

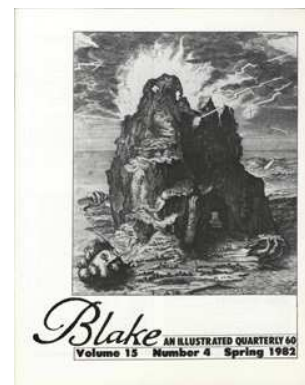
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R E V I E W

Margaret Bottrall, A Lecture on William Blake's
Songs of Innocence and [of] Experience

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Margaret Bottrall. "A Lecture on William Blake's **Songs of Innocence and Experience**" (sic), The Critical Forum. London: Norwich Tapes, Ltd., 1978.

Reviewed by Paul Mann

It is hard for me to believe that this could be an idea whose time has come. In two taped lectures of about forty-five minutes each, a British schoolmarm with a good BBC Third Programme accent leads us on a docent tour of the *Songs Of Innocence and Of Experience*. Along the way she offers us a little history, a little biography, some judicious glosses from other works by Blake, and a glimpse of the Major Themes: Energy, Imagination, Contraries, Apocalypse, Revolution, Rationality, Priestcraft--all described clearly, succinctly and soberly. The tape is, in effect, a kind of low-tech *Cliff Notes*.

This is not to say that it is without merit. As an introduction, one can hardly fault it. Professor Bottrall is an epitome of Anglo-American critical common-sense, and she covers an impressive amount of territory. She sees Blake's work in his career and his career in his century. She deals fairly effectively with relationships between text and illustrations. She knows about textual alterations in copies of the *Songs*. She is skeptical of reading Blake as a doctrinal mystic. She keeps it simple, but not at the expense of irony and enigma. And she only occasionally lapses into sententiousness, as when she claims that "Blake restores to us our lost innocence. . . . Art can make good that loss, but life cannot"; or when she gently dismisses the later work because Blake's "schemes are too arbitrary, his nomenclature too individualistic, ever to commend his reading of superhuman nature to the generality of men." One wishes, at such

moments, that she were on hand, so that one could ask a pointed question about generality, or remind her that Blake was not interested in that which could be made explicit to an idiot.

The problem is not really with Professor Bottrall's interpretations, which are good enough for an introduction. Indeed, the perspectives she maps out are probably much the same as those with which many of Blake's most sophisticated readers began. The problem is rather one of medium, of appropriate form, of pedagogical viability. How are students to listen to this? With their hands folded on their desks? Certainly, slides of the relevant plates could be shown with the lecture, but would that be enough? The tape is designed to be heard by high school and beginning college students, but it is really for teachers who have to teach Blake but feel they know little or nothing about him. Professor Bottrall serves them, as a guest lecturer or substitute teacher.

If teachers believe they need this tape, they should listen to it at home and work out some positions on the *Songs* for themselves. But no student should be forced to endure it. Professor Bottrall wants to interest students in Blake, but to do that you need to involve them in an active encounter with the texts, to interrogate them and be prepared for their questions. You should not just point out and explain details, but show a slide and get the students to discover for themselves significant pictorial and textual details. You should not tell them that the language of the *Songs* is simple and musical, but get them to recite the *Songs* until they experience at least something of their simplicity and music. You should not tell them that the nomenclature of the later work is complex and formidable, but encourage them to explore, say, "Tirzah," in a kind of paranomastic free association until at least some of the name's allusions are clearly experienced. I find it hard to believe that, in a tape-and-slide show of the *Songs*, students would be likely to profit from or retain much of Professor Bottrall's short course; it would, I suspect, be the fiery images of the plates themselves into which the students would be drawn. And it is that attraction which should be encouraged and developed.

