

5. *The Book of Thel*

London: The Trianon Press for the William Blake Trust, 1965

Dated 1789, but probably engraved between 1788 and 1791, *The Book of Thel* is an intriguing allegorical counterpart to *Songs of Innocence*. Thel, a mythological figure associated with the daughter of Venus (Desire), is a virgin inching toward the world of sex and experience, but also frightened by it. She asks several forms of life--- a lily, a cloud, and a clod of clay--- what is it like to be mortal? At the end of the book, Thel almost enters the world of the experience, but at the last minute runs back to the sanctuary of her pastoral home. Thel's final failure of nerve is, the poem suggests, worthy of pity rather than applause. Innocence may be an idyllic state, but "Without Contraries there is no Progression."

This message is clear before we even open the book. As you hold the book in hand, there is a striking contrast between the fine, smooth finish of the leather spine and the book's boards, which appear as if someone had painted an abstract image in oil paints, held the book on its side, and allowed the paint to run in the direction of the spine. This relationship between the leather bound "arm chair academic" and the flowing, mysteriously chaotic front and back covers recall one of Blake's most fundamental beliefs: that "true enlightenment and understanding comes from the marriage. . . of contraries. Innocence and Experience, Good and Evil, must converge to be complete. " Reason and Energy. . . are necessary to Human existence." Before we even begin reading the poem, we are forced to think about the dualities in our own lives and whether or not we are capable of blending the ideas of innocence and experience, good and evil, reason and energy. The reader could be said to undergo an experience similar to the paint running toward the leather, Blake forcing his mysterious, provoking energy toward us, even tapping our spine, the very back bone of our being.

Following the analogy one step further: the thin gold line that separates the boards from the spine could suggest wealth and the conventional power it represents as the only barrier strong enough to keep the chaotic paint away. While “arm chair academics” may be affected by the thoughts of the poem, they also might retreat (as Thel does) to familiar conventions that offer definition and order. Blake spent his whole creative life trying to break his readers free of the institutions that create these conventions. But, after all, it’s up to each reader to decide whether he or she chooses to embrace the easy comfort of leather or the discomfort of fluid, unpredictable energy.

--- *Joe Kilcullen '03*