

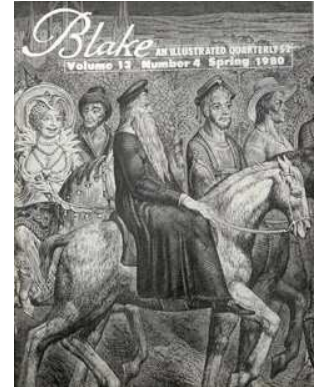
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

N E W S

The Mental Traveller, presented by Theatre of Man

Misha Berson, Charles Pelton

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 13, Issue 4, Spring 1980, pp. 205-206



NEWSLETTER

MLA SEMINAR

W. J. T. Mitchell was discussion leader of the special session on Blake at the annual MLA meeting in San Francisco this past December. He reports:

The basic idea of this year's seminar was to explore Blake's ideas about language, with particular emphasis on his notions of writing, both as a material craft and as a symbolic activity. A secondary purpose was to bring Blake's thought into contact with post-structuralist theories of language, particularly Jacques Derrida's concept of "writing" in the extended sense (mental writing, pictograms, ideograms, imprints, tracks, traces, and "marks"). Peggy Meyer Sherry of the German Department at Princeton seemed most explicitly indebted to the Derridean vocabulary, discussing the metaphors of the human body as writing surface and as alphabetic form in *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, and showing by references to Blake's Notebook, how and why the pictorial figures in *Visions* embody calligraphic forms. Stephen Behrendt of the English Department at Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania, discussed Blake's notion of a language of art (primarily pictorial) in terms of the problematic notions of original and copy, and in relations to the revisions in Blake's series of pictures on the theme of the "Plague." Nelson Hilton of the English Department at the University of Georgia enriched our sense of "Blake's Polysemous Words" with a series of meditations on key word clusters (e.g. vale, veil, vile, evil) that are the focus of Blake's phonetic and typographic playfulness. Hilton's presentation included a textual emendation to *Jerusalem* (worship/warship) that David Erdman promises to include in the new revised edition. David Herrstrom of Roosevelt, New Jersey, presented what he called a "literal" account of Blake's ideas on writing, stressing Blake's concern with the material signifier (calligraphic or pictorial) in the context of his understanding of the incarnation. Herrstrom illustrated his presentation with a close analysis of verbal and pictorial symbolism in the Laocöon engraving. Finally, Ronald Paulson of the Yale English Department stepped outside the circle of Blake studies to bring us news of other Romantic poet-painters who were concerned with problems in language and writing. Paulson's presentation focused on the way emblems, marks, "graffitti," and other verbal elaborations (titles, accompanying poems) tend to suppress meaning in the work of landscape artists like Turner and Constable, in contrast to the augmenting and disseminating power of verbal-pictorial interactions in Blake.

It will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the genre of reportage on MLA Seminars that the session this year was a stunning success. All

questions were discussed fully, and with the most rigorous respect for logic and rules of evidence, all the basic problems were solved, and all had a chance to speak their minds. The only sour note occurred when the participants rejected the Discussion Leader's proposal to conclude with a rousing chorus of "And did those feet. . . ."

W. J. T. MITCHELL, DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO.

ROMANTICISM IN HOUSTON

During 25-28 February 1981 the University of Houston will sponsor its third humanities and fine arts symposium, which on this occasion has the theme: *English and German Romanticism: Cross-Currents and Controversies*. Topics under consideration for the symposium include: German Romanticism and English Literature; The Spirit of Place in English and German Romanticism; German Idealism and British Empiricism: Romantic Philosophy in Germany and England; The Goslar Year: Wordsworth and Coleridge in Germany; The "Other" Genres; The Romantic Novel and the Romantic Drama; Romanticism: Revolution or Evolution?; Dark Romanticism; National Views of History in the Romantic Period; The Political Dimensions of the Romantic Period; The Woman Artist in the Romantic Period; German "Classical" Writers as "European" Romanticists (Goethe, Schiller, Kleist, Holderlin); Romanticism and the Napoleonic Wars.

Papers on these topics and proposals for other topics in the area of English and German should be sent to Professor Theodore Gish, Department of German, or Professor James Pipkin, Department of English, at the University of Houston, Houston, Texas 77004 by 15 October 1980.

THE MENTAL TRAVELLER

The Mental Traveller by William Blake, presented by Theatre of Man at the Performance Space, 1350 Waller St., Sat. and Sun. Feb. 9 and 10, 1980.

I was very curious to see what director Fred Curchack would do with his theatrical version of the William Blake poem, *The Mental Traveller*, an extremely enigmatic and haunting poem about a psychic journey through the unending human cycle of birth, infancy, love, death, rebirth. Throughout runs the recurrent theme of the sexual struggle between women and men and how sexuality both infantilizes and empowers us.

Curchack seems aware of the potent possibilities of this poem and its relation to modern psychological concerns about androgyny, sexual roles, etc. The problem with the piece for me was that instead of giving us his own meditations on this metaphysical fable, he offers us a heavy handed Show and Tell.

First, Curchack recites the poem, then he recites it as a man and a woman "act it out" for us behind round egg-like scrimms, and finally all three performers act it out again with variations. I enjoyed the recitation, I found some of the first shadow images--

clearly meant to be archetypal--captivating, and then I lost interest, because the work simply never went anywhere. It stayed literal--earnest, obvious images presented to us as Big Truths. The actors sweat and groan to demonstrate sexual passion, they double over to show us they're old, they arm wrestle to let us know there is a power struggle.

There's nothing demonic about all this, it simply lacked innovation and relied instead on conveying familiar images via a kind of intense athleticism. Perhaps because he didn't want to violate the poem, Curchack missed an opportunity to truly expand and explore it, winding up instead with something vaguely analogous to a Classic Comics version of Blake. I'm sorry that Curchack's considerable imaginative theatrical gifts--effectively demonstrated in other pieces--didn't take him farther along on his travels with the visionary poet.

MISHA BERSON

Reprinted from *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*,
31 January 1980.

The Theatre of Man is currently offering *The Mental Traveller*, based on the William Blake poem of the same name. The poem is written in a spare, balladic form. It is one of the bleakest and most dismal visions of fallen existence. A baby boy is born "in dire woe" and given to an old woman "Who nails him down upon a rock . . . [and] lives upon his shrieks and cries." Meanwhile, "she grows young as he grows old." He fades to "an aged shadow" while she grows younger. The cyclical struggle repeats in the opposite direction, with the "Female Babe" growing older and the "Poor Man" younger. Only as they pass each other in age can love and sex be possible.

Adapted by Fred Curchack and heavily influenced by the techniques of physical theater, *The Mental Traveller* cleverly utilizes a large revolving mobile, from which dangle two life-size see-through screens. Excellent lighting, eerie, primitive instruments and long enveloping shrouds grace the dance-like movements of the woman (Laura Jorgensen), the man (James Bryant), and the traveller (Curchack). After two early and powerful readings of the poem--one acted, the other in darkness--the audience is hurled, without dialogue, through the agony and wonder of solitude, rape, birth, narcissism, self-destruction, sensuality, creation, revenge and eroticism.

Curchack's traveller at times merely creates and observes. At other times he participates in the countless permutations of relationships. He is alternately accepted and rejected by the two who "Wander in terror and dismay . . . On the desert wild." However, Curchack's world becomes too personal, focusing primarily on sexuality and interpersonal dynamics, leaving much of Blake's mythic insight only half-explored.

CHARLES PELTON

Reprinted from *City Arts*, February 1980, San Francisco.

