

NARCISSUS ENGLISHED: A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF THEL,  
ALASTOR, AND ENDYMION.

by

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B.A., University of British Columbia, 1964

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts

in the Department

of

English

We accept this thesis as conforming to the  
required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

June, 1966

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Date June 24, 1966

## ABSTRACT

The origin of the story of Narcissus is unknown, and the circumstances of his death are uncertain, but the most popular version of the tale as told by Ovid has been read, translated, explained, moralized and disputed by innumerable writers and alluded to by many more. Renaissance writers in England, such as Golding, Edwards and Sandys, were interested in first introducing the myth into their own language and then in explaining its meanings, lessons and moralizations. Later poets paraphrased their translations, often adding their own point of view or else using only the skeleton structure of the myth for their own poetic purposes. The simple story of a youth who died by a pool after falling hopelessly in love with his own reflection acquired a significance and immortality worthy of a Greek god. The Eighteenth Century writers, who were less interested in the gods than their predecessors had been, almost completely ignored Narcissus in their poetry, but later poets such as Blake, Shelley and Keats revived him once again and transformed the faded youth into a Romantic.

In The Book of Thel Blake explores the consequences of self-love, and anticipates the fuller development of this theme in The Four Zoas. He uses the archetypal pattern of the Narcissus myth for portraying the fading Thel, who refuses to enter the state of Generation because she is afraid of the voice

of experience that she meets in her own grave when she descends into the underworld. Her sterile separation from her Spectre is similar to the unconsummated relationship between Narcissus and Echo. The fleeing from her grave escapes back to non-existence, fading by the river like Narcissus and Echo.

An understanding of the function of the Narcissus story in Shelley's poem, Alastor, is indispensable to an interpretation of this controversial poem. Shelley's allusions to the myth are faithful to the Ovidian version of Narcissus as a youth who sighs away his life after seeing his own shadow in a well. Shelley associates the Poet's quest with the Narcissus myth by generally paralleling the narrative structure of Ovid's story, and by employing much of its imagery. Chapter II argues that Shelley's poem is both unified and consistent when it is interpreted in terms of the Narcissus theme.

Keats primarily uses the popular myth of Endymion and Cynthia in his poem, Endymion, but also includes other myths in the manner of the Renaissance epyllion. The most significant addition to the main myth is the story of Narcissus as a comment on the nature of Endymion's quest. Keats pictures the hero at the well, viewing the reflection of the vision, in order to establish the specific parallel to Ovid's story. Endymion, however, unlike Narcissus or the Poet in Alastor, recognizes his illusion and proceeds towards accepting his

responsibility to his kingdom and to the Echo figures in the poem.

The analysis concludes with a comparison of the specific handling of the Narcissus myth in the three poems in terms of the various versions of the myth, the treatment of the metamorphosis of Narcissus into a flower, and the development of the theme of self-love. The thesis establishes the significance of the Narcissus myth in The Book of Thel, Alastor and Endymion, and evaluates Blake's, Shelley's and Keats's contribution to the attempts of the Renaissance writers to introduce the Ovidian story into English literature.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Dr. Warren Stevenson for his academic and personal interest in the formulation and completion of this thesis.

To Helga for the many hours and....

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
<u>THE FABLE OF OVID TRETING OF NARCISSUS:</u> THE ARGUMENT	Frontespiece
INTRODUCTION	1
I. BLAKE'S <u>BOOK OF THEL</u> : THE SHADOW OF NARCISSUS	18
II. SHELLEY'S <u>ALASTOR</u> : THE CONTROVERSIAL NARCISSUS	41
III. KEATS'S <u>ENDYMION</u> : NARCISSUS METAMORPHOSIZED	60
CONCLUSION	82
BIBLIOGRAPHY	93



## THE ARGUMENT OF THE FABLE

Lireope had a Sonne by Cephicious named Narcissus, whose  
contynuaunce of life Tyricias a prophete, affyrmyd to be long,  
yf the knowledge of hym selfe, procuryd not the contrary, whose  
sentence here now Ecco the callynge Impe, from whome Iuno had  
berefte the ryght vse of speche, so loued this Narcyssus, that  
the thought and care that she sustayned, for the gettinge hys  
that euer despysed her, she consumed the relykes, of which con-  
sumed  
Carcas were torned into stones. The greate dysdayne of Narcys-  
sus,  
herein Ramusia Straungely reuenged, for he heated through hūti-  
nge  
by the drynkyng of a well, supposynge to quence hys thurste  
espyed therein the shadowe, of hys face, wherewyth he was  
so rauyshed that hauynge no power to leue hys  
blynde desyre for the attaynyng of an impose-  
belyte, there he starued. For the pre-  
paration, whose buryall the Nim-  
phes, had ordyned souch fur-  
nituer as ther vnto apper-  
teyned & had. Retornyed  
to the solemne  
Erthyng  
and buryall of such a carcase, they  
found in sted of the ded Corpis  
a yelow floure which with  
vs beareth the name  
of daffa-  
dylly

## INTRODUCTION

The mirror of poetry has reflected Narcissus in more shades and subtleties than most myths. Ovid's popular version was introduced into English by three Renaissance translations, but the story had already been alluded to by both Chaucer and Gower. The first of these translations, The Fable Of Ouid Treting Narcissus, was printed anonymously in 1560 together with a long moralization "very pleasante to rede."<sup>1</sup> Arthur Golding completed the most important English version of The Metamorphoses in 1567 with an apologetic introduction outlining some of the lessons to be learned in each book, and explaining Ovid's use of the pagan gods. George Sandys' translation appeared in 1632 with his own detailed explanation of each book. The need to justify Ovid and explain the tales naturally influences the details of the translations, and influences the interpretations of the myths considerably. The Latin Ovid, as a result, was not only "englished,"<sup>2</sup> but also humanized in the Christian tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> The Fable Of Ouid Treting Narcissus, Trāslated Out Of Latin Into Englush Mytre, With A Moral Ther Vnto, Very Pleasante To Rede, (Thomas Edwards, Cephalus and Procris. Narcissus), ed. W.E. Buckley, London, 1882.

<sup>2</sup> George Sandys, trans., Ovid's Metamorphosis Englished, Mythologiz'd And Represented in Figures, Oxford, 1632.

The most indispensable elements of the Narcissus myth include the hero Narcissus, Echo, who remains only as a voice after the hero rejects her, the well, mirror or pool, the shadow, and the narcissus flower. A combination of any two of these is usually sufficient for identifying an allusion to this myth. In Ovid's original version, as translated by Golding, Tiresias prophesies that the boy will grow old if "him selfe he doe not know."<sup>3</sup> The youth, Narcissus, scorns the young men and maids who admire him for his beauty. Echo, one of these admirers, tries to win his love by following him while he hunts. She can only reply by echoing what he speaks because Juno has punished her for detaining Jove with her talk. After Narcissus rejects Echo's advances, she hides herself in woods and caves and fades away until only her voice remains. Narcissus continues to reject all suitors and their love. One of these suitors hopes that Narcissus will also feel the fire of love, but not be able to enjoy what he desires, and his curse is heard by Ramnuse, who assents to punish the hero.

While hunting, Narcissus goes to drink at a clear spring,

Which neyther sheepeheirds, nor the Goates  
that fed upon the hill,  
Nor other cattell troubled had, nor savage beast had  
styrd,

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<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare's Ovid Being Arthur Golding's Translation of The Metamorphoses, ed. W.H.D. Rouse, London, 1961, III. 433. Hereafter cited internally as Shakespeare's Ovid.

Nor braunch, nor sticke, nor leafe of tree, nor  
any foule nor byrd.  
(Shakespeare's Ovid, III. 510-512)

The isolation of this well is repeatedly emphasized by the Romantics. Narcissus sees his reflection in the pool, but thinks that it is a "lively boddie," (Shakespeare's Ovid, III. 522) and falls in love with it. He gazes at his shadow and complains about its elusiveness. Golding's translation emphasizes his delusion rather than his recognition that he loves himself. Narcissus flagellates himself with his fists in desperation, and melts away with desire until nothing of him remains. Echo sighs after him as he dies. Narcissus is received into Hell, and goes to "the Well of Styx" where he "Standes tooting on his shadow still as fondely as before." (III. 633-634) The Nymphes come to mourn his death, but find only "A yellow floure with milke white leaves new sprong upon the ground." (III. 642)

In the anonymous translation of 1560, Echo is more elusive and more playful than in Golding. When Narcissus asks whether there is anyone here, she answers "none,"<sup>4</sup> rather than "I." She actually embraces him "aboute the necke" (p. 134) instead of just approaching him, and is rejected physically: "her foulded armes that sprede/ about hys necke he caste awaye." (p. 134) This translation also emphasizes the violence

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<sup>4</sup> The Fable Of Ouid Treting Narcissus, p. 134.

that Narcissus does to himself in his sorrow: he releases his "wretched rage" by beating himself with "stonye fystes." (p. 137) The use of adjectives in the description of his fate in Hell seems to make the punishment even more severe than in Golding. Narcissus is received "into that hyllye place/ be yeke wythin the ogly stype, beheld hys wretched face." (p. 138)

Sandys seems to subordinate Narcissus' own lament to the interpretation of the poet. Narcissus' rejection of his wooers is immediately identified as pride, one of the seven sins. As in the other translations, he finally recognizes his shadow, but the stress is on his love for himself instead of for his shadow. The poet also scorns him for trying to attain an impossibility: "O Foole! that striu'st to catch a flying shade!/ Thou seek'st what's no-where."<sup>5</sup> This translation innovates the suggestion that Narcissus is "Deceiued by the Image of his words," (p. 89) as well as by his voice, thus making it possible to interpret Echo as representing the same principle of self-illusion as the shadow. Blake, for example, interchanges his allusions to the shadow and to Echo in a way that suggests a combination of the two figures to represent the same role. Although Sandys closely parallels the other two translations, he allows himself more freedom in emphasi-

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<sup>5</sup> Sandys, trans., Ovid's Metamorphosis, p. 90.



symbol for those people who strive silently after a worthy goal, but who are forsaken by some "for folyshe pleasures sake." (p. 150) The well is the place where these foolish people see their own glory and perish, captured by their own glory. The flower resembles the bounty nature has bestowed on them which fades quickly without fruit. (p. 150-151)

The opinions of Ficinus, Walles and an Italian are also included in order to please as many readers as possible. Ficinus neoplatonizes Narcissus as someone who cannot understand the proper "office which is sente/ Unto the minde." The reflection is the body "Which onely is the shadowe of the minde." (p. 165) The mind, as a result of being subjected to the body, loses its proper function, and is "drowned with desyre/ Of such delyghtis as to the bodye longe." (p. 166) Walles similarly explains that Narcissus is someone who loses the life of his soul (p. 169) because he is puffed up with pride for the shadow of his own beauty, knowledge or wealth. (p. 168) The Italian only describes Narcissus as someone who was so proud of his own beauty that he completely isolated himself until he starved in the woods. He was transformed into a flower to confirm that "youth and bewghte, come and soone be paste." (p. 169)

The moralization of the translator also portrays Narcissus as a beautiful youth who is extraordinarily gifted. Narcissus rejects the good council of those who would make him wise, and loses every virtue as a consequence of his

pride and self-love. (p.154) Echo, "By whome...good aduice is mente," (p.153) follows Narcissus faithfully in order to teach him the "endinge sense" of "speche," (p.153) but he refuses to accept her "good aduice" of reason. (p.154) The spring in which he sees his reflection is the "well of prayse" (p.160) where he sees the illusion of his self-love:

With in this well no fautes he euer spies  
Whereby him selfe he anye waye might spite  
But as eche face appearithe, fayre & quyte  
Though it be foule with in the flatringe glas  
This lyinge lake, shewes euerye gyfte to passe.  
(p.158)

Narcissus degenerates from "disdayn" to "contempte" to the "poyson pride," (pp.160-161) and loses all the gifts that he desires most because,

this aboundaunce who shall euell abuse  
and quite forget from whence these vertues flowe

...  
Mysuse of good thus them shall ouer throuwe.(p.162)

The myth teaches that beauty and wit will destroy the owner if he is guided by pride and self-love instead of by reason and good advice of others.

In his explication "Vpon The Third Booke Of Ovid's Metamorphosis," Sandys closely follows Bacon's and Ficinus' interpretations as given in the 1560 translation. Narcissus is a youth who perishes when the soul is alienated from the body because he admires the shadow of the soul, and also an endowed person who sequesters himself from others and dies from the madness of self-love. (p.106) The concentration



of the interpretation, however, is not on Narcissus nor Echo, but on Nemesis or Ramnuse, who "is introduced to revenge such pride and insolency; and to make his vices his owne destruction." (p. 106) Sandys gives a detailed iconographic description of this "Deity severe and inexorable to the proud and arrogant," emphasizing her power, her swiftness and her vengeance: "she terrifies those, whom she confounds not, with black and ominous visions; as with the perfidiousnesse of friends, the circumventions of enemies, misfortunes, sicknesse, and death, which incounter them in the midst of their felicities." (p. 104) Shelley may have been alluding to this figure when he named his poem Alastor. Keats, too, who knew Sandys' translation, describes Endymion as being visited ' with black and ominous visions... in the midst of ... felicities.' The fearful figure of vengeance is certainly significant in these poems and in The Book of Thel by Blake. Sandys' explication also inserts Pausanias' non-Ovidian interpretation which argues against the view that Narcissus died at the fountain because he did not recognize his own shadow. Pausanias explains instead, that the shadow was the image of Narcissus' identical twin sister, who repaired to the fountain after her death. (pp. 105-106) This suggestion is not emphasized in Thel, Alastor or Endymion, although the shadowy visions in both Shelley's and Keats's poems are portrayed as nymphs.

Two other Renaissance poems, freer than the more literal

Ovidian translations, tell the story of Narcissus. The first, simply called Narcissus, was written by Thomas Edwards and imprinted in 1595. The other poem by James Shirley, called Narcissus or Self-Lover, was entered in the Stationer's Register in 1618.<sup>6</sup> These poems can be classified with the minor epics of the Renaissance, or the more controversial genre of the "epyllion."<sup>7</sup> The epyllion, which includes Marlowe's Hero and Leander and Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis, is a poem of medium length treating mythological subject matter, often from Ovid, and "employs the formal digression, a secondary story contained within the first and frequently quite unconnected with it in subject."<sup>8</sup> The digressions, often reduced to short allusions in the Elizabethan poems, may be connected with the main story by paralleling either its theme or plot.<sup>9</sup> These poems, as perfected by Marlowe, can be characterized by their personal note, their complaints of love, allusions to classical or other myths, and their delight in artifice.<sup>10</sup> The delight in the artifice

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Story Donno, ed., "Introduction," Elizabethan Minor Epics, London, 1963, p.18. Hereafter abbreviated as EME.

<sup>7</sup> Donno, ed., "Introduction," p.18.

<sup>8</sup> Paul W. Miller, "The Elizabethan Minor Epic," SP, LV (1958), p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> Miller, "The Elizabethan Minor Epic," p.37.

<sup>10</sup> Donno, ed., "Introduction," pp.6-8.

and love complaints "explains why the writers of epyllia frequently use only the core of a myth for their story line."<sup>11</sup> The secondary story may even be of equal importance with the first, as in Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis, where the shy Adonis and dominating Venus are probably modelled after Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, or even "the somewhat similar story of Narcissus and Echo."<sup>12</sup> Both Edwards' and Shirley's poems on Narcissus employ Ovid's myth for their basic narrative structure, but like the epyllion, they introduce numerous classical allusions, an apparently personal note, and a great deal of artifice.

Edwards' often humorous poem, is a long complaint that the poet overhears Narcissus utter at the well just before fading away. Narcissus is portrayed as the youth who almost innocently scorns the love of all his female admirers:

I knew not I what loyes they gaue to men,  
But as the banquet past, they as the shot,  
Pleasing euils acting or acting not,  
Gods know I knew not, nor accounted euer  
Of fairest woemen but as fowlest weather.<sup>13</sup>

Narcissus complains most bitterly about the sorrow and affliction that he must now experience as a punishment for scorning the dalliance of love. He lies in "vgly dungeon

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<sup>11</sup> Donno, "Introduction," (p. 9).

<sup>12</sup> Douglas Bush, Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry, New York, 1963, p. 139.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Edwards, Narcissus, ed. Buckley, p. 38.

where the serpents lie," because "Their musicke shall consort melodiouslie" with his sighs. (p. 45) Narcissus does not recognize his own shadow in the well, but thinks instead that what he sees is the "fairest faire." (p. 50) Shirley neatly compromises the old argument as to whether Narcissus sees his reflection or a nymph by having the hero deck himself with the jewels of his wooers, so that when he looks into the well the shadow is his own reflection, but does look like a woman. The reflection, therefore, as in Alastor and Endymion, represents the "shaddowed mistres," (p. 60) and Echo the rejected wooer. (p. 59)

Edwards' Narcissus, in the tradition of this genre, introduces numerous allusions to other myths to decorate and illustrate various aspects of the hero's complaints. Narcissus appeals to Adonis to join him because Adonis similarly scorned Venus' love, and is therefore the only one able to help him expose "beauties blindnes." (p. 42) Tantalus is also like Narcissus because he tried to "touch those seeming apples" (p. 52) that are comparable to the reflection. And like Orpheus, Narcissus decides to go "to hel againe" (p. 52) to pursue his object of affection.

Shirley's poem is closer to the original Ovidian story, although he introduces a number of his own innovations and follows the tradition that has been ascribed to the epyllion. Echo's character and personality are developed more fully than in any of the other versions of the myth. The poet's

sympathy is directed primarily towards her: he invokes her as the muse and tells the story from her point of view. Echo does not just try to kiss him once, as in Ovid's story, but finds Narcissus while he is sleeping, and plies his lips with kisses until they bleed.<sup>14</sup> The allusion to Endymion identifies the similarities between the two myths. (Stanza 31) Shirley has, in fact, digressed from the narrative of the Narcissus myth and inserted an element essentially borrowed from the story of Endymion, but disguised in a different mask. Keats may have been following this precedent in reverse order when he introduced the Narcissus myth into his poem on Endymion.

In Shirley's poem Echo, rather than one of the other suitors, asks Ramnusia to punish her "contemners pride." (Stanza 84) The shadow is unambiguously Narcissus' own reflection meant as a punishment for his rejection of Echo:

But whether is my wiser reason fled?  
It is the shadow of my selfe, I see,  
And I am curst to be enamoured.  
Where did I lose my soule? or where am I?  
What god shall pardon me this sin, if here,  
I must become my owne Idolater? (Stanza 98)

Shirley includes the moralization found in the 1560 translation of Ovid, but also includes other interpretations. The idea that Narcissus loses his soul when he sees his shadow in

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<sup>14</sup> Narcissus, or Self-Lover, EME, Stanzas 27-44.

the water is apparently an old Greek superstition connected with this myth. Frazer thinks that the Narcissus myth probably originated in the Greeks' fear "that the water-spirits would drag the person's reflection or soul under water, leaving him soulless to perish" if a man saw his reflection in the water.<sup>15</sup> The concept that Narcissus is his own 'Idolater' is Shirley's variation of Ficinus' moralization. Milton adapts this interpretation in Paradise Lost, Book IV, where Eve admires the beauty of her own reflection.<sup>16</sup> Blake also describes the fallen Man worshipping his own shadow in a similar allusion in The Four Zoas. Shirley's poem ends, as it begins, with Echo, describing how she too sees her shadow in the water while searching for Narcissus and throws herself into the stream in order to end her grief. The myth is now no longer sacred to Ovid and the translators, but has been retold with so many moralizations and variations that the poet can exercise almost complete freedom in his own retelling as long as he includes Narcissus, Echo, the well and the shadow somewhere in his narrative.

Allusions to Narcissus also appear in a number of the other English epyllia, thus demonstrating the widespread knowledge and popularity of the myth. In Lodge's Scylla

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<sup>15</sup> James George Frazer, The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion, London, 1933, p. 192.

<sup>16</sup> Jay Macpherson, "Narcissus: Some Uncertain Reflections," Alphabet, Number 1 (September 1960), pp. 41-42.

Metamorphosis Echo replies "With piteous voice from out her hollow den"<sup>17</sup> to the moans of Scilla, who is being punished with unrequited love after having rejected Glaucus. This allusion decorates the narrative, but also comments indirectly on the similarities between Scilla's and Narcissus' situation. Both Marlowe and Shakespeare allude to Narcissus as an example of unsurpassed beauty. Marlowe summarizes the myth for its own beauty when Hero favorably compares Leander's eyes to Narcissus':

Leander's eies,  
Those orient cheekes and lippes, exceeding his  
That leapt into the water for a kis  
Of his owne shadow, and despsing many,  
Died ere he could enjoy the love of any.<sup>18</sup>

Shakespeare also refers to Narcissus' beauty in two allusions describing Adonis and Lucrece. He adapts the myth to his own whim without trying to follow the original details: when he sees "his shadow in the brook,/ The fishes spread on it their golden gills," (Venus and Adonis, 1099-1100) and if Narcissus had seen Lucrece "as she stood/ Self-love had never drowned him in the flood." (The Rape of Lucrece, 265-266)

Shakespeare also uses the myth in a traditional allusion in Venus and Adonis. Venus scolds Adonis for rejecting

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<sup>17</sup> Scylla's Metamorphosis, EME, Stanza 117.

<sup>18</sup> Hero and Leander, EME, I. 72-76.

her by uttering the curse of the young men who ask Ramnuse to punish Narcissus:

Then woo thyself, be of thyself rejected,  
Steal thine own freedom and complain of theft.  
Narcissus so himself himself forsook,  
And died to kiss his shadow in the brook.  
(Venus and Adonis, 159-162)

Marston employs this same meaning when referring to Pigmalion, who after disdaining "to yeeld servile affection," is punished by Love who finally forces "him to know his fate,/ And love the shade, whose substance he did hate."<sup>19</sup>

Narcissus disappeared from the pastoral world of poetry in the Eighteenth Century and passed into the relatively obscure writings of a few lexicographers and philosophers. Lemprière summarizes the myth with only a brief reference to the Ovidian version. According to him, Narcissus sees his image reflected in the fountain, but kills himself because he thinks it is a nymph of the place and, according to Ovid, is changed into a flower. Lemprière also adds Pausanias' slightly different version.<sup>20</sup>

Taylor again revived the Neoplatonic interpretation of Ficinus in his comments on Narcissus. The "vain shadows" that Narcissus tries in vain to grasp are "corporeal beauties" which "are only images, traces and adumbrations of a superior

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<sup>19</sup> The Metamorphosis of Pigmaliions Image, EME, Stanza 1.

<sup>20</sup> Lemprière's Classical Dictionary of Proper Names mentioned in Ancient Authors, ed. F.A. Wright, London, 1958, pp. 396-397.



principle." Whoever lets himself be misled by the pursuit of these shadows "would resemble that senseless (Narcissus) who, wishing to grasp that image himself, according to the fable, disappeared, carried away by the current."<sup>21</sup> The shadow is only an illusion that cannot be attained. In the Romantic poems, The Book of Thel, Alastor and Endymion, the 'corporeal beauties' are no longer illusion, but indivisible with beauty and essence. The shadow is now beauty or love or any other ideal that is isolated from nature, mind and corporeality.

When the Romantics came to pay their tribute to the faded Narcissus of the Eighteenth Century, they found only the flower beside the brook. Keats's poet, wandering,

on the bank a lonely flower ... spied,  
A meek and forlorn flower, with naught of pride,  
Drooping its beauty o'er the watery clearness,  
To woo its own sad image into nearness.<sup>22</sup>

From this flower the poet reconstructs the "tale/ Of young Narcissus, and sad Echo's bale." (179-180) Shelley, too, finds the "narcissi" among the flowers:

the fairest among them all,  
Who gaze on their eyes in the stream's recess,

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Taylor, trans., Plotinos: Complete Works, London, 1918, I. 6.8.

<sup>22</sup> "I Stood Tip-Toe," The Poetical Works of John Keats, ed. H.W. Garrod, London, 1961, 171-174. Hereafter Keats's poems will be cited internally from this volume.

Till they die of their own dear loveliness.<sup>23</sup>

Blake, Shelley and Keats all transform this myth into poetry in The Book of Thel, Alastor and Endymion. Their interpretations bear only occasional resemblances to those of earlier poets, but they keep the essentials of the myth which has completed the mythic cycle of life, death and metamorphosis, becoming the rightful possession of the English poets.

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<sup>23</sup> "The Sensitive Plant," The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, London, 1961, 18-20. Hereafter Shelley's poems will be cited internally from this volume.

## CHAPTER I

### BLAKE'S BOOK OF THEL: THE SHADOW OF NARCISSUS

Thel is the creation of Blake's own imagination for a specific role in his mythology. She has no specific counterpart in classical myths, but like Urizen, Orc and Tharmas of the later prophecies, Thel, too, echoes some of the well established archetypes of the existing literary tradition. She combines the roles of the pastoral shepherdess, traditionally personified by Persephone, Euridice, or even Venus, and the epic hero, Ulysses, Dante, and Aeneas in her descent to the "land unknown."<sup>1</sup> Like Persephone and Euridice, Thel descends into the realm of death, but like the journey of the hero to the underworld, her journey is a movement towards greater vision and knowledge.

The Book of Thel deals with the problem of Thel's failure to complete her descent, and tries to interpret her action in terms of Blake's comprehensive poetic vision. The poem explores the effects of self-love, or

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<sup>1</sup> William Blake, The Book of Thel, The Prophetic Writings of William Blake, Volumes I-II, ed. D.J. Sloss and J.P.R. Wallis, London, 1957, II, IV. 2. Hereafter cited internally as Prophetic Writings. All quotations from The Book of Thel, The Four Zoas and Tiriel are from this edition, and will be cited internally.

selfishness, as opposed to self-sacrifice in the natural cycle. This theme of selfhood is one of Blake's most dominant and most unifying themes. In the song "Love and Harmony Combine!" of the Poetical Sketches, love and harmony entwine the two souls whose branches and roots are mixed and joined together. "On Another's Sorrow" emphasizes the necessity of identifying with another's grief in order to share his woe:

Can I see another's woe,  
And not be in sorrow too?<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, in "Night IX," one of the Eternal Men summarizes this theme as the key of the later prophecy, The Four Zoas, in his proclamation that,

Man liveth not by Self alone; but in his brother's  
Each shall behold the Eternal Father, & love-<sup>face</sup> & joy  
abound. (639-640)

The Clod of Clay reiterates this principle in The Book of Thel in the last attempt to make Thel understand that "we live not for ourselves." (III. 10)

This lesson on the dangers of self love has been commonly associated with the myth of Narcissus by the translators and moralizers of Ovid. Although Blake never specifically mentions Narcissus in The Book of Thel, he must have used this myth as a basic concept for the development of the

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<sup>2</sup> William Blake, The Poetical Works of William Blake, ed. John Sampson, London, 1949, p.78. Hereafter cited internally as Works.

theme of his poem. Blake rejected older mythology because "the literalness and the externality to which older myths had been subjected... had rendered them unadaptable to fresh historical situations,"<sup>3</sup> but he, nevertheless, agreed with his predecessors that " 'the Greek Fables Originated in Spiritual Mystery & Real Visions' ".<sup>4</sup> Blake, according to his friend Tatham, "was very fond of Ovid," and knew both the Metamorphoses and Thomas Taylor's translations of the Neoplatonists.<sup>5</sup> Blake, however, was less interested in reinterpreting these myths than in creating his own organic mythological framework from whatever source he found applicable.

The number of phrases echoing the story of Narcissus, as well as the theme itself, indicates that Blake was consciously employing this myth in The Book of Thel. Thel, like Narcissus, "is a reflection in a glass, like shadows in the water." (I. 9) She abandons the other daughters and seeks "the secret air," just as Narcissus leaves his friends and finally arrives at the well to which no one had ever come. Thel fades away by the river, (I. 3-4) as Narcissus

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Shorer, William Blake: The Politics of Vision, New York 1946, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> George Mills Harper, "Taylor and Blake's Drama of Persephone," PQ, 34 (1955), p. 378. Quoted from Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, 3rd ed., New York and London, 1932, p. 830.

<sup>5</sup> Northrop Frye, "Introduction," Selected Poetry and Prose of William Blake, New York, 1953, p. xx.



lamentations. When she comes to her own grave plot, a sorrowful voice asks her a number of questions. Thel is frightened by what she sees and hears, and flees back to the vales of Har.

The poem is divided into four symmetrical movements, each introducing and developing the theme of Thel's self-hood. In each section Thel meets a figure with whom she hopes to identify, but discovers each time that the apparent similarity is, in fact, an illusion. This discovery is the discovery of Narcissus, who falls in love with his shadow and tries to embrace it, only to find that he is mistaken. Thel's self-portrait in the first part is almost completely disproved by the end of the poem. She identifies herself with "the lotus of the water," with "a parting cloud." and the "smile upon an infant's face." (I. 6-10) But this apparent identity is false. After meeting the Lilly, she must pass on, because the lotus is not like Thel. The similarity of the imagery associated with both Thel and the Lilly does not emphasize their essential identification with each other,<sup>6</sup> but rather emphasizes Thel's basic illusion in her false state of innocence. Her world is similar to the well of Narcissus where illusion and reality are indistinguishable:

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<sup>6</sup> Stanley Gardner, Infinity on the Anvil: a Critical Study of Blake's Poetry, Oxford, 1954, p. 36.





the veil. She can, therefore, not even be the worm that will be transformed into life by the Eternals. Thel, personifying herself as a flower, a cloud and a worm, must reject her mistaken identification because kinship with the Lilly, the Cloud and the Worm is as unattainable for her as the shadow is for Narcissus.

In spite of this close parallel between Thel and Narcissus, a unique and more significant application of the myth to the poem is possible if Thel's words that she is "Like a reflection in a glass, like shadows in the water,"(I. 9) are taken literally. In this context she represents the shadow of Narcissus reflected in the pool, a very important image both in this poem and in Blake's later works. Instead of being the deluded Narcissus who does not recognize her illusions about the Cloud, she is in fact the shadow of the Lilly, the Cloud, the Worm and the Clod of Clay. She discovers, not that they are unreal, but that she is only a shadow of their reality.

In "Night III" the Dark'ning Man, representing an aspect of the fallen Albion, sees the spectre and emanation of Luvah and Vala as his shadow reflected in the water:

Above him rose a Shadow from his wearied intel-  
lect,  
Of living gold, pure, perfect, holy; in white  
linen pure he hover'd,  
A sweet entrancing self delusion, a wat'ry vi-  
sion of Man,  
Soft exulting in existence, all the Man absor-  
bing. (45-48)

This is, without a doubt, a direct allusion to the Narcissus myth, and demonstrates that Blake is consciously using the myth for his own poetic purposes. The meaning of this Narcissus shadow in the context of The Four Zoas clarifies some of the imaginative concepts that Blake was working with when he wrote The Book of Thel, and definitely establishes Thel's self portrayal as a "reflection in a glass" (I. 9) as a conscious allusion to the myth. The shadow in "Night III" is connected with illusion, self-love and punishment of the Narcissus figure, as it is in both the myth and The Book of Thel. The fallen Man, like Narcissus in Shirley's poem, is "Idolatrous to his own Shadow" ("Night III," 54) because he mistakenly thinks that it is his Lord. His worship, therefore, is a worship of himself as Narcissus' love for his shadow is a love of self.

He is the partie whome he wooes, and suter that  
doth wooe,  
He is the flame that settes on fire, and thing  
that burneth tooe.

(Shakespeare's Ovid, III. 535-536)

Albion foresees the doom that must follow this perversion and prophesies from his sleep:

I can no longer hide  
The dismal vision of mine eyes. O love & life  
& light!  
Prophetic dreads urge me to speak: futurity is  
before me  
Like a dark lamp. Eternal death haunts all my  
expectation. ("Night III," 67-70)

The reason for this doom is the same as the punishment for

Narcissus' self-love, because when we are "Rent from Eternal Brotherhood, we die, & are no more." ("Night III," 71) Thel, too, returns to essential non-existence because she could not learn from the Cloud that "every thing that lives/ Lives not alone nor for itself." (II. 26-27)

When Urizen falls and separates himself from his female principle, Ahania, and casts her to the earth as a separate entity, he, too, describes her in terms of a Narcissus reflection:

And thou hast risen with thy moist locks into  
a wat'ry image  
Reflecting all my indolence, my weakness & my  
death. ("Night III," 119-120)

Tharmas, "emerging from the Smoke/ Of Urizen, dashed in pieces from his precipitant fall," ("Night III," 152-153) identifies his lost emanation, Enion, as Echo:

For now no more remain'd of Enion in the dismal  
air,  
Only a voice eternal wailing in the Elements.  
("Night III," 199-200)

The emanations of the fallen gods are, therefore, interchangeable as Echo or the shadow of the Narcissus story. Blake has combined the reflection of Narcissus and the figure of Echo to mean the same thing in his allusions.<sup>8</sup> This innovation explains the descriptions of Thel as both a reflection and as someone who is fading away. Thel is,

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<sup>8</sup> Northrop Frye, Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake, Boston, 1962, p. 283.

therefore, Blake's version of Narcissus' shadow, and can be classed with the female principles separated from Urizen and Tharmas: Ahanian and Enion.

The opening lines of The Book of Thel emphasize Thel's lamenting voice "by the river Adona" as she seeks "the secret air,/ To fade away like morning beauty." Echo, too, leaves Narcissus and fades into a mere voice:

She gate hir to the Woods,  
And hid hir head for verie shame among the leaves  
and buddes.  
And ever sence she lyves alone in dennes and hollow Caves.

...  
Through restlesse carke and care  
Hir bodie pynes to skinne and bone, and waxeth  
wonderous bare.

(Shakespeare's Ovid, III. 489-494)

The shadow of Narcissus, similarly, glides away and vanishes as he tries to touch it. Like Echo who listens for the voice of Narcissus, Thel also wants to "hear the voice/  
Of him that walketh in the garden in the evening time."  
(I. 13-14) These allusions to the Narcissus myth gain importance in their relation to The Four Zoas.

Frye identifies the river Adona with the four rivers of the Biblical Eden, or Blake's equivalent of Beulah, because of the etymological connection between "the Hebrew 'Eden' and the Classical hortus Adoni."<sup>9</sup> This identifica-

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<sup>9</sup> Frye, Fearful Symmetry, p. 229.

tion clarifies the significance of the Vales of Har where Thel dwells. Har is the early concept of Beulah in the later Prophecies, one of the four lands of Blake's cosmos. Beulah "is the bed in which we bury the seed before it rises again, and the bed of sleeping love in which new human life is created."<sup>10</sup> It is the land of "the Caverns of the Grave & places of Human Seed," (Night III," 136) into which Urizen and Ahania fall after their separation. From here the seed must fall into existence, as Adam had to fall from Eden, because "from the eternal point of view it is a state of repose and of dormant life."<sup>11</sup> Thel, therefore, is like Man in The Four Zoas, who "seeks the caves of sleep/ Among the Flowers of Beulah," (Night IX," 625-626) and waits for a visit from the immortal world: 'the voice/ of him that walketh in the garden.' This voice is the voice of God talking to Adam in Eden before the necessary fall. Thel, however, wants to remain in her garden rather than participate in regeneration. In the Songs of Experience this "Holy Word" calls to the "lapsed soul," not to sleep, but to,

Arise from out the dewy grass;  
Night is worn,  
And the morn  
Rises from the slumberous mass.  
(Works, "Introduction," 12-15)

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<sup>10</sup> Frye, Fearful Symmetry, p. 229.

<sup>11</sup> Frye, p. 232.

Thel hears this voice as it is embodied in the words of the Lilly, the Cloud, the Clay and the "voice of sorrow," (IV. 10) but she is unwilling to experience the necessary symbolic birth, and flees back to the vales of Har.

The vales of Har is the dwelling place of Mnetha and her children, Har and Heva, in the unengraved poem, Tiriel. The unexplained "Mne" in the first line of The Book of Thel is probably a deliberate allusion to Mnetha, identifying Thel as one of her daughters. The word was not scratched from the plate (Prophetic Writings, II, footnote I, p. 271) and is, in fact, necessary for the metre of the line. The vales of Har is the place of unborn innocence, a state of death before existence for those who remain there: "Har is the human Selfhood which, though men spend most of their time trying to express it, never achieves reality and is identified only as death. Har, unlike Adam, never outgrows his garden but remains there shut up from the world in a permanent state of near-existence."<sup>12</sup> Thel, like the old Tiriel, flees back to this land for safety. Innocence here is false and equated, not with childhood, but with senility: Tiriel "is an innocent old man" (Tiriel, 2. 26-30) because he is harmless without his staff. The imagery describing Har and Heva in Tiriel identifies the "daughters of Mne Seraphim" as the daughters of Mnetha:

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<sup>12</sup> Frye, Fearful Symmetry, p. 242.

And Har & Heva, like two children, sat beneath  
the Oak.  
Mnetha, now aged, waited on them, & brought them  
food & clothing;  
But they were as the shadow of Har & as the years  
forgotten.  
Playing with flowers & running after birds they  
spent the day,  
And in the night like infants slept, delight (e)d  
with infant dreams. (Tiriel, 2. 5-9)

Thel, as one of these daughters, is also like a forgotten  
shadow in the "secret air" (Thel, I. 2 ), who plays with flo-  
wers, and whose transience is "Like dreams of infants."

(Thel, I. 10) The Earth, in a later stage of the process of  
regaining Eden, answers the 'Holy Word' with the "Earth's  
Answer," in order to escape its fallen state in the Songs  
of Experience:

'Break this heavy chain  
That does freeze my bones around.  
Selfish! vain!  
Eternal bane!  
That free Love with bondage bound.' (Works, 21-25)

Thel, too, should break from her chains of self-love, but remains,  
instead, the shadow of Narcissus because she is unable to enter  
the cycle of selflessness in the world of experience.

"Thel's Motto" indicates the necessity of a descent into  
the pit of experience in order to obtain "Wisdom" and "Love":  
" 'Thel's Motto' is a series of questions which suggest the  
moral necessity of immersion in life, but, at the same time,  
the distastefulness of the immersion... Since the Eagle  
does not know what is in the pit, one has to ask the Mole,  
and in order to ask him one must go to the pit. But the  
Eagle is so much more glorious than the Mole that one won-





wat'ry bow, and like a parting cloud." (I. 8) The Cloud must first inform Thel that its "steeds drink of the golden springs/ Where Luvah doth renew his horses." (II. 7-8) This fact does not apply to Thel, who thinks of the Cloud only as vanishing from its "pearly throne." (I. 37) She does not want to leave her throne any more than she wants to change from an eagle to a mole. But as the Lilly tamed the steed, so now the Cloud drinks with the horses of Luvah. Thel does neither. Luvah, in the later poems, will "represent the sexual aspect of existence," called "Generation,"<sup>14</sup> the world to which Thel must descend in order to be born so that she can reascend into the true Eden.

The Cloud symbolizes the state of Generation. Unlike Thel it passes away "to tenfold life" by descending to the "shining tent" of Generation and by wedding "the fair-eyed dew" in order to reascend to a higher innocence, "link'd in a golden band and never part,/ But walk united, bearing food to all our tender flowers." (II. 11-16) Like the Lilly, the Cloud also ascends to an eternal state of innocence and unity. The loss of identity of the Cloud and the virgin dew within each other symbolizes Blake's concept of ideal unity.

When Luvah and Urizen fall in "Night III," they are

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<sup>14</sup> Frye, Fearful Symmetry, p. 235.

separated from their female counterparts which are actually a part of themselves in the eternal and unfallen state. Once Ahania is separated from Urizen she becomes a shadow in the same way that Thel is a shadow. In Blake's Eden the whole human world exists in "the shape of a single infinite human body," the "perfect Man."<sup>15</sup> The four eternal archetypes, Urthona, Luvah, Urizen and Tharmas, exist in perfect harmony as this body, Albion. However, when any "one of the eternal family usurps for himself the role of eternal man,"<sup>16</sup> the Spectre of that Eternal is formed, separating itself from its Emanation. When Tharmas falls in "Night I," he becomes a Spectre who complains, "Lost! Lost! Lost! are my Emanations!" (19) The "Spectre is a 'ravening devouring lust,' looking outside himself for gratification," and his former Emanation is "everything he can love" as part of himself.<sup>17</sup> When man worships Luvah as a separate principle of himself and calls him Lord, Luvah becomes the Spectre separated from his Emanation, Vala. The Cloud and the dew who are 'link'd in a golden band and never part,' exemplify the unified existence of the eternal archetypes, whereas Thel is still the separated virgin

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<sup>15</sup> Frye, "Introduction", p. xxxvii.

<sup>16</sup> Robert F. Gleckner, "Blake's Religion of Imagination," JAAC, XIV (September 1955), p. 360.

<sup>17</sup> Frye, p. xxvi.

dew, the lost Emanation, who remains "without a use." (II.22) Thel is like Echo because she remains an unfulfilled virgin, fading to a mere voice, and like Narcissus' shadow because her existence is actually a state of non-existence and sterility in terms of Blake's categories. In The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, selfhood as found in Thel is represented by the "Devourer," whereas selflessness is the "Prolific." The union of these principles is necessary in order to "reinstitute the conditions of unconscious selfhood which preceded Urizen's revolt."<sup>18</sup>

The Clod of Clay, like the Cloud, is also bound in "nuptial bands," (III.14) and like the Lilly and the Cloud it too has learned that "we live not for ourselves." (III. 10) As the Lilly has been promised the "eternal vales," (I. 25) and the Cloud has been promised eternal union, so Christ of Revelations 2:10<sup>19</sup> has promised to give the Clay "a crown that none can take away." (Thel, III.16) Only Thel remains without a promise, but the matron Clay now invites her to enter her house, and promises that "tis given thee to enter/ And to return." (III. 28-29) This promise is traditionally given to the epic hero such as Homer, Aeneas, and Dante as an invitation to share the secrets of the

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<sup>18</sup> Gleckner, "Blake's Religion of the Imagination," p.365.

<sup>19</sup> "be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."

underworld. In Christian mythology Christ, too, descends to and returns from Hades, and in this context Thel is being invited to become Christ. For Blake, Christ is the eternal essence, and the ideal oneness<sup>20</sup> which man becomes when he enters Eden. Thel is, therefore, asked to descend into the grave in order to be able to reascend into Eden.

The source for the northern gates has been identified, both as "one of the few genuine and indisputable borrowings on Blake's part from Neoplatonic tradition,"<sup>21</sup> and as the discussion of the entrances to Jerusalem in Ezekiel 46:9.<sup>22</sup> In his allegory on Ulysses' descent into the Cave of the Nymphs, Porphyry states that this cave is "full of ancient wisdom," and signifies "the descent of the soul into sub-lunary regions."<sup>23</sup> The Odyssey explains that the Cave of the Nymphs "has two doors; one turned to the north, by which mortal men may descend; one on the south, meant rather for gods, by which men do not enter, but this is the road of

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<sup>20</sup> Gleckner, "Blake's Religion of Imagination," p. 360.

<sup>21</sup> Bloom, Blake's Apocalypse, p. 60.

<sup>22</sup> Gleckner, "Blake's Thel and the Bible," BNYPL, LXIV (1960), pp. 579-580.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Taylor, trans., "On the Cave of the Nymphs," Select Works of Porphyry, London, 1823, pp. 174-175.

the immortals."<sup>24</sup>

The Neoplatonic interpretation of this cave with its two gates explains it as a place of generation for souls:

The northern parts, likewise, pertain to souls descending into generation. And the gates of the cavern which are turned to the north, are rightly said to be pervious to the descent of men; but the southern gates are not the avenues of the Gods, but of souls ascending to the Gods.<sup>25</sup>

Both Blake and Porphyry think of this cave as a place of generation. Thel, like Ulysses of the Neoplatonic allegorization, is given the opportunity of being born to immortality by passing through this cave. The verse in Ezekiel does not specify who can go through the north and the south gates, but it emphasizes that those who enter by one gate must exit by the other:

he that entereth in by the way of the north gate to worship shall go out by the way of the south gate; and he that entereth by the way of the south gate shall go forth by the way of the north gate: he shall not return by the way of the gate whereby he came in, but shall go forth over against it. (46:9)

The Virgin, refuses generation when she flees back the same way by which she came.

The land that Thel enters, however, is filled with "Dolours & lamentations." (IV, 7) Neither the Cave of the

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<sup>24</sup> Homer, The Odyssey, trans. W.H.D. Rouse, New York, 1937, p. 140.

<sup>25</sup> Taylor, Select Works of Porphyry, pp. 186-189.

Nymphs nor Jerusalem is described in this way. And the "eternal gates' terrific porter" (IV. 1) seems to remain unidentified. But Aeneas' visit to the underworld in Virgil's epic seems to have some affinity with Thel's descent. The Sibyl suggests that Pluto, the king of the underworld, or possibly Cerberus, is the porter of the gate: "every night and every day black Pluto's door stands wide open."<sup>26</sup> She also tells him, as the Clay tells Thel, that he has been given the privilege of both entering and returning. The sorrows that meet Thel as soon as she enters the gate, also meet Aeneas: "In front of the very Entrance Hall, in the very Jaws of Hades, Grief and Resentful Care have laid their beds. Shapes terrible of aspect have their dwelling there, pallid Diseases, Old Age forlorn, Fear, Hunger, the Counsellor of Evil, ugly Poverty, Death, and Pain."<sup>27</sup> Thel, too, sees the "couches of the dead." (IV. 3) Thel's descent is, therefore, a potential Neoplatonic rebirth and an opportunity to enter into the land of vision.

Blake divides his cosmos into the four-fold division of Ulro, Generation, Beulah and Eden.<sup>28</sup> Ulro is the lowest

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<sup>26</sup> Virgil The Aeneid, W.F. Jackson Knight, trans., London, 1960, VI. 123-154.

<sup>27</sup> Virgil The Aeneid, VI. 255-287.

<sup>28</sup> Gleckner, "Blake's Religion of the Imagination," p. 364.

level of death and Non Entity: the place to which the seed must descend in order to rise into Eden. The Ovidian and Dantean metamorphoses of "everyheart on earth" (Thel, IV. 4) into a tree pictures it as infixing "deep its restless twists" into this land of the dead.

In the dialogue between the Spectre of Urthona and the Shadow of Enitharmon, the Shadow explains how Urizen fell from the "plains of Beulah." (Night VII," 249) When this happened Enitharmon was wrapped up in forgetfulness "in the Cavern dark, enslav'd to vegetative forms." ("Night VII," 260) In The Book of Thel, Thel meets these vegetative forms in the grave. This is the land of Ulro, the place of division and the source of a new union:

this delightful Tree  
Is given us for a Shelter from the tempests of  
Void & Solid,  
Till once again the morn of ages shall renew us,  
To reunite in those mild fields of happy Eternity  
Where thou & I in undivided Essence walk'd about  
Imbodied, thou my garden of Delight & I the spirit  
in the garden. ("Night VII," 265-270)

The existence of Ulro is a result of a division in the "Universal Manhood" into Spectre and Shadow:

One dread morn--  
Listen, O vision of delight! -- One dread morn of  
goary blood,  
The manhood was divided; ("Night VII," 275-277)

The Spectre of Urthona is now "a ravening devouring lust, continually/ Craving and devouring," ("Night VII," 301-302) and cannot pass back into "the Gates of Eternal life" ("Night

VII," 305) until this division is destroyed,

Consummating by pains & labours  
That mortal body, & by Self annihilation back  
To Life Eternal. ("Night VII," 339-341)<sup>returning</sup>

This challenge to go through the 'pains and labours' of reunion faces Thel as she encounters her own Spectre in her "grave plot." (IV.9) Her fear is the fear of paying the 'price of Experience,' and she flees back to the vales of Har to remain the fading virgin Echo and the shadow of Narcissus.

The questions from the hollow pit are those of experience, in contrast to Thel's questions of innocence in Part I. Her fear is the fear of false innocence because the threat of destruction is the means towards life rather than death. Urthona within the "New born Man" ("Night IX," 831) asks:

'How is it we have walk'd thro' fires, & yet are  
not consum'd?  
How is it that all things are chang'd, even as in  
ancient time?' ("Night IX," 842-843)

The price is the price of selfhood. Man must become infinite in order to become eternal.

The Book of Thel is Blake's early exploration of the problem of selfishness, the ultimate sin in his mythology. He employs the Narcissus story as a vehicle for his poetic vision by combining the roles of Echo and the shadow of Narcissus to represent the ephemeral and illusory nature.



of selfhood. He fully explores the possibilities of this theme in The Four Zoas where selfhood is destroyed by an apocalyptic union ushering man into an Innocence that is gained after the self is lost in experience. In The Book of Thel, however, Thel is unable to pass to 'tenfold life' with the Cloud and therefore remains a "weeping virgin... before the risen sun."

## CHAPTER II

### SHELLEY'S ALASTOR: THE CONTROVERSIAL NARCISSUS

The use of the Narcissus myth in Alastor, Shelley's most critically disputed poem, has been conceded, but has not been interpreted as the organizing principle for the poem's unity of structure, imagery and theme. Jay Macpherson has called this poem "the most Narcissus-ridden poem in English,"<sup>1</sup> and has interpreted some of the imagery in these terms. Contrary to those critics who see the Poet as a positive hero,<sup>2</sup> Miss Macpherson clearly recognizes that his search is "delusive and self-devouring" because he is unable "to recognize in the visionary maiden his own creation."<sup>3</sup>

Jones finds a serious inconsistency between the early and later parts of the poem. According to his view, Alastor begins with the purpose of illustrating the fatal consequences of living a self-centered life, but then abandons this purpose and ends with unqualified praise of the Poet "as the

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<sup>1</sup> Jay Macpherson, "Narcissus: Some Uncertain Reflections," Alphabet, Number 1 (1960), p.46.

<sup>2</sup> William H. Hildebrand, A Study of Alastor, Kent, Ohio, 1954.

<sup>3</sup> Macpherson, "Narcissus: Some Uncertain Reflections: or From 'Lycidas' to Donovan's Brain," Alphabet, Number 2 (1961), p.68.

highest conceivable type."<sup>4</sup> Gibson attacks Jones' criticism that Shelley deviates from the purpose stated in the "Preface" in the last half of the poem, and finds instead a complete unity of thought throughout, consistent with Shelley's stated purpose.<sup>5</sup> He argues, however, that the poem is not structurally unified because Shelley changes his method from narrative to allegory at the point where the Poet embarks onto the sea in the "little shallop." (299)<sup>6</sup> Neither interpretation is completely satisfying, for Alastor possesses a definite structural unity supported by the unifying theme and imagery of the Narcissus myth.

The journey of the Poet, which begins with leaving the "alienated home" (Alastor, 76) and ends with death, is the basis for the structure of the poem. Shelley's invocation and prologue (1-66) and the closing lament (672-720) thematically introduce and summarize this journey. The structure of the story is divided into halves of a continuing cycle with close unifying parallels at the point where the Poet goes to search for his vision. (222-223)

The Poet's entire travels, both before and after the

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<sup>4</sup> Frederick L. Jones, "The Inconsistency of Shelley's Alastor." ELH, 13 (1946), p. 291.

<sup>5</sup> E.K. Gibson, "Alastor: A Reinterpretation," PMLA, 62 (1947), p. 1022.

<sup>6</sup> Gibson, "Alastor: A Reinterpretation," p. 1036.

vision, take place in the geographical landscape of cities, sea, rivers and mountains. O'Malley's argument that the hero's "travels obviously were amid spiritual landscapes, not to any geographical Thebes or Cashmire"<sup>7</sup> is only partly true. The Poet does, in true Romantic fashion, recognize the imaginative value of the scenery, but the source of the image is always in real nature:

'O stream!  
Whose source is inaccessiblely profound,  
Whither do thy mysterious waters tend?  
Thou imagest my life.' (Alastor, 502-505)

Although nature becomes animated and mysterious during the boat trip, the Poet, nevertheless, does not leave the physical world for a purely spiritual realm. These concepts are two aspects of the same reality in Shelley's metaphysics, and therefore indivisible. As Shelley felt in his ascent to Mont Blanc, that it "was a living being & that the frozen blood forever circulated slowly thro' his stony veins,"<sup>8</sup> so also the Poet experiences the life of the rivers and mountains. The Poet is, therefore, going on a single journey, experiencing the landscape both objectively and subjectively.

The unity of this structure encompasses a single theme:

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<sup>7</sup> Glenn O'Malley, Shelley and Synesthesia, Evanston, Illinois, 1964, p. 52.

<sup>8</sup> The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley, ed. Frederick L. Jones, Oxford, 1964, I, p. 500. Hereafter cited internally as Letters I or II.

the delusive search for truth. This theme is unified because the search after the Poet leaves home is essentially the same as the search after the vision appears. The Poet, unlike Shelley, does not realize that there is no division between his objective and subjective worlds. The vision that he seeks has no reality except as it is embodied in the Arab maiden, the peasants, and the natural scenery.<sup>9</sup> The spiritual essence, according to Shelley, is inseparable from the physical manifestations:

When we speak of the soul of man, we mean that unknown cause which produces the observable effect evinced by his intelligence & bodily animation which are in their nature conjoined, and as we suppose, as we observe, inseparable.

(Letters I, p. 100)

The Poet is the Narcissus figure who is misdirected into searching for the shadow of truth, and therefore doomed to failure. The consistent imagery of the mirror, the shadow and the eyes, associated with the quest for the vision, identifies it as the reflection in the fatal Narcissus pool.

Shelley's "Preface" to Alastor supports this interpretation. The "Being" the youth "images to himself...unites all of wonderful, or wise, or beautiful, which the poet, the philosopher, or the lover could depicture." (p.14) This image is the "soul within our soul" that Shelley discusses

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<sup>9</sup> C.E. Pulos, The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley's Scepticism, Lincoln, 1954, p.81.

in the essay, "On Love":

We dimly see within our intellectual nature a miniature as it were of our entire self, yet deprived of all that we condemn or despise, the ideal prototype of everything excellent or lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man.

This "mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness,"<sup>10</sup> is directly related to the Narcissus myth by Miss Macpherson. She finds that the "De Incredibilibus," the first doctrine explaining the Narcissus myth, interprets the water in which Narcissus is drowned as the " 'stream of nature and the physical body'," and the reflection with which he fell in love as " 'the faintest reflection of his true soul' ".<sup>11</sup> According to her, there were two divergent interpretations of the mirror-symbolism: the Renaissance considered the mirror image to be far inferior to the original, but the Romantics tended to suggest that it was more beautiful than the reality.<sup>12</sup> "The Fable Of Ouid Treting Narcissus," written in 1560, however, already interprets the well as reflecting only what is praiseworthy:

With in this well no fautes he euer spies  
Whereby him selfe he anye waye might spite  
But as eche face appearithe, fayre & quyte

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<sup>10</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, "On Love," English Romantic Poetry and Prose, ed. Russell Noyes, New York, 1956, p. 1093.

<sup>11</sup> Macpherson, "Narcissus," Alphabet, Number 1, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> Macpherson, "Narcissus," Alphabet, Number 1, p. 46.

Though it be foule with in the flatringe glas  
This lyinge lake, shewes euerye gyfte to passe.<sup>13</sup>

Shelley is, therefore, working with a traditional interpretation of the reflection as being more beautiful than the original. At the same time, he is also borrowing the explanation in "De Incredibilibus." This combination produces the 'soul within our soul' as purified reflection of the total man.

The second paragraph of the "Preface" explains Shelley's attitude towards the Poet. Hildebrand's reading of the "but" in the third sentence<sup>14</sup> over-emphasizes Shelley's praise of the Poet as a luminary. The protagonist of the poem is one of the "luminaries of the world" under the dominion of the Power, as distinguished from the "meaner spirits that dare to abjure its dominion." He is nevertheless "avenged by the furies of an irresistible passion pursuing him to speedy ruin" as a punishment for his "self-centered seclusion." 'The furies' literally refers to the Poet's uncontrolled emotional reaction to his frustrated search, but it also embodies the mythological concept of Nemesis, as explained in Sandys' comments, who punishes Narcissus for his self-love. The Power, or "spirit of sweet human love" (203) sends the Poet the vision that distinguishes him from those who are "morally dead." The Poet misdirects his search when he isolates himself from human sympathy instead of dedica-

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<sup>13</sup> "The Fable Of Ouid Treting Narcissus," ed. Buckle, p. 158.

<sup>14</sup> Hildebrand, A Study of Alastor, p. 28.

ting his insight to the service of humanity. Shelley's sympathy at the end of the poem does not contradict his criticism of the Poet's 'self-centered seclusion' but rather expresses his sorrow that one who, like Narcissus, is more beautiful than the rest should perish because he is deluded by a generous error. Shelley distinguishes his idealism from the Poet's:

I am undec(e)ived in the belief that I have powers deeply to interest, or substantially to improve, mankind ... I am an outcast from human society; my name is execrated by all who understand its entire import,--by those very beings whose happiness I ardently desire. (Letters I, p.517)

He does not believe that the "ideal is eternal, immutable, and above the mortality of space and time and death."<sup>15</sup> The ideal for Shelley is immutable, but only as it is associated with space and time. He does not claim to have any knowledge of an ideal after death. Power, God, Love or the ideal are coexistent with the universe: "the essence of the universe, the universe is the essence of it." (Letters I, p.101) Although he may have altered his views when he was older, he explicitly believed at this time that "God is another signification for the Universe." (Letters I, p.215) The Poet must search for his vision through sympathy for humanity or else be punished by the curse that afflicts Narcissus.

In the invocation, Shelley develops the three functions which together form the essence of his concept of the human

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<sup>15</sup> Hildebrand, A Study of Alastor, p.41.



soul, as opposed to the Poet's understanding of the image that he pictures to himself. In the first section (1-17) Shelley describes how his own senses have perceived Nature in terms of a physical love. He has responded to the "tingling silentness," "hollow sighs," "winter robing with pure snow," "voluptuous pantings," and "sweet kisses" of Nature. (7-12) Sensual perception, therefore, is the first function. The second focuses on the intellectual search for the "deep mysteries" in Nature. The sinister imagery of the "charnels," "coffins," "black death," "lone ghost," and "desperate alchemist" (18-41) develops this search poetically, suggesting that it is a search for a forbidden and fatal truth. He ends the invocation with the image of the lyre and the wind, symbolizing the function of the imagination.

In his essay, "On Love," Shelley identifies these three functions as the fulfilment of the human being. The reason, the imagination and the senses compose the totality of what we experience within ourselves and for which we seek a response outside of ourselves. This totality is the nature of that "something within us which ... more and more thirsts after its likeness." This 'something' is the miniature in which we concentrate "our intellectual nature," to which we "refer all sensations," and which is acted upon by the imagination. The miniature is the "mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness: a soul within our soul."<sup>16</sup> Shelley has, therefore, described the three func-

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<sup>16</sup> Shelley, "On Love," p. 1093.

tions of the soul within the invocation of the poem. The Poet, however, searches for this essence itself rather than for a human being who will respond to this soul within him, just as Narcissus wants to embrace his own shadow rather than respond to Echo, who admires his beauty.

The introduction to the story of the Poet (50-66) establishes the mood of sorrowing and melancholic loneliness, and introduces the tragedy of the Poet's lack of response to human love. The virgins who waste away for love, and the youth's "wild eyes" both echo imagery from the Ovidian Narcissus myth.<sup>17</sup>

The first half of the structural cycle (67-106) begins when the Poet leaves his home for the "undiscovered lands." He first pursues "Nature's most secret steps," visiting "fields of snow," "bitumen lakes" and "secret caves." This pursuit culminates in a bond of kinship with Nature. (100-106) His "wandering step" proceeds to the old ruined cities where he finally perceives the "thrilling secrets of the birth of time." (106-128) On his journey he rejects the love of the Arab maiden, and continues through Arabia, Persia and the Carmanian waste, finally ending in a "natural bower," (147) where he falls asleep. As he sleeps, a vision comes to him, and when he awakes the world which previously was

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<sup>17</sup> Ovid, The Metamorphoses, trans. Horace Gregory, New York, 1963. Hereafter cited internally as Ovid.

full of 'thrilling secrets' (128) has been transformed into a dark and "empty scene." (201) Hope changes to despair. The first half of the cycle ends here, because the world in which he has felt "strong inspiration" (127) and kinship with nature has disappeared, and he is now in a world of fear, led on by the "fierce fiend" of his passion. (225)

The theme of the triple response of the soul to Nature introduced in the invocation is reintroduced and developed within the structure of the search. The Poet is identified as one nurtured by "vision, and bright silver dream [imagination]," (67) and who "felt [functions of sense] and knew [intellect]" the truth of nature and knowledge. (68-75) These are precisely the functions which Shelley identifies as the 'soul within our soul' in "On Love," making it possible to interpret this Poet as one of those who recognizes that 'something' which 'more and more thirsts after its likeness.'

This theme is expanded to include the Narcissus tendency towards seclusion from society when the Poet leaves "His cold fireside and alienated home." (76) In his essay, Shelley defines love as the search for the soul's "anti-type: the meeting with an understanding capable of clearly estimating our own"<sup>18</sup> within another person. Since this

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<sup>18</sup> Shelley, "On Love," p. 1093.

central idea is completely consistent with the central idea in the "Preface" to Alastor, it may be safely assumed that the general ideas in "On Love" are relevant for an interpretation of the poem. The Poet, contrary to Shelley's ideals, searches for the fulfilment of his desires in Nature, rather than in society.

Shelley develops this double theme of the Poet's desire for truth and his alienation in three parts. (73-239) He finds some response to his inner longing in his feeling of kinship with Nature and his flashes into the secrets of time. The imagery of the animals eating from his hand portrays this identification. The alienation is re-emphasized in the picture of the Arab maiden who pines away for his love. (129-139) This maiden symbolizes the anti-type which Shelley mentions in "On Love," who could respond to the Poet's reason, imagination and feeling. She comes "to gaze" (135) upon the Poet in the same way that he "gazed/ And gazed" (125-126) on the awful ruins, both of them seeking a response for the same desire. The maiden is also the rejected Echo, who pines away for the love of Narcissus, here the Poet. The Poet is one who, as explained in the "Preface," searches for an ideal which is the reflection of his soul, but tries to exist without human sympathy.

Hildebrand challenges the view that the Poet is punished for not responding to the Arab maiden because "the Poet did

not yet know about love in the personal sense; he had not experienced it yet and could not until he was properly prepared."<sup>19</sup> This suggestion is untenable. Narcissus, too, is only a youth when he rejects Echo, sometimes sixteen, sometimes twenty-one, and yet the gods must punish him. Like Narcissus, the Poet does not only reject the Arab maiden, the Echo of the myth, but also other maidens and youths who sigh after him.

Shelley already emphasizes the Poet's indifference in the introduction to the narrative:

Strangers have wept to hear his passionate notes,  
And virgins, as unknown he passed, have pined  
And wasted for fond love of his wild eyes. (61-63)

This is the first clear reference to the Narcissus story in the poem. Both heroes are too involved with their own beauty to respond to those whom they attract. After the Poet's vision, when he is supposedly ready for human love, the cottagers, mountaineers, infants and maidens show their devotion (254-271), but he is still unable to love them. Shelley establishes the Ovidian pattern of demonstrating the hero's self-love through his indifference to others.

The theme of the last two sections of the beginning of the Poet's journey fully develops the identity of his aspirations. The vision (149-191) is represented as an intellectual ideal: "Knowledge, and truth and virtue were her theme,"

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<sup>19</sup> Hildebrand, A Study of Alastor, p. 23.

(158) as an imaginative ideal: "wild numbers then/ She raised," and as a sensual ideal. (161-165) These three responses had all been described in the invocation. This vision is, therefore, poetically identified with the essence of the Poet's own soul described at the beginning of his journey. (67-75) It is unmistakably the 'soul within our soul' for which the Poet must find an antitype. Like Narcissus, the Poet mistakes the antitype for the prototype: his vision is but a shadow of himself.

The final section (192-222) develops the Poet's despair and his mistake in identifying the vision as the antitype and object of his search, rather than as the reflection of his soul. His "wan eyes/ Gaze on the empty scene," (200-201) but do not find the earlier inspiration because Nature cannot satisfy his soul now that he has fully experienced its desire.<sup>20</sup> Like Narcissus, he mistakes the reflected soul for the object of his search. The Poet's desire for the vision, like Narcissus' desire for his reflection, is emphasized by mirror images. His eyes that gaze on the empty scene "as ocean's moon looks on the moon in heaven," (222) are similar to Narcissus' eyes when he "lay to look deep, deeper/ Into two stars that were his eyes." (Ovid, p. 98) The deluding

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<sup>20</sup> The connection between this statement and the Christian Myth of the Fall of Man is obvious. His initial wanderings are in a kind of Eden, and now that he has eaten the apple, (vision), he has lost Paradise.

Narcissus predicament is paralleled by Shelley:

Does the bright arch of rainbow clouds,  
And pendent mountains seen in the calm lake,  
Lead only to a black and watery depth? (213-215)

Shelley's suggestion that the vision is a retributive act of the "spirit of sweet human love," corresponds to the Ovidian source in which Nemesis traps Narcissus in answer to Echo's curse.

The ideal of the vision embodies the Poet's desire, first motivating him to leave his home, and in the second half of the cycle becoming itself the conscious object of his continuing search. The Being he imagines is the 'soul within our soul' which cannot satisfy itself, but must find the antitype in the "corresponding powers of other human beings." ("Preface," p. 14)

The second part of the journey continues, in many ways parallel to the first. The Poet again wanders through old ruins, Petra's steep and Balk, as he had done in the first journey. (106-128) Again he rejects human companionship and the maidens' love. The encounter with the swan is parallel to the feeding of the wild animals. The flashing inspiration in the first part of the journey is now converted to a "desperate hope" that "sleep" and "death" contain the secret "shadowy lure." (292-294) The river voyage in the shallop can be interpreted as the crossing into the mystical world of dream, or as the escape into Nature. He finally ends in the "silent nook" (572) where Death overtakes him.

The explanation in the "Preface" is now fulfilled: "He seeks in vain for the prototype of his conception." (p. 14-15)

To this structural development Shelley adds the theme of the mistaken search for the shadow of the identified soul. The Poet is not pursuing the representative of all truth and beauty, which "it would be a crime not to pursue,"<sup>21</sup> but rather the shadow of this truth:

and silent death exposed,  
Faithless perhaps as sleep, a shadowy lure,  
With doubtful smile mocking its own strange charms.  
(293-295)

The theme of his search among the ruined cities emphasizes his fear and anguish in pursuing the "shadow of that lovely dream." (233) He becomes both the pursuer and the pursued: "Startling with careless steps.../ He fled" (236-237) because the pursued Shadow is actually "in his own deep mind." (298) He is like Narcissus in Ovid's account:

Himself the worshipped and the worshipper,  
He sought himself and was pursued. (Ovid, p. 98)

The image of the eagle, fatally bitten by the snake within its own grasp, parallels the Poet, whose own soul is now a deadly snake. (325) The depressing diction: "fiend," "green serpent," "poison," "glare," "desolate," "tombs," "decaying," "withered skin," (226-251) emphasizes the theme

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<sup>21</sup> Jones, "The Inconsistency of Shelley's Alastor," p. 295.



of fear and death.

When the Poet ignores the cottagers and maidens, the theme of the rejection of human love as the source for requiting desire is reaffirmed. The "glare of those wild eyes," (264) suggests the deceived eyes in the earlier section (200) and Narcissus' eyes. The maidens no longer 'gaze' at him, but watch him "dim through tears," (270) as Echo was doomed to watch Narcissus from afar.

The swan scene (272-295), similar to the one in which the Poet fed the animals, further develops the theme of the loss of kinship with Nature. The fleeing swan symbolizes Nature's final rejection of the Poet. Ironically the swan flees to its "sweet mate," while the Poet is alienated because he has deliberately rejected all such affiliation with his possible mates. This experience leaves him with the "desperate hope" that he will be able to see into the secrets of Death, (290-295) but as his first insight into the "thrilling secrets" (128) ended in disillusion, so this hope will result in ultimate death.

The search now takes him to the Narcissus well where,

yellow flowers  
For ever gaze on their own drooping eyes,  
Reflected in the crystal calm. (406-408)

The Poet is alienated from nature, like Thel who is not wedded as the Cloud and the Dew, and like Endymion who finds no beauty in Nature after his first vision. The trees and flowers, unlike the Poet, are closely united in wedlock,

symbolizing the ideal relationship:

These twine their tendrils with the wedded boughs  
Uniting their close union; the woven leaves  
Make net-work of the dark blue light of day.  
(444-446)

The Poet, however, like the self-isolated Narcissus, comes to the lonely "well" that "Images all the woven boughs above." (457-459) and sees his own reflection:

Hither the Poet came. His eyes beheld  
Their own wan light through the reflected lines  
Of his thin hair, distinct in the dark depth  
Of that still fountain; as the human heart  
Gazing in dreams over the gloomy grave,  
Sees its own treacherous likeness there. (469-474)

The vision is now associated with this shadow. The Poet thinks he sees the "Spirit .../ stand beside him," (479-480) but, in fact, there are only "two eyes,/ Two starry eyes." (489-490) He is by now in the clutches of his 'furies': which will mock him into following the 'shadowy lure.'

The Poet's last desperate search, (492-671) structurally linked to his wandering in nature, (81-106) demonstrates the impossibility of finding the Narcissus vision. He realizes that the universe can no longer tell him "where these living thoughts reside." (512) The imagery constantly suggests that he is pursuing a reflection, rather than an antitype. He is "Obedient to the light/ That shone within his soul," (493-494) actually the vision itself. "Following his eager soul" (311) he searches for "those beloved eyes," (332) already identified as his own. In the cave he sees the reflected Narcissus flower, whose 'drooping eyes,/ Reflected

in the crystal calm.' The light leads him down the mirror-like rivulet, taking him to the 'silent nook' where he sees the "two lessening points of light alone," (654) suggesting Narcissus' 'stars that were his eyes.'

In the description of the last moments of the Poet's life, (625-671) Shelley once more repeats the three functions of the soul in order to emphasize the mistaken reflection of the search. These functions fade as the Poet's life expires. This description is reminiscent of the beginning of the Poet's growth and thereby completes the cycle of his quest. The Poet once more "resign[s] his high and holy soul/ To images," (628-629) communicates with Nature through the senses: "place[s] / His lean hand upon the rugged trunk," "Recline[s] his langued head" "Upon an ivied stone" (632-635) and allows "the stream of thought" (644) to flow through him. The cyclical journey of the Poet links him with the archetypal hero quest, obviously employed as the unifying structure of the poem.

The conclusion recalls the sinister themes of the invocation, and the lament in the introduction. The imagery of "Medea's wondrous alchemy" and the "dream/ Of dark magician in his visioned cave, Raking the cinders of a crucible" (672-683) establishes a firm connection with the imagery in the invocation of the "desperate alchemist/ Staking his very life on some dark hope." (31-32) The repeated diction suggesting despair: "poison," "deathless wrath," "slave," "incarnate death," "decay," (676-685) implies that this

death is not a victory, but rather a mysterious loss.

After establishing these images, Shelley expresses his sympathy for the Poet, and his praise for his high spirit. The careful choice of diction, consistent with that of the introduction, emphasizes the loss and the tragedy of his death, "Frail," "pallid," "worm's outrage," "woe," and "cold tranquillity" (711-718) do not suggest unrestrained praise. Shelley's praise of the Poet as "The brave, the gentle and the beautiful,/ The child of grace and genius" does not contradict the expressed theme of the poem. Shelley admires the Poet because he has recognized and dedicated himself to those ideals which Shelley considered valuable in "On Love." On the other hand, the organic use of the Narcissus myth with its central motif of delusion is his poetic comment on the tragic death of a poet engaged in a misdirected search for truth. The wheel of the poem has come full circle, forming a consistent structural and thematic unity.

### CHAPTER III

#### KEATS'S ENDYMION: NARCISSUS METAMORPHOSIZED

Keats's Endymion introduces the genre of the Renaissance epyllion into Romantic poetry. The Book of Thel and Alastor follow some of the archetypal patterns of mythology and make significant allusions to classical myths, but unlike such poems as Venus and Adonis and Hero and Leander, they do not employ these myths as the basic source for the development of the plot. Endymion, however, like the poems of Shakespeare and Marlowe, uses a specific myth for its main narrative and includes digressions that allude to other myths: Pan, Venus and Adonis, Arethusa and Alph eus, and Glaucus. Keats follows Shakespeare's example of portraying Adonis as the shy Narcissus or Hermophraditus, by combining the story of Endymion and Cynthia with the theme of Narcissus and Echo. He had already displayed his interest in classical mythology before he wrote Endymion in "I Stood Tip-Toe," where he lists the myths of Pan, Cupid and Psyche, Narcissus, and Endymion. The emphasis in this poem is not on the myth itself, but on the process of the creation of the myth. The details of the classical myth are subordinated to the emotional experience that prompted the poet to create a particular tale. The stimulus for each myth is the poet's attempt to convey an emotional response

to nature in concrete terms. Keats explains that the poet who first told the myth of Cupid and Psyche felt as we do when we see such beauty as the "waving of the mountain pine" (128) or "bloomy grapes laughing from green attire." (136) Such an experience originally prompted the poet to create the myth:

the voice of crystal bubbles  
Charms us at once away from all our troubles:  
So that we feel uplifted from the world,  
Walking upon the white clouds wreath'd and curl'd.  
So felt he, who first told, how Psyche went  
On the smooth wind to realms of wonderment. (137-142)

These lines show that Keats understands the essence of the nature of myth as being an attempt to objectify an unexplainable subjective experience. Keats also endorses the theory that a myth is an attempt to explain a certain natural phenomenon. The "tale/ Of young Narcissus, and sad Echo's bale," (179-180) is, therefore, a poet's attempt to explain the lonely flower on the bank as well as his own emotional reaction.

This approach to myth is developed in the later poem, Endymion. The poem is a fuller exploration of the process of myth making, and the conditions that allow a poet to mythologize his experience with the beauty of nature. In his poem, "To George Felton Mathew," Keats asks why Mathew has never told how Apollo changed him "from a flower, into a fish of gold." (85) Keats, in fact, wants to know why Mathew, unlike the poets in "I Stood Tip-Toe," has not been able to create

any myths. In the preface to Endymion Keats also expresses the hope that he will be able to preserve the brightness of "the beautiful mythology of Greece." Endymion attempts to solve both problems. The hero must discover how he can be 'uplifted from the world,' so that he can mythologize his love of the beauty of the moon.

Keats's poem, like the Renaissance epyllion, introduces the theme of another myth into its main story. The story of Endymion originally told how the moon fell in love with, and finally exalted, her lover. Drayton adds the Venus and Adonis theme of the unwilling lover who is being courted by a goddess. In Keats's poem, Endymion is also in love with the moon-goddess, but he must first learn that he cannot escape his responsibility to society if he wishes to consummate his desire. This theme is borrowed from the story of Narcissus. Narcissus falls in love with his unattainable shadow as a punishment for rejecting his friends. In the first book, Endymion, Like Narcissus, rejects his people and is punished with a desire for an illusion, but, unlike Narcissus, he learns to correct his error and love the real Indian maid. He is now rewarded with the discovery that his involving experience with the human and real is also an experience with the ideal, Cynthia. He is now the poet who can respond to the beauty of nature by creating the myth.

"Book I" describes how the pastoral-king, Endymion, almost completely withdraws himself from any participation in

the elaborate festival of Pan. His sister, Peona, takes him to her bowery island to discover the reason for his sorrow and to counsel him. After a long refreshing sleep, he promises her that he will renounce his isolation and return to his former activities. He then tells her of his three encounters with the vision as an explanation of his sorrow. Every one of these encounters is associated with the myth of Narcissus by definite allusions.

The first meeting occurs after Endymion falls asleep in a bed of poppies and ditamies. He is enraptured with the rising and the setting of the moon, when a "completed form of all completeness" (I. 606) descends to him and he rises to embrace her passionately. This scene is an elaborated version of the Cynthia and Endymion myth: Endymion dreams in a nook where the river seems "like a crescent moon," (I. 544) and the ditamies and poppies, according to Lemprière, are sacred flowers of Diana, another name for Cynthia. After he awakes the "sweet dream/ Fell into nothing," (I. 677-678) and he thinks that the wind "brought/ Faint fare-thee-wells, and sigh-shrilled adieus." (I. 689-690) This allusion to the Narcissus myth recalls the sighing of Echo for the deluded Narcissus. Endymion's dream is therefore unreal, and not an actual visionary meeting with Cynthia. The emphasis, however, is not on Cynthia's unreality but on Endymion's inability to have the type of vision experienced by the poets in "I Stood Tip-Toe."



The circumstances of the dream and the description of the awakening, support this interpretation. Endymion's reaction to the breeze and the flowers before he falls asleep is similar to the reactions that stimulate the myths in "I Stood Tip-Toe":

through the dancing poppies stole  
A breeze, most softly lulling to my soul;  
And shaping visions all about my sight  
Of colours, wings, and bursts of spangly light.  
(I. 566-569)

The repetition of the "s" and "l" sounds, and the open vowels (e,o,a,e) lend a musical lilt to these phrases, drawing the reader into the experience. The dream of the moon similarly repeats this experience:

she did soar  
So passionately bright, my dazzled soul  
Commingling with her argent spheres did roll  
Through clear and cloudy, (I. 593-596)

paralleling the reaction of the poet who originally sang  
the story of Endymion:

to him bringing  
Shapes from the invisible world, unearthly singing  
From out the middle air, from flowery nests,  
And from the pillowy silkiness that rests  
Full in the speculation of the stars.  
("I Stood Tip-Toe," 185-189)

But Endymion's vision, unlike the Poet's in the earlier poem, does not produce the myth. He awakes in disillusionment and despair to a world that appears desolate rather than beautiful. The diction now emphasizes the contrast with the earlier joy. The breeze that lulled his soul before, now "Bluster'd"; the 'spangly light' of colours, is now "sooty";

the "vermeil rose had blown/ In frightful scarlet." (I. 687-697). The vision, like the vision of the poet in Alas-  
tor, has destroyed Endymion's appreciation for the beauty  
of nature:

all pleasant hues  
Of heaven and earth had faded: deepest shades  
Were deepest dungeons; heaths and sunny glades  
Were full of pestilent light. (I. 691-694)

Instead of innocence, he now finds death:

If an innocent bird  
Before my heedless footsteps stirr'd, and stirr'd  
In little journeys, I beheld in it  
A disguis'd demon, missioned to knit  
My soul with under darkness. (I. 698-702)

This seemingly attractive invitation to suicide, however,  
is an illusion and ends only with "disappointment." (I.705)  
The dream has destroyed all communication with nature in-  
stead of stimulating Endymion to mythologize the beauty.

The introduction in "Book I" establishes the opposing  
view that "A THING of beauty is a joy for ever." "Loveli-  
ness" does not fade, but "increases," and the "sleep/ Full  
of sweet dreams" does not destroy our joy in the beauty  
of the earth, but rather wreaths "A flowery band to bind  
us to the earth,/ Spite of despondence." (I. 1-8) In  
"Sleep and Poetry," Keats similarly establishes that the  
purpose of poesy is not to feed upon "the burrs,/ And  
thorns of life," but "To sooth the cares, and lift the  
thoughts of man." (244-247) Endymion's reaction to his  
dream is, therefore, a misunderstanding of the vision.

Even if the nymph is the Cynthia of "Book IV," his interpretation is, nevertheless, based on an illusion rather than vision. Lemprière says of Narcissus that he "saw his image reflected in a fountain, and became enamoured of it, thinking it to be the nymph of the place."<sup>1</sup> Endymion also thinks that he has seen 'the nymph of the place' but has, in fact, only had an hallucination that beckons him to death instead of to greater appreciation for the beauty of nature.

Peona admonishes her brother for his "poor weakness," (I. 718) and tries to teach him how to react to his fantasy. She wants him to be "rather in the trumpet's mouth," than to sigh away his life to death. (I. 731-737) She too has seen the western cloudiness pictured in silver lakes taking,

The semblance of gold rocks and bright gold sands,  
Islands, and creeks, and amber-fretted strands  
With horses prancing o'er them, palaces  
And towers of amethyst. (I. 743-746)

This fantastic reflection is similar to the reflection that Narcissus sees in the well, for Peona recognizes the folly of trying to "mount/ Into those regions." (I. 746-747) These dreams are "fitful whims of sleep" (I. 749) that could not even be captured by,

the spider's shuttle,  
Circling a million times within the space  
Of swallow's nest-door. (I. 751-753)

The dreamer must recognize the illusions of these dreams

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<sup>1</sup> Lemprière's Classical Dictionary, p. 396.

or else be led only to desperation.

Dreams themselves are not harmful if the dreamer realizes their implications. In the sleep in Peona's bower, Endymion also dreams of "golden palaces, strange minstrelsy, / Fountains grotesque," (I. 457-458) but when he wakes, he is "calm'd to life again," and opens "his eyelids with a healthier brain." (I. 464-465) Instead of rejecting his duties as he does after his vision, he determines to follow his sister's later advice:

No, I will once more raise  
My voice upon the mountain-heights; once more  
Make my horn parley from their foreheads hoar.  
(I. 477-479)

The effects of these dreams on the dreamer are determined by his reaction, and not by the dreams themselves.

Endymion's "pleasure thermometer" speech (I. 769-842) is introduced in the context of Peona's warning, and must not be interpreted by itself. The critical arguments as to whether this speech represents a Neoplatonic philosophy, or Keats's own natural Platonism, or merely a sensual approach to life are relevant<sup>2</sup> for an interpretation of the poem, but the context of this passage and its application to the hero adds a significant dimension. The first "fellowship with essence" that Endymion mentions is similar to the ex-

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<sup>2</sup> Jacob D. Wigod, "The Meaning of Endymion," PMLA, XVIII (1953), pp. 779-790.

periences described in "I Stood Tip-Toe." The "rose leaf" and the "Aeolian magic" stimulate the poet to hear prophecies and lullabies "Round every spot where trod Apollo's foot" and "In every place where infant Orpheus slept." At the "tip-top" of this type of experience sit love and friendship, with love at the top because it is more self-destroying and demands a complete "melting into its radiance." The progression is from an involvement with nature to an involvement with humanity at its most ideal level. Keats would agree entirely with this point of view. Endymion, however, continues his argument to justify a "sleep in love's elysium" and an "ardent listlessness." He then concludes that since "this earthly love has power to make/Men's being mortal, immortal," (I. 843-844) the disregard of the mortal and the devotion only to an immortal is justified. Keats would never agree. The "World" is one of the necessary materials "for the purpose of forming the Soul."<sup>3</sup> Nature and humanity are necessary for an ascent to the ideal, and can never be disregarded as irrelevant. The visionary is in a world of illusion if he tries to grasp his vision by rejecting his own mortality.

Endymion then describes his two other meetings with the nymph as a justification of his position:

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<sup>3</sup> The Letters of John Keats, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman, London, 1960, p. 335.

I'm sure,  
My restless spirit never could endure  
To brood so long upon one luxury,  
Unless it did, though fearfully, espy  
A hope beyond the shadow of a dream. (I.853-857)

The next two accounts, contrary to what he believes, prove that the object of his love is even more shadowy than one would suspect from the first dream. The second experience, (I.862-917) occurs in a "deep hollow" enclosed by leaning bushes, so that "a vulture could not glide/ Past them." At the bottom of this "cool cell" is the "crystal eye" of a well where Endymion has often picked flowers that looked,

Like vestal primroses, but dark velvet  
Edges them round, and they have golden pits.

Shirley had similarly described the narcissus as having "Saffron-colour'd rayes" in his poem. (Stanza 121) Endymion's picking of these flowers alludes to the Greek association of the narcissus with the Persephone myth in the "Hymn to Demeter" written in the Seventh Century, B.C. According to this version, Pluto prepares the flower for Persephone, "t', en-  
snare the virgin's thoughtless mind,/ And please the ruler of the shades."<sup>4</sup> Endymion, like Persephone and Narcissus, is in danger of being carried to the underworld in this setting.

The setting recalls the grove where Narcissus saw his reflection in the well:

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<sup>4</sup> "Hymn to Demeter," The Greek Poets, trans. Moses Hadas, New York, 1953, p.117.

A Spring there was, whose siluer Waters were,  
As smooth as any mirror, nor lesse cleare:  
Which neither Heards-men, tame, nor saluage Beast,  
Nor wandring Fowle, nor scattered leaues molest;  
Girt round with grasse, by neighbouring moysture  
And Woods, against the Sunnes invasion spread.<sup>5</sup>

Endymion, like the Ovidian lover, is playing in the well  
when he sees,

A wonder, fair as any I have told --  
the same bright face I tasted in my sleep,  
smiling in the clear well. My heart did leap  
Through the cool depth. (I. 894-897)

This wonder had been told many times before, and his reaction  
follows the well-known pattern:

such a breathless honey-feel of bliss  
Alone preserved me from the drear abyss  
Of death, for the fair form had gone again.  
(I. 903-905)

The introduction of the Narcissus myth into Endymion's  
story represents Keats's comment on Endymion's assertion that  
he is not being lured by "the shadow of a dream." (I. 857)

The last enchantment appears in the groto of Persephone,  
(I. 918-989) or the "cell of Echo." The double allusion to  
both Cynthia and Persephone combines the two myths since  
Persephone is the underworld manifestation of Cynthia, but  
Endymion's wandering into her cave also alludes to Narcissus'  
crossing of the Styx after his death. The babbling Echo re-  
fers to the Echo who is sighing after a Narcissus, now con-

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<sup>5</sup> George Sandys, trans., Ovid's Metamorphosis Englished,  
Mythologiz'd And Represented in Figures, Oxford 1632, p. 90.

sumed "in unseen fire."<sup>6</sup> He sues for her help, not realizing that he is like her lover whose death she laments. He follows the unidentified voice into the cave, but does not explain what he saw. The implication may be that he is following his illusion to the realm of Hades like Narcissus, who disappears from the grave to gaze eternally "Upon the waters of the infernall Styx."<sup>7</sup> He decides, as a result of his last meeting, to bear up against death with "demurest meditation," and fashion his "pilgrimage for the world's dusky brink." (I. 975-977) This brink is the "deadly-dark-some region" that Ulysses visits in The Odyssey:<sup>8</sup> the homes of Pluto and Persephone.

Endymion's quest deteriorates systematically from the first time that he sees the descending nymph. His desire for the highest happiness of immortal love has led him down the classical hierarchy from Cynthia to Diana and finally to Persephone. He has not found joy, but only despair, resigning himself finally to death. Like the poet's quest in Alastor, Endymion's vision in "Book I" is an illusion that "Fell into nothing" (I. 678) and leads only to death.

Keats, however, finds a solution to this predicament

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<sup>6</sup> Sandys, trans., Ovid's Metamorphosis, p. 92.

<sup>7</sup> Sandys, trans., Ovid's Metamorphosis, p. 92.

<sup>8</sup> George Chapman, trans., Homer's Odyssey, Vol I, London, 1874, XI. p. 198.



in the last three books. Endymion's descent begins his salvation from illusion. Unlike Thel, who flees from her grave, Endymion follows the voice from the caverns and receives the prophecies. The development in the next three books is a gradual change from the type of vision that he sees in "Book I," to a poetic experience that involves him more and more in both the natural world and in humanity. As he rejects his desire for other worldly essences, he learns the powers of the poet who can create the myth from his experience with beauty.

In "Book II," Endymion follows a butterfly to a fountain where the butterfly changes to a nymph and tells him that he must wander far in the regions of the underworld. He meets the sleeping Adonis and Venus in the underground caverns, preparing to reascend into the springtime world. Cupid tells him the story of their love, and Venus tells him that he will one day be blessed with the love of the fair immortal. The earth then closes before him, and he continues to wander through caves and palaces. An eagle carries him to a bower, where he dreams that he meets the human form of Cynthia, who promises that she will soon exalt him to join her. He awakens and imagines that he hears Alpheus pursuing the coy Arethusa. In "Book III," Endymion continues his journey beneath the sea where he frees Glaucus from his curse by helping him to resurrect the drowned passengers. Venus again encourages him, and Cynthia's voice tells him that he is now ready to join her in

heaven.

In "Book IV," Endymion finally learns the distinction between the illusion and the true object of his quest: he meets the Indian maid and accepts her love. Two steeds take them for a ride onto a cloud in the sky, where Endymion goes to sleep and dreams that he meets Diana. After struggling between his love for Diana and his love for the maid, he accepts the sleeper by his side, but when they return from the cloud, the rising moon enraptures him once again, and the maiden beside him disappears. In the Cave of quietude he falls asleep while Diana prepares for the coming wedding feast. He awakens in despair and rejects his desire for his vision, and pledges himself to the Indian instead, but she informs him that she may not be his love. When he returns home he is surprised to meet Peona with the girl. Endymion pledges himself to his earthly responsibilities of ruling the shepherd realm, and the Indian maid now accepts him. Endymion and Peona watch in amazement as she changes into Cynthia. The united couple kiss Peona farewell and vanish. Peona goes "Home through the gloomy wood in wonderment."

The theme of the last three books shifts from portraying Endymion as Narcissus who sees his shadow in "Book I," to portraying him as the hero who gradually learns the true nature of the desired essence, and becomes worthy of possessing it by descending into the underworld. In "Book II," Endymion's experience at the fountain guides him to the real

Cynthia for the first time. The butterfly that leads him to this fountain is born out of a wild rose that he picks and dips into the water. This butterfly, unlike his earlier visions, is not an illusion, but is a product of Endymion's appreciation for the rose. These circumstances recall the first part of the "pleasure thermometer" speech in which the rose leaf around the finger stimulates the happiness in the music of the wind. The water nymph could be a combination of the goddess who tells Ulysses how to enter the realm of the dead, and the nymphs who mourn Narcissus' death.

Endymion is still the Narcissus at the well and must learn the dangers of isolation and self-love. He is the "Brain-sick shepherd prince," (II. 43) "wandering in uncertain ways." (II. 48) The fountain, like the Narcissus well, is in "solitary glen,/ Where there was never sound of mortal men." (II. 77-78) After hearing the nymph he is still in despair, thinking that there is nothing earthly worth his compassing (II. 161-162), but he nevertheless follows her voice into the cavern even though he would rather be with "the soft shadow" of his "thrice-seen love." (II. 168) In the cavern, "thoughts of self" and the "deadly feel of solitude" (II. 275-284) again "surcharge'd him with grief" because he cannot see anything of nature's beauty. (II. 285-293) Endymion, now at the nadir of his quest, experiences the sorrow of the dying Narcissus. But Endymion rejects his own isolation and follows the echoing voice "back into the temple's chief," (II. 298)

where he meets Venus and Adonis. The struggle is not resolved, but Endymion has at least entered 'The vale of Soul-making' that will lead him to an ultimate integration with the true ideal.

Endymion's encounter with Adonis and Venus is the beginning of his sympathy for other lovers and a development of his experience of myth which began when he picked the rose. In "Book I," Endymion, like Narcissus, had rejected his friends but now progresses towards reintegration. Cupid's explanation emphasizes Adonis' immortality as part of the cyclic death and rebirth of nature. The myth emphasizes the unity between nature and the gods as a guide to Endymion's own aspirations.

Cynthia now comes to Endymion in his sleep as the traditional version of the myth dictates. There are no indications in "Book II" that this meeting is an illusion. The Echo of the Narcissus myth, Cynthia, now replaces the shadow in the well as Endymion learns the value of human sympathy. Keats interrupts the narrative "For the mere sake of truth," (II.829) in order to explain that Endymion's dream is an old myth:

'twas told  
By a cavern wind unto a forest old;  
And then the forest told it in a dream  
To a sleeping lake, whose cool and level gleam  
A poet caught as he was journeying  
To Phoebus' shrine;...

...  
He sang the story up into the air,  
Giving it universal freedom. (II. 830-839)

Endymion is now personally involved in the type of myth-making that Keats describes in "I Stood Tip-Toe."

'golden fruit' that he must lift to heaven. The other meetings with Cynthia must still teach him that she, too, is part of the 'muddy lees,' and that only the union of the earth with the tree can actually produce the desired fruit.

In spite of this mistake, Endymion has progressed far enough to enable him to participate in the aesthetic creation of the Alpheus and Arethusa myth from his relationship with nature. The kinship with nature displaced by the illusions is now revived. He imagines the dialogue while hearing the echoing from the shells<sup>11</sup> just as the poet imagined the Endymion myth while hearing the cavern wind in the forest. (II. 837-853) From this poetic participation with nature he must now advance to a similar identification with humanity that will culminate in his love for the Indian maid.

The significance of the Glaucus myth has been excellently interpreted by Evert as a "return to human sympathy ... by means of the concrete illustrative precept embodied in the figure and story of the ancient Glaucus."<sup>12</sup> Through his action, Endymion becomes the "new born god," (III. 808) who can raise dead lovers from their death. He has also won "immortal bliss" (III. 1024) for Cynthia, not because his

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<sup>11</sup> Evert, Aesthetic and Myth, p.134.

<sup>12</sup> Evert, Aesthetic and Myth, p.140.

act has raised her to immortality, but because his identification with humanity has immortalized his desire for the ideal.

In "Book IV," Endymion learns to distinguish between his shadowy visions of the first book, and learns that his love for the human maiden is, in fact, the same as love for an immortal. The complications of the plot follow Endymion's indecision between his attraction for the shadowy visions and his love for the Indian maiden:

For both, for both my love is so immense,  
I feel my heart is cut for them in twain. (IV. 96-97)

He no longer desires to isolate himself from humanity, but he must still free himself from the lure of the shadow in the well.

The Indian had already appeared to him in his sleep in the second book, although Endymion was unable to distinguish between her and his illusion at that time. She now comes to him in human form in order to challenge his love for the imaginary nymph. Her role recalls Peona's attempts in "Book I" to persuade him that he is sacrificing his "honour.../ For nothing but a dream," (I. 759-760) and to encourage him to abandon his search and return to the festival. When Endymion returns home, the Indian maiden and Peona welcome him and initiate him into his new role.

Endymion's love for the girl drives away the illusionary shadow which had attracted him in "Book I." The voice inter--





The maid returns, but tells him somewhat harshly that she must refuse his love:

I may not be thy love: I am forbidden--  
Indeed I am - thwarted, affrighted, chidden,  
By things I trembled at, and gorgon wrath.  
Twice hast thou ask'd whither I went: henceforth  
Ask me no more! (IV. 752-756)

Her statement that he has asked for her twice refers to his search for the maid who appeared to him in his dream in "Book II," (III. 1011) and for the Indian maid, (IV. 632) thus identifying the two times that the real vision appeared to him.

Endymion declares his determination to resume his responsibility for his realm, and thereby becomes worthy of possessing the maid. His political solution to govern through his sister is not a rejection of his responsibility as king, but an amalgamation of both his human and spiritual aspirations. His final desire to command the fate of the trio releases the Indian's reservation, and Endymion beholds her metamorphosis into his passion, Phoebe. The abrupt conclusion suggests that Endymion himself is creating this consummating myth as a triumphant assertion of his poetic power to immortalize his love for physical beauty.

Keats has, therefore, successfully solved the problem of determining what conditions constitute the highest happiness. He does not reject visions as merely illusions, nor the desire for the ideal as mere self-centeredness, but he insists that such a quest is a negation if the searcher

rejects his human and natural bonds. The highest value is not in a poetic isolation, but in an imaginative concern for human responsibility. Keats introduces the Narcissus myth to show how Endymion is misguided by the shadowy reflection of his illusion, but then solves the hero's dilemma by asserting his own faith in the immortality of the "poetry of the earth."

## CONCLUSION

Each of the three poems by Blake, Shelley and Keats uses a clear allusion to the Narcissus myth in order to establish the identity of the protagonist and the nature of his quest. Thel is concretely associated with the Ovidian story in two brief similes that compare her to 'a reflection in a glass' and 'shadows in the water.' Neither of these images alludes to Narcissus himself, but rather to his reflection or shadow in the water. The intricate network of the imagery emphasizes Thel's evanescent characteristic. Unlike the Lilly, the Cloud and the Worm, who pass 'to tenfold life,' she fades into nothing like a shadow and remains the unproductive lamenting voice of Echo. Blake has actually unified Narcissus, his shadow and Echo into one role by characterizing Thel as self-love, as a fading unproductive voice, and as a shadow of reality. The other symbols in the poem represent her opposites who attempt to lead her to acceptance of her Spectre in the grave, so that she can discard her selfhood and be reborn like a seed through a new unity.

Of the three poems, Alastor relies most faithfully and most extensively on the Ovidian source for its imagery. The clearest allusion to the Narcissus myth in the poem is an almost exact paraphrase of Ovid:

His eyes beheld  
Their own wan light through the reflected lines

Of his thin hair, distinct in the dark depth  
Of that still fountain. (469-472)

This is the only allusion in the three poems that describes Narcissus as seeing himself in the well. The adjectives 'wan,' 'thin,' and 'dark' add a Romantic quality to this classical allusion. Shelley's further comment supports his emphasis:

as the human heart,  
Gazing in dreams over the gloomy grave,  
Sees its own treacherous likeness there. (472-474)

The clarity of this allusion to Narcissus, who sees himself in the well, helps to establish the source of the numerous allusions to reflected eyes, echoes, wells, mirrors, pools, shadows and flowers. The myth of Narcissus is certainly the most significant analogue of this poem, especially when related to the nature of the Poet's quest.

In Endymion, as in Alastor, the hero sees the reflection in an isolated grove with a well that reflects the trees and clouds. The reflection that Endymion sees in this well, however, is not identified with his own shadow as in Ovid, but rather as a nymph:

The same bright clear face I tasted in my sleep,  
Smiling in the clear well. My heart did leap  
Through the cool depth. (I. 895-897)

The allusion is still to the Narcissus myth, but Keats is following such authors as Pausanias, who argues that Narcissus did not actually see his own reflection, but a nymph. The Ovidian Narcissus also thinks that he sees a maiden but recog-

nizes his reflection before he dies. Keats does not explicitly allow Endymion to recognize himself, although the hero does complain in "Book IV" that he has 'clung/ To nothing.' (636-637) Endymion also recognizes that his first vision was a shadow although not necessarily his own. This nuance, however, is still within the traditional interpretations of the Narcissus myth as found in the English translators and poets. Keats is relying more on the Renaissance popularizers while Shelley is truer to the classical Ovidian version.

The three poems, like Ovid's story, all associate the death-wish with the allusion to the reflection in the well. Thel desires only to lie down and "sleep the sleep of death." (I.13) The Poet in Alastor is not "Forgetful of the grave, where.../ He must descend." (520-522) He is the only one of the three who actually does fade away to death after seeing the image of himself. Thel returns to her former state, and Endymion progresses to a new realm with the realized vision. When Endymion sees the reflection, his heart actually does leap into the 'cool depth' and he only narrowly escapes the physical fact of death:

such a honey-feel of bliss  
Alone preserved me from the drear abyss  
Of death, for the fair form had gone again.  
(I.903-905)

Thel wants to die because she feels that she is fading away and is of no further use. The Poet, as in Ovid, is in despair because he cannot satisfy his passion for his image in the well.

This association of the reflection with love, despair and death is again truest to the Ovidian source. Endymion is only preserved from jumping into the abyss at the last moment. His feeling of bliss, however, is Keats's innovation, and the desire to jump into the water is borrowed from Shakespeare's allusion in Venus and Adonis where Narcissus is described as drowning to join his shadow in the brook. Endymion escapes death, but only after recognizing that the shadow is nothing and by responding to the love of the Indian maiden who represents Echo.

The narrative structure of Alastor, unlike the other two poems, is at least generally similar to the original story of Narcissus, although Shelley is even less concerned with retelling the myth than Edwards and Shirley are. Blake's poem, as we have seen, is the most original because he is re-interpreting the myth in terms of his own imaginative concepts and metaphors. Keats uses the story of Cynthia and Endymion for his basic plot, introducing the Narcissus and other myths into this frame in the manner of the Renaissance epyllion. The Poet, in Alastor, like Narcissus, leaves his friends and rejects the Arab maiden, but he then first sees the vision in his sleep before coming to the well where he also sees his shadow and associates it with his dream. This dream may have been borrowed from the Endymion myth in which Cynthia appears to her lover while he is asleep. The hero in Keats's poem also leaves his sister and friends before his dream. Keats is

obviously using the myth as his source, although Shelley may have influenced him. Both heroes are sleeping when the lady appears to them and both embrace her passionately, although Keats is more specific in his description of her physical features. There are, however, no obvious verbal echoes in the two accounts. The Poet dreams that she is sitting beside him veiled, while Endymion dreams that she descends to him from the sky "in naked comeliness." (I. 615) After seeing the vision, both heroes, as in Ovid's story, see the reflection in the well, and the Poet in Alastor dies like Narcissus in the isolated grove.

Both Shelley and Keats introduce the long Romantic quest which is not found either in the myth of Endymion or Narcissus. Thel, too, goes on a quest, but not for a previously glimpsed apparition: she is searching for a solution to her fading identity. The disillusionment and loss of kinship with nature that the three heroes experience during the search is an extension of Narcissus' complete self-isolation and fatal devotion to his passion for the reflection. Both Endymion and the Poet found their source of joy in a harmony with nature and friends but experienced a Wordsworthian disillusionment and loss of kinship after the illusion appears to them. In The Book of Thel the Cloud and the Dew are "linked in a golden band" (II. 15) but Thel cannot identify herself with any of the symbols of nature. Shelley also uses similar marriage imagery to contrast with the Poet's isolation. The tendrils

'twine' together and the boughs are 'wedded.../ Uniting their close union.' After Endymion responds to the descending form, he, too, feels that he has been unfaithful to Diana, who symbolizes his response to nature. His appreciation grows again only when he turns to the human maid who, in the resolution, unites his love for her and his love for the beauty of nature.

The Arab maiden in Alastor and the Indian maiden in Endymion represent the same principle in the two poems, even though there is no evidence that Keats was consciously writing his poem as an answer or complement to Shelley's. In Alastor she is the rejected Echo. The Poet, like Narcissus, perishes because he is unable to respond to anything beyond his own reflection. In Endymion she is the Echo who pines after the lovely youth. Endymion, who was captured by his illusion, however, can respond to her because he has learned the value of human sympathy. The Arab girl in Alastor is very coy and comes to the Poet only in his sleep in contrast to the voluptuous and aggressive counterpart in Endymion. Both of these characterizations are consistent with the Ovidian poems where Echo is portrayed both as shy and withdrawn or as the aggressive wooer. Blake's Thel is even more withdrawn than Shelley's maiden. She is not even rejected by a Narcissus, but completely unable to unite with a male counterpart who will deliver her from her state of Non Entity. Her Narcissus could be the voice in the grave who would rescue her from fading



like Echo. Thel, however, is both the unfulfilled virgin and the narcissistic lover.

Thel's and Endymion's quests take them to a mythic underworld where they are given the secret knowledge that can redeem them from their predicament. Thel descends to the underworld of The Aeneid where she meets "Dolours & lamentations" (IV. 7) and a voice from her own grave plot. Unlike Aeneas, she does not stay for the vision and flees back unborn. Endymion, as contrasted to Thel, descends to a place of rebirth where the dead Adonis is again preparing to ascend to the upper world to herald the Spring with Venus. He also descends to the world under the sea where his experience with Glaucus teaches him the necessity of involvement with humanity and transforms him into a god. The completion of this descent initiates him into his new role of epic hero, so that he can now reascend to complete his ultimate unification with the goddess. The Poet in Alastor, in contrast to Thel and Endymion, does not even qualify as the hero who is given the secrets that will lead him through the gates of Hades. His boat trip over the sea and his travels through the caverns leads him up to the mountain cliffs instead of underground. Like Narcissus, he finds no solution for his attraction to the shadow and must therefore perish in his isolation.

Thel, Alastor and Endymion include numerous transformations elaborating the suggestion at the end of the story of

Narcissus that he was changed into a flower after his death. All three poems contain some significant flower imagery recalling the narcissus. Thel's most significant transformation is suggested by her recurring complaint that she is fading into nothing. This gradual fading does not follow the Ovidian pattern because she does not change from one state of nature into another as Narcissus, for example, does. Blake, however, introduces Ovid's theme of eternal recurrence in two other patterns of imagery that are closely associated with Thel. Her self-portrayal as a flower, a cloud and a worm is potentially Ovidian but does not develop beyond the imaginative suggestion of the similes. These allusions to Ovid emphasize that Thel is involved in the eternal cycle of nature. The Lilly, the Cloud and the Worm, in contrast to Thel, complete a transformation on an imaginative level. Each of them passes into endless life by figuratively changing their form. The Lilly is eaten by the lamb, the Cloud becomes food for all the flowers, and the Worm becomes an infant "wrapped in the Lilly's leaf." (III. 3) This pattern comments on the potential result of Thel's descent to her grave if she could accept the necessary change and loss of identity.

Shelley's poem is the most explicit in its allusions to the ending of the Narcissus myth. He includes the narcissus in his description of the well:

yellow flowers  
For ever gaze on their own drooping eyes,  
Reflected in the crystal calm. (406-408)

When the Poet dies, Shelley desires another kind of metamorphosis that will change the dead body into a flower as in the original myth:

O, for Medea's wondrous alchemy,  
Which wheresoe'er it fell made the earth gleam  
With bright flowers, and the wintry boughs exhale  
From vernal blooms fresh fragrance! (672-675)

Shelley again repeats his request by desiring the fulfilment of the alchemist's dream, who searches for "life and power." (684) These desires are not granted, but the Poet is at least involved in a poetic transformation and "shall live alone/ In the frail pauses of this simple strain." (705-706) Shelley wishes that the Poet would be like Narcissus, who changes into a flower, but finds that he must be satisfied with the life that the dead hero will have in his lines. This resolution is the first step towards the resolution of the pastoral elegy that Shelley will master in Adonais.

There are numerous Metamorphoses in Endymion but none of them follow the example of the Narcissus myth. Keats's transformations follow the pattern of the dream and the fairy-tale. In a dream as in the fairy-tale, anything can become anything else without any necessary pattern. In the fairy-tale the hero or heroine is frequently changed from an ugly orphan or peasant to the beautiful princess or prince. The classical counterpart of this type, also found in Ovid, is

the elevation of a mortal into an immortal: the myths of Endymion, Adonis, and Psyche. In his first dream, Endymion imagines that he sees the moon change into a woman and descend to him. (I. 590ff.) This change, however, occurs only in his imagination. In the episode where Endymion revives the drowned, he scatters his magic charms, as Shelley hopes that Medea will do for his dead poet, and they lift up their head "As doth a flower at Apollo's touch." (III. 786) When he meets the Indian maiden, she again disappears in dream-like fashion and he is left kissing his own hand. Endymion, however, again becomes worthy of her as he is exalted from a mortal to a god. When this process is complete, the Indian maiden also throws off her disguise and changes from mortality to the goddess Phoebe. Endymion has now won immortality. These recurring transformations demonstrate Keats's belief that the beauty of nature is 'a joy for ever.' Endymion is threatened with death only when he desires to escape the beauty of nature, humanity, friendship and love.

Each of the three poets uses the Narcissus myth according to his own individualistic taste, guided by poetic inspiration. Blake emphasizes the theme of selfhood, but uses the Narcissus myth primarily as a basis for his own original reinterpretation. Shelley follows the pattern of the original version, adding primarily the introduction and the hero's quest, and reinterpreting the myth from a Romantic point of view. Keats

relies heavily on Renaissance masters who freely retell the myth and add whatever other myths or digressions they think will enhance the narrative. His style is therefore looser and more encumbered by numerous twists in the narrative, as compared to the polished and unified poems by Blake and Shelley. All three of the poets, however, treat the myth as if it is truly their own. The myth no longer needs to be justified, moralized or englished.

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