want to "fade away". She wants to *be someone*. She wants to be autonomous. Like Lacan's fragmented, split, decentred child, she wants to fix an identity that is solid, lasting and discrete, that contradicts her experience of insubstantiality. Perhaps a paradise would do it, a place where things don't change?

Of course Buddhist teaching says no. The Second Noble Truth sees the cause of our fundamental anguish, or *duhkha,* in desire, articulated as clinging to the past and grasping for the future. According to this, the ignorant, fearful desire to secure a stable "selfhood" and a world of solid entities, is precisely at the root of our distress. Astonishingly (for the paranoid, grasping "I"), the only way out is to abandon attachment to believing in a dualistic world of selves and entities, and to realise the nondual wisdom of emptiness. But "emptiness" here is not the dreary nihilism that the English translation of the Sanskrit *sunyata* tends to suggest. Form may be emptiness, as the *Heart Sutra* puts it, but emptiness is continually manifesting as form, what the old texts call "the myriad things", or the jewelled network. In recent interpretations, there are clear and important correspondences between this sense of the relation of individual beings to a network of interbeing, and an ecosystems approach which defines the individual organism in an environment of energy and

information in which it arises and passes away. In Buddhism and in ecology, impermanence is not only unavoidable, it is what makes the system *live*. Eating and being eaten is primary, for all of us. As Gary Snyder has put it, "the shimmering food-chain, food-web is the scary, beautiful condition of the biosphere" (Snyder 1990: 184). To an interviewer who objects that he doesn't want to be eaten, Snyder laughs that he'd better get used to the idea (Snyder 1980: 69).

Thel's objection is quite similar. To be "the food of worms" seems disgusting and humiliating, the most awful way of being "of use" that she can think of. But the Cloud replies by once again challenging her preconceptions:

> "Then if thou art the food of worms, O virgin of the skies,
> "How great thy use, how great thy blessing! Everything that lives
> "Lives not alone nor for itself. Fear not ...
>
> (Blake 1979: 129)

The Cloud then calls the "weak", "helpless" Worm, and Thel is "astonish'd" at the sight. The worm is powerless and silent, even despised, but the Garden invites her to truly *see* it, to go beyond the "narrowing perceptions" of habitual vision which reduce its potential. And what she sees is extraordinary: the Worm appears as a helpless infant, wrapped in the Lilly's leaf. To feed this child is a blessing, not a horror. In teaching her that it is impossible for anything to live "alone or for itself", the Cloud repeats the central insight that living is impermanence. In the Garden, the self is continually eaten and renewed in the food-chain of interdependence. To embrace this wisdom is a blessing that would put an end to Thel's distress, her fear and sadness. The Worm has no words, but the Clod of Clay hears its cries and responds with the "milky fondness" of a mother. Then she turns to Thel and gives her the Garden's central teaching:

> "O beauty of the vales of Har! we live not for ourselves.
> "Thou seest me the meanest thing, and so I am indeed.
> "My bosom of itself is cold, and of itself is dark;
> "But he, that loves the lowly, pours his oil upon my head,
> "And kisses me, and binds his nuptial bands around my breast,
> "And says: 'Thou mother of my children, I have loved thee
> "And I have given thee a crown that none can take away.
>
> (Blake 1979: 129)

As long as the Clod of Clay is seen as an entity extracted from its interrelations with the environment, it remains "cold" and "dark", a bit of dirt, mud, "the meanest thing". But as soon as we recognise its role in the living system, the Clod becomes the Earth, precious "mother" of all beings. Like all the other

inhabitants of the Garden, her life is realised, not as a unitary self, but in nurturing others. At this point in the poem the jewelled network of emptiness and dependent arising is recognised as a network of love, or what might be called sympathy. Another way of putting this is to say that the insight into impermanence and interdependence is shown explicitly to be inseparable from compassion. In other words, the wisdom of no-self means selflessness. No-self-existence means compassion: "we live not for ourselves".

It is significant that this crucial statement is made by the Earth, who is in an obvious sense the lowliest speaker. After the reference to the Mole's point of view in Thel's Motto, the poem repeatedly works to foreground the small, the lowly, the weak, the trivialised and the subjugated: quiet Moles rather than heroic Eagles. "*Everything* that lives is holy", say Blake's voices of Energy, resistance and liberation in their challenge to the "narrowing" rationalist moralisms of State Religion. And here in Thel's Garden the world is still in the care of the God of Innocence, the God of the Everlasting Gospel who blesses the meek and "loves the lowly" and even marries the Earth. Having explained all this to Thel, the Clay gives a sort of disclaimer: "But how this is, sweet maid, I know not, and I cannot know;/ I ponder, and I cannot ponder; yet I live and love" (p. 129). Like many spiritual teachers, she understands that to claim to "know" (own, possess) the truth is hubristic and delusional, so she doesn't try to figure it all out. But what she is sure of is love. Blake's use of the word here refers to an attitude which transforms the habitually oppressive, reifying relation to the other. If the "self" is no longer experienced as an entity in opposition to an "other", then there is no longer a conflict of interests: not two. Like the Buddhist texts which instruct practitioners to begin by recognising all beings as having at some time been one's mother, Blake's introduction to this nondual compassion finds a powerful metaphor in the relations of mother-love.

As this suggests, the intriguing similarities between the Garden's teaching and Mahayana Buddhism continue. In his commentary on the *Bodhi charyavatara*, an important text in this tradition, His Holiness the Dalai Lama describes the development of a wise and compassionate state of mind and heart called *bodhichitta*, in which "kindness is combined with the highest intelligence" (Gyatso 1994: 16). Taking what is called the *Bodhisattva's* vow, the practitioner commits him- or herself to attaining enlightenment for the ultimate benefit of all beings, using the "unmistakable methods" of wisdom or the insight into the emptiness of all phenomena, and compassion (p. 11). Very much as the Cloud and the Clod of Clay are trying to show Thel, this way out of suffering begins with a recognition of impermanence and an understanding of *sunyata* and *pratitya samutpada*, and it manifests in compassion for all beings. Beginning with the extraordinary vow of aspiration which describes a subjectivity that is defined in its receptivity to and imaginative identification with the needs of others,[19] the *Bodhicharyavatara* outlines a practical path for

realising this state of bodhichitta. Where the Garden teaches that "we live not for ourselves," the *Bodhicharyavatara* describes a practice called "the exchange of self and others" (Gyatso 1994: 104f). This practice is explicitly designed to enable the practitioner to realise through exercises in imaginative identification a form of that experience of sympathetic imagination which Coetzee's character Elizabeth Costello finds lacking in her society. In his commentary on this practice of putting oneself in the place of others, the Dalai Lama (who is believed by his followers to be an incarnation of the compassion it evokes) repeatedly emphasises that the purpose of realising emptiness is compassionate engagement: "The truth, therefore, is this: / You must wholly give yourself for others" (Gyatso: 1994: 112).

In the last section of *The Book of Thel,* the Clod of Clay invites Thel to "enter my house", to experience directly what is "in the pit" (p. 130). This is the next stage of her education, one which most readers feel she finds too challenging. If the Garden is to teach her wisdom and compassion, it must show her the way out of Innocence, to include aspects of Experience that she would probably rather repress. So she enters into the dark, unconscious earth, hears "the voices of the ground" and sees "the secrets of the land unknown". It is a place of death and pain, "a land of sorrows & of tears where never smile was seen". Arriving at the fact of her own death, "her own grave plot", she hears a voice whose suffering is more anguished, articulate and knowing than hers was at the beginning of the poem: "Why cannot the Ear be closed to its own destruction?/ Or the glist'ning Eye to the poison of a smile?" and so on, through the senses and the potential "gateways" of sexuality. As elsewhere, Blake seems to be using reference to the five senses to denote the "narrowing" dualistic perception of the nondual, infinite universe which the state of Experience introduces, that imprisoning of awareness which Buddhists call *samsara*.[20] In this case, the Garden has been opening up Thel's narrowed perception to the extent that she can now recognise the degree and nature of suffering or *duhkha* much more acutely. This is precisely what spiritual teachers often tell practitioners to expect: beginning to "wake up" often brings with it an intensification of the very fear and sorrow which the practice aims to cure. The awakened vision of compassion and interbeing reveals its shadow in more clarity. This recognition is painful, but necessary. Spiritual awakening is of no purpose if it can't face and see through the intense, challenging world of fear and anger and cruelty. In Blake's terms, Innocence is naïve without Experience.

Thel glimpses the pain of Experience and listens to its insistent questions, but suddenly it is all too much for her, and she runs back to the Vales of Har. All at once it's over, with an ending that is startling, unresolved and sad. No closure, no answers, no reassurance. Is this a parable of failed vision? A story about Innocence that refuses life because of the fear Experience evokes? Is the

ending, as Larrissy sees it, evidence of Blake's own ambivalence about the relation of free Imagination to (necessarily) restraining limits? (Larrissy 1985: 125). Is it a demonstration of the idea suggested in the Motto that the truth of love and wisdom will not submit to textual framing? Did Blake run out of ideas or money or enthusiasm for the book? Like *Visions of the Daughters of Albion, Thel* offers some of Blake's most inspiring statements from this period of liberated vision. Yet in both cases these are qualified by an ending which confirms the prevalence of suffering and delusion. Oothoon knows that "every thing that lives is holy!" yet she is unable to communicate this to the jealous, mentally blinkered Theotormon whom she loves. So neither of them can be free. Thel has been given a similar teaching by the Garden, yet she is unable to act on it because of the fear which drives her away, running.

4 Pollution, Forgiveness and Love

> They did not say "It is I who am in that cattle car" .... They did not say "How would it be if I were burning?" They did not say "I am burning, I am falling in ash" ... there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination.
>
> (Coetzee 1999: 34-35)

After *Thel* and the *Songs of Innocence*, Blake explores the world of *samsara,* or deluded, conditioned existence, in more detail. The Clod of Clay reappears five years later in "The Clod and the Pebble" (*Songs of Experience*), describing once again what it means to identify imaginatively with the needs of others: "Love seeketh not Itself to please". But now the soft, giving, Innocent Clay is answered by the hard, exploitative, Experienced Pebble who asserts that "Love seeketh only Self to please, / To bind another to Its delight" (Blake 1979: 211). And in this poem the Pebble has the last word. Again, "The Garden of Love" illustrates what the apparatuses of Experience do to Thel's innocent Garden in the name of religion (Blake 1979: 215). Blake places responsibility for the repressive, coercive authoritarian systems which build and police this Chapel which is built in the Garden with Urizen, the old sky god. His creation story in *The Book of Urizen* can be read as a Lacanian or Buddhist account of the solidification of the self as separate, Imaginary entity, that permanent self which Thel more innocently desires. That such attention is given to this aspect of Urizen's delusion can be seen as a response to the increasing authority of the idea of self as autonomous entity during this period. As the "Father of Jealousy" Urizen becomes a being whose panoptic existence is premised on subjugating and reifying the other. Throughout, he displays a paranoid desire to resist impermanence, making laws and books to fix the world in place for

ever:

> "Lo! I unfold my darkness, and on
> "This rock place with strong hand the Book
> "Of eternal brass, written in my solitude: ...
> "One command, one joy, one desire,
> "One curse, one weight, one measure,
> "One King, One God, one Law".
>
> (Blake 1979: 224)

Monotheism, monoculture, monologic ... in response to the heterogeneous "minute particulars" of life, Urizen as the ultimate control-freak tries to impose a single system of law. Blake indicates that, however well intentioned this gesture may be, its project to freeze the flow of joy, to deny the interplay of contraries is always deathly: "I have sought for a joy without pain / For a solid without fluctuation" (p. 224). As this impossible attempt to dichotomise experience suggests, his way of seeing is irremediably dualistic and oppositional. In this spirit of "dividing and dividing" (p. 230), he exemplifies the Fall from (nondual) Vision which Blake recognises in the religious, philosophical, scientific and consequently economic paradigms of the time. In their most reductionist expression, these systems represented the world of plants and animals as a collection of material objects instead of recognising its continuity with human consciousness. So Urizen inevitably dislikes what he calls "the odours of Nature", and responds to what he sees as "the Abyss" by becoming an explorer, using the tools of Science to assert his control.[21] Like the early colonials who established gardens at the Cape, in the Caribbean, on Mauritius, in India and wherever else they could, the next step in Urizen's appropriation of the environment is to plant "a garden of fruits". And so it came to pass that the seeds of his influence travelled everywhere, and wild nature was supplanted by natural resources.

In Blake's system, Urizen's endeavours are deluded and ultimately hopeless. The winds, the fire and the waters of the living world resist imprisonment. And yet his project (the work of State Religion, Cartesian philosophy, mechanistic Science, industrialism, colonialism, imperialism, phallologocentrism) has a powerful impact nevertheless. Urizen's activity turns the nondual universe into "a wide world of solid obstruction", and weaves a "Net of Religion" so cunningly knotted that it ties people up. Their senses rush inwards (and out of "nature"), they "shrink up" from existence, and they forget their eternal life (Blake 1979: 235-236). At the time Blake was creating Urizen, the colonising English began to find the dead bodies of Australian Aborigines, the first of an estimated third of the population to be killed by the smallpox imported to the continent (Crosby 1986: 205). So it is perhaps significant that the description

of Urizen's activity in spreading delusion uses metaphors of disease and infection. In retrospect at least, this way of describing the Fall from Vision simultaneously evokes the genocidal impact of all the old world pathogens that European expansions were spreading around the world:

> Then the Inhabitants of those Cities
> Felt their Nerves change into Marrow
> And hardening Bones began
> In swift diseases and torments,
> In throbbings & shootings & grindings
> Thro' all coasts; till weaken'd
> The Senses inward rush'd, shrinking
> Beneath the dark net of infection.
>
> (Blake 1979: 235-236)

The lines that follow presciently go on to represent samsaric existence in the image of a polluted sky:

> Till the shrunken eyes, clouded over,
> Discern'd not the woven hipocrisy;
> But the streaky slime in their heavens,
> Brought together by narrowing perceptions,
> Appear'd transparent air.
>
> (Blake 1979: 236)

From where I sit, the sky over Cape Town looks clear enough today, but I know that if I were far enough away I would see the brown haze we're breathing in.

So the Chapel (and the factory and the scientific institute) come to usurp the Garden, establishing totalising systems for "binding" the expression of love, and polluting the world. Blake, like his antinomian forebears, saw this Chapel as the manifestation of everything that inhibits vision and awakening. Its gates are shut, and "Thou shalt not" is written above the door. In the figures of Urizen and other tyrants, Blake tries to bring his readers to *face* the monstrous reality of what early modern industrial society was constructing. At the same time, characters like Orc and Oothoon offer models of resistance, although it must be said their resistance is ineffectual. In all this, the questions that appeared in *Thel* recur insistently, and with greater clarity. If Urizen closes the gates of the Chapel and pollutes the Garden with his insatiable desire for permanence and control, Blake's vision of liberation involves rediscovering the Garden not as an illusory, mythical paradise, but as a real environment in which all things die and live. Urizen may attempt to secure an eternal paradise of "joy without pain", but Blake insists that mutability, impermanence and the

interplay of contraries are what we're made of. If Thel were ever brave enough to return, she would find that "Joy & Woe are woven fine" (Blake 1979: 432) in a rich, irrepressible, living universe of multiplicity which is the outward form of Imagination.

Seen in Buddhist terms, this recognition would contribute to liberating her from the experience of *duhkha* that had marked her conversations in the Garden. From the view of nondual wisdom, the evanescent transience of things and the impermanence of "self" are, we're told, no longer a problem. In attempting to describe this perspective, C.W. Huntington Jr uses language that strikingly recalls the imagery in Thel's Lament at the beginning of the poem:

> when, through *prajna,* the bodhisattva actualises the concept of dependent origination and experiences all things as interrelated threads woven into the fabric of emptiness (which is no fabric), then the phenomena of the world are seen to be devoid of any enduring "self" or "sovereign". Like magical illusions, beams of light, fairy cities, dreams or reflected images, from the perspective of this soteriological truth they are all without intrinsic being. As seen through the eye of perfect wisdom, the relations between things exert much greater claim to meaning and existence than do the things themselves.
>
> (Huntington 1989: 91)

Writing against the sort of critical practice which is concerned only to deconstruct the cultural texts which it addresses, my purpose in reading *Thel* has been to interpret it as what might be called a "teaching text" with regard to the mistaken dualisms of self/nature, and reason/nature which carve up the nondual world. Here I share the purpose of theorists working in the intersections between ecology, feminism and Buddhism.[22] In many ways, Blake's idiosyncratic poetry may be as deconstructive of the totalising theories and hierarchic dualisms of post-Enlightenment Western intellectual tradition as any late- modern or postmodern critic could hope to be. Yet this very critique potentially has much to teach contemporary theory about affirmation and engagement. Urizen's judgemental Chapel may instate the power/knowledge tyranny of "Thou Shalt Not", but this authoritarian system and the critique it provokes are never the whole story. For Blake, the living Garden can always be recovered in the speaker's experienced return to the qualities of Innocence: "Mutual Forgiveness of each Vice, / Such are the Gates of Paradise" (Blake 1979: 761). While fiercely rejecting the narrow prohibitions of Urizen's Moral Law, the poetry relentlessly asserts what E.P. Thompson calls the central antinomian affirmatives of *Thou Shalt*: Thou Shalt Love, or Thou Shalt Forgive. Thompson goes on to say that "these affirmatives cannot easily be derived from materialist thought today. That is why every realisation of them is a plank in the floor on which the future must walk" (Thompson 1993: 228).

But to use such language without apology or irony in contemporary academic discourse tends to invoke in one's audience a certain awkwardness or embarrassment. If we ask why this is, the answer seems to have everything to do with our inheritance of a way of seeing our "selves": as reasoning minds distinct from heart and embodied feeling, as autonomous agents in a world of matter. Anne Klein describes this view of subjectivity, and the strategies by which it inhibits compassion:

> In the dominant mentality of contemporary Western culture, "self" is often equated with the autonomous or self-sufficient individual .... Therefore, relationality is in Western cultures often constructed as undermining the "right" or most powerful kind of selfhood. To the extent that personal creativity and individuality are more valued than relationship in the West, to the extent that autonomy is characterized as the pinnacle of psychological and ethical development, there is an implicit suggestion that caring and a relational style of identity make one less than one might be. Thus, compassion is framed in opposition to more singular forms of selfhood.
>
> (Klein 1995: 101)

From a variety of disciplines addressing the present crisis of environment and development it has become clear that this attitude needs to change.[23] If the possibility of sustainable living requires that we find ways of nurturing heart as well as mind, articulating in our lives and work the antinomian affirmatives of love and forgiveness, then taking seriously the model of relationality in *Thel* suggests an approach to subjectivity which could begin to make a difference. Certainly it would be possible for modern readers to interpret the Garden's injunction that "we live not for ourselves" as an argument for the destructive self-abnegation that is currently known as co-dependence. But reading the poem in the context of Blake's other work suggests that this injunction works rather as a corrective: to the delusion which constructs a self that is separate from its community with life, and to the unhappy, myopic systems of selfishness that manifest this delusion.

In this interpretation, the teaching on the wisdom of no-self and interdependence which may be derived from the poem is made possible through an act of Imagination which the poet or seer invokes. This nondual wisdom is inextricably related to the imaginative identification we call love or sympathy or compassion for every thing that lives: no-self-existence means selflessness. Hand-printed and hand-coloured by its author in an act of material and imaginative resistance to the developing hegemony of Urizenic mechanism, *Thel* uses an ecological metaphor to affirm the possibility of this nondual way of seeing.

Notes

1. All quotations from William Blake are from the *Complete Works,* edited by G.Keynes (1979).

2. Sabine Haüsler calls for research into sustainability that critiques the Western development model by "challenging the almost all-pervasive [patriarchal, Enlightenment] Western framework of thinking ... from genuinely non-Western modes of thinking" (Haüsler 1994: 153). Similarly, in suggesting ways for greening media studies, Tom Jagtenberg and David McKie critique the hegemony of "that mega-ethnocentric discourse, *the* Enlightenment, singular" (Jagtenberg & McKie 1997: 162). They argue that in excluding other, lower-case and plural enlightening movements and enlightenment traditions, "we continue to ignore the potential of ... non-Euro-enlightenment perspectives to revitalise ideas of subjectivity and nature for contemporary eco-conditions" (p. 163). And Anne Klein suggests the need for a sense of self that enables us to "swim past" the hegemonic narratives of "male-ordered fascination with individual agency, legacy and mastery" (Klein 1995: 144).

3. In "Ideas of Nature", Raymond Williams puts it like this: "As the exploitation of nature continued ... the people who drew most profit from it went back, where they could find it ... to an unspoilt nature, to the purchased estates and country retreats" (Williams 1980: 80-81).

4. As Neil Evernden shows in *The Social Creation of Nature* (1992), the wilderness is in some senses often as human a creation as the garden, our wildest dreams of nature the most ideological.

5. Critique of the illusory separation of "nature" and "culture" is a major feature of Gary Snyder's literary project. See for example, "The Ettiquette of Freedom" (Snyder 1990: 3-24).

6. Through a variety of case studies, Richard Grove argues that the responses to nature which developed at this periphery of the expanding European system became central to the formulation of Western environmental ideas (Grove 1995: 12). Around the world in botanical gardens and projects of reforestation, "colonial states increasingly found conservationism to their taste and economic advantage" (p. 15).

7. When socialist ecologist Joel Kovel argues for the value of "radical spirituality" in contemporary engagement, Blake's example is one of the first that comes to mind (Kovel 1997: 34). The eminent socialist historian E.P. Thompson similarly mourns the failure of English Romanticism to merge with working-class radicalism in the early nineteenth Century:

   After William Blake, no mind was at home in both cultures, nor had the

> genius to interpret the two traditions to each other .... In the failure of the two traditions to come to a point of junction, something was lost. How much we cannot be sure, for we are among the losers.
>
> (Thompson quoted by Veldman 1994: 192-193)

8. In *Europe* (1794), in response to his question, "What is the material world, and is it dead?" the speaker is told with assurance that "every particle of dust breathes forth its joy" (Blake 1979: 237).

9. *Thel* may have been a lament for William and Catherine Blake's only child, a daughter who died soon after birth. Readers have also identified its correspondences with Milton's *Comus*.

10. As the Buddhist teacher Aya Khema puts it, "Suffering isn't going to go away; the one who suffers is going to go away" (Khema 1991: 59).

11. Edward Larrissy, for example, argues that:

    > [i]n none of his works is he able to comfort the reader with a discourse which can safely be fixed as authoritative "meta-commentary". Indeed, the attempt to find such a secure vantage point was recognised by Blake as sterile and authoritarian.
    >
    > (Larrissy 1985: 45)

12. Are the rod and bowl the paraphernalia of religious ritual? Are they the genitals and the brain respectively? Why is the alchemical symbolism apparently reversed? and so on.

13. As E.P.Thompson shows, in this he is a figure of what the Antinomian movements of the time identified as the pernicious Moral Law (Thompson 1993).

14. For example, as Grove's environmental historical work usefully argues, the early colonial enterprise involved a more complex interaction between colonial administrators and the often radical agendas of the contemporary scientific lobby than totalising theories of ecological imperialism generally recognise. As Grove shows, Edenic and Romantic metaphors strongly informed the discourses according to which Europeans attempted to characterise, identify and organise their perceptions of nature at the expanding colonial periphery (Grove 1995: 13). In this context, the process of botanical garden making in the colonies came to acquire moral, even redemptive significance.

15. As Evernden describes it, the rise of landscape painting in the eighteenth century served in different ways to heighten the objectifying of nature. While British landscape artists were following the lead of Dutch painters in representing "nature", Blake fiercely rejected their Baconian model of perception which proposed the idea of vision as passive receptivity to an outward stimulus. In its place he insisted on the engagement of the imagination "which could reveal that

which is *more* real, so to speak ... which constitutes wisdom rather than mere knowledge" (Evernden 1992: 81).

16. Evernden, for example, wants people to recognise that we can never "know" or "own" other beings, that they are "living subjects of significance" (Evernden 1992: 108), "ultrahuman". Patrick Murphy's model of what he calls "anotherness" similarly attempts to find a way out of the self/other polarity by suggesting a way of "being another for others" and extending Bakhtin's dialogics to include nonhumans as "speaking subjects" (Murphy 1995: 23, 9). And Val Plumwood argues the need for experiencing ourselves as being more animal and more embodied, and seeing nature as more mindlike than in the Cartesian conception. She proposes an "intentional stance" towards what she calls "Earth others" (Plumwood 1993: 137).

17. See for example views of wetlands by Aboriginal writers, Giblett & Webb, in *Western Australian Wetlands* (1996), the representation of the Valley as narrative subject in Ursula le Guin's novel *Always Coming Home* (1988), or the treatment of non-human nature in Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island* (1974).

18. If you are a poet, you will clearly see that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud there will be no water; without water, the trees cannot grow; and without trees you cannot make this paper. So the cloud is in here. The existence of this page is dependent on the existence of a cloud .... The paper is made of all the non-paper elements to the extent that if we return the non-paper elements to their sources ... the paper is empty. Empty of what? Empty of a separate self .... Empty, in this sense, means that the paper is full of everything, the entire cosmos.

(Nhat Hanh 1987: 45-46)

19. May I be a guard for those who are protectorless,
A guide for those who journey on the road;
For those who wish to go across the water,
May I be a boat, a raft, a bridge.

May I be an isle for those who yearn for landfall,
And a lamp for those who long for light;
For those who need a resting place, a bed;
For all who need a servant, may I be a slave.

May I be the wishing jewel, the vase of plenty,
A word of power, and the supreme remedy.
May I be the trees of miracles,
And for every being, the abundant cow.

Like the great earth and the other elements,
Enduring as the sky itself endures,

For the boundless multitude of living beings,
May I be the ground and vessel of their life.

Thus, for every single thing that lives,
In number like the boundless reaches of the sky,
May I be their sustenance and nourishment
Until they pass beyond the bounds of suffering.

(Shantideva quoted by Gyatso 1994: 32-33)

20. For example, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (c. 1790-93), the Fall from expanded perception is described in terms of Man having "clos'd himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern" (Blake 1979: 154), and in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), Oothoon's liberation from multiple enslavements is accompanied by a vehement protest against the mental slavery of eighteenth-century philosophy: "They told me that I had five senses to inclose me up" (p. 191).

21. Recalling Milton's account of Creation in *Paradise Lost*, Book VII, Blake describes this as follows: "He form'd a line & a plummet / To divide the Abyss beneath; / He form'd a dividing rule ..." (Blake 1979: 233-234).

22. Plumwood, for example, describes the need to resolve the Cartesian dualisms by finding "a *non-reductionist* basis for recognising continuity and reclaiming the ground of overlap between nature, the body and the human" (Plumwood 1993: 123), and urges the rediscovery of "care" as a non-instrumental relation to the other. Murphy similarly outlines a way of seeing in terms of what he calls "volitional interdependence" instead of autonomous individualisms (Murphy 1995: 23). And as Klein and others have shown, Buddhist approaches to subjectivity and interdependence, and the relation of these to compassion offer powerful models for developing a less exploitative way of thinking and being about selves and others.

23. See for example the comments by the hard science writers of *Beyond the Limits: Global Collapse or a Sustainable Future* on the urgent need for economics to acknowledge the reality of "non-material needs," and to describe acts of imagination, co-operation and love (Meadows et al. 1992: 224).

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