

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY

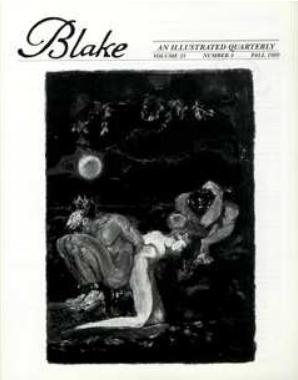
# BLAKE

R E V I E W

William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,  
performed by DIY Theatre

Michael Grenfell

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there, here, *fort/da*" (357). Certainly the picture goes away from us, destricturing, deferring itself in "the logic of stricture, in the interlacing of *différance* of (or as) stricture" (340) but it also comes back, stricturing itself into the would-be fullness of representation: "What we know is that every step (discursive or pictural in particular) implies a *fort/da*. Every relation to a pictural text implies this double movement doubly interlaced to itself. It is a kind of *fort/da* that is described by the circuit of the lace" (357).

This seems to be a little different from the emphasis Derrida's works are sometimes, mistakenly, given. If, simultaneously, with destricturing there is a "determined (structured) form of stricture" then it is clearly one to which attention must be paid and to which "the whole path of thought, for Heidegger, leads back, by a dis-tancing, to a *Da* (thus the *Da* of *Sein*) which is not merely close, but whose proximity lets the distance of the *fort* play within it" (357). The word "proximity" is important and Derrida isolates this word as something wanting in Heidegger's discussion: "No doubt he mis-recognized the necessity of the argumentation, the lac-ing movement of its coming and going and the abyss of its *fort/da*" (358). After these discussions (and one now sees that the truth in painting is something I cannot give you) we are left with (remaindered with) logic and stric-tured play: "*There is* painting, writing, restitutions, that's all. Who among you knows Van Gogh? Does any-one here know Heidegger? Goldstein? Shapiro? This square—" (371). When we look at a picture all we can bet on is that we *are* going to bet on it:

All these shoes remain there, in a sale, so you can compare them, pair them up, unpair them, bet or not bet on the pair. The trap is the inevitability of betting. The logic of the disparate. You can also try to buy the trap and take it home, as a tribute, or the way you think you're taking something away on the soles of the painted shoes. All these shoes remain there—for he painted so many. . . . (381)

Pocket up Blake how we may, something will remain: "It gives to be rendered. To be put back on/put off. —It's just gone. —It's coming round again. —It's just gone again" (382). *Fort/da*.

In deconstruction there is no *lack* of referentiality but, rather, an *excess*: "Enough! or Too much" (MHH 10; E 38). It will be interesting to see the emergence of deconstructive analyses of painting for which *The Truth in Painting* will be to art historians what *Of Grammatology* and *The Post Cart* have been to literary critics.

**William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell***

**DIY Theatre,  
Rosemary Branch Theatre Club, London,  
July 1988**

**Reviewed by Michael Grenfell**

Is Blake entertaining? One step inside this tiny café theatre and the average member of the public might well regard any encounter with him as a pretty hellish experience: strange subterranean voices cry out like lost souls in an auditorium covered in shroudlike drops. From the ceiling hang various luminous objects with no apparent sense or meaning. Striding through the audience onto the stage, the three actors (two men and a woman) continue in the same vein—"Energy, Genius, Infinite, One Law," they hiss in witch-like tones before stating "The Argument." I say stating, but really it was chanted using various vocal styles—unison, staccato, and syncopation. This made quite a sound, but what was gained in energy and sheer dynamics was lost in clarity and finally in comprehension of the text. Happily this was not the case elsewhere, and, often following Blake's original "color-coding" (Copy H), the swapping of lines between the actors injected a terrific pace and direction into the words. At key points, as in "A Song of Liberty," the players set the text to music, but this was less successful, the natural rhymes and rhythms of the words seeming to fight with the imposed melody.

The biggest laughs of the evening came from the "Proverbs of Hell"—whether out of excess sorrow, nervousness, or at the audacity and wit of the man. With so many on offer it was inevitable that some were passed over rapidly, while others were given a more lingering treatment. Intended interpretation, too, was often heavily hinted at by the use of appropriate intonation. For the most part this was acceptable, but, less forgivable in the interrogative, puzzled tone adopted for "Enough! or Too much"—surely more didactic and imperative in the text?

But this was mostly a dramatic presentation, the three actors flinging themselves about the stage in the kind of ecstatic postures of "William" and "Robert" depicted in *Milton*. Things settled down, though, for the Memorable Fancies which gave them stronger character and more conventional narrative to follow. Isaiah was played as pompous and illusory to the Blakean protagonist, whilst Ezekiel became lying and pretentious. Debatable as these interpretations may be, it did make good theatre. Indeed, considering the drama of much of Blake's work, I wonder how more has not found its way onto the stage.

"Energy," they finally cried, "is eternal delight," tearing away the shrouds to reveal painted fire over all the walls. A powerful and visual performance, then, of Blake's Hell with all its heavenly delights. Corrosive stuff!

**Greg Brown, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Red House Records, RHR14, 1986. Cassette, \$9.00, LP \$9.00.**

Reviewed by Alexander S. Gourlay

Greg Brown's contributions to the growing number of musical arrangements for Blake's *Songs* will be of interest not only to students and teachers of Blake, but also to everyone who thinks about the relationship between lyric poems and popular songs. Brown is most familiar to national audiences from Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion*, where he appeared as a musical celebrator of small-town midwestern life. He is a singer and guitarist, and writes exceedingly diverse songs on a variety of subjects other than small-town life. These range from jazz ballads to spare country songs in the manner of Jimmie Rodgers to imitations of traditional songs so authentic-sounding that they are sometimes taken by folk purists to be as old as the hills. His biggest commercial hit so far was recorded by Carlos Santana and Willie Nelson in an improbable duet.<sup>1</sup>

On this recording of sixteen arrangements of the *Songs* Brown is very ably accompanied by Angus Foster on bass, Michael Doucet on violin, Peter Ostroushko on violin and mandolin, and Dave Moore on button accordion, harmonica, and pan pipes; the last two musicians, both regulars on *Prairie Home Companion*, are also songwriters and solo artists with their own followings. These performances have been arranged only loosely;

Brown's singing and guitar are backed up by accompaniments that sound largely improvised. If Brown followed his usual practice, he and the sidemen settled on ad hoc arrangements in rehearsal, probably in the studio, and then recorded the bulk of the parts together in a single take. This procedure gives the recordings an entirely appropriate feeling of spontaneity and informality, even if it results as well in occasional moments of aimless noodling; these performers are all experts at improvisation, and some of them have worked with Brown for years.

Brown's settings are extraordinary in several respects. For one thing, this seems to me to be by far the most successful attempt ever to put the *Songs* to something like traditional popular melodies (I don't recognize any wholesale borrowings, but the songs incorporate jazz, blues, Irish fiddle tunes and many other things here and there). Brown's background as a popular songwriter is evident in the dexterous weighing of the rhythm, stress, meter, and melody in his phrasing; the results will startle those accustomed to art-song arrangements of these and similar lyric poems, which tend to work against the grain of the spoken word. Although Brown was aware of the work of Ralph Vaughan Williams and others, he reports in conversation that he paid no attention to previous settings; nor did he attempt to be authentic in any historical sense. Most listeners will agree that these performances are not only extraordinarily sensitive to Blake's complexities and ironies, and that some work as popular songs in their own right, but also that they are authentic in spirit, reflecting music in the air today (and relatively modern instrumentation) as well as melodies that were around in eighteenth-century London.

Brown's bass-baritone voice might appear to present a difficulty in that it obviously can't cover all the personae called for by the *Songs*, but this is not as serious a problem as it might seem. For example, "The Lamb" must be understood as having an innocent speaker, presumably the boy shown in the illustration. But Brown's performance in deep, rolling tones interposes an inconsequential additional distance, and the effect is successful—far more successful than, say, a formal performance of the song by even the most accomplished child. At the same time, the melody is simple enough that we can imagine a boy singing it to himself, or to a lamb.

This is a consistently thoughtful and sensitive treatment of the *Songs*, even if it was undertaken in a spirit of genial distaste for most Blake criticism and is never merely reverent. Brown sometimes makes minor changes and additions in the individual songs in order to create verses and choruses, but he is mostly careful with Blake's words and the work in general evinces a subtle reader's appreciation of his ironies. Certainly the