

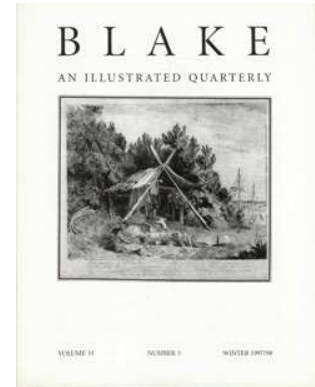
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

David Thomas, dir., South Bank Show
Documentary on Blake

Sarah Joyce

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 31, Issue 3, Winter 1997/98, pp. 102-103



- Sanderson, Alexis. "Saivism in Kashmir." *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Editor in Chief, Mircea Eliade. 16 vols. NY: Macmillan, 1987. 13:16-17.
- Scholem, Gershom G. *Kabbalah*. NY: Quadrangle, 1974.
- Singh, Charu Sheel. "Bhagavadgita, Typology and William Blake." *Influence of Bhagavadgita on Literature Written in English: In Honour of Ramesh Mohan*. Ed. T. R. Sharma. Meerut, India: Shalabh Prakashan, 1988. 23-36.
- Stace, W. T. *Mysticism and Philosophy*. 1960. Rpt. NY: Macmillan, 1973.
- Thompson, E. P. *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law*. NY: New P, 1993.
- Woodhouse, Mark B. "On the Possibility of Pure Consciousness." *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*. Ed. Robert K. C. Foreman. NY: Oxford UP, 1990. 254-68.

South Bank Show Documentary on Blake. Directed by David Thomas. ITV (U.K.), 17 September 1995.

Reviewed by SARAH JOYCE

On 17 September 1995, ITV's South Bank Show screened a one-hour documentary on William Blake. It was directed at newcomers or rather, since no one in the British Isles is exempt from knowledge of at least one Blake lyric, at those who had only encountered his most famous productions. Accordingly, the program included biographical material, broad discussions of Blake's beliefs, and brief consideration of some of his writings, paintings and prints. It could easily have been disappointing for the already initiated scholar, but in fact it was a very appealing program, made with a great enthusiasm for Blake, and an impulse to celebrate as well as to inform.

One manifestation of this enthusiasm was the ebullient claims made for Blake's literary status by Peter Ackroyd, who was an important presence throughout the film. He praised Blake "the greatest religious poet England has ever produced" as well as "the greatest poet of London," finally placing him in the ultimate English canon: "His vision is so prescient, his poetry and painting, so marvelous, that he is of the same stature as Milton, as Chaucer, as Shakespeare." Whilst the scope of the program did not enable it to reward such eulogy with careful analysis, it did succeed in presenting what seemed to me an accurate and moving account of some of the reasons why Blake is so cherished by his twentieth century public.

At the heart of the documentary was the vision of Blake as the lonely, unrecognized genius, dramatically repre-

sented by Michael Loughnan, who performed extracts from Elliot Hayes's play, *Innocence and Experience* [see Blake 29 (1995/96): 97]. Amidst drying impressions of *Jerusalem* plates, Loughnan's Blake worked alone in his studio, frequently bursting into prophetic monologue although unvisited but for the brief appearance of the Archangel Gabriel. Ackroyd insisted that Blake's isolated labors were not the work of "some solitary visionary in a garret," but of an ordinary Londoner with extraordinary commitment: "earning his living all his life and only able to work on his own time."

Blake's ability to complete works that were doomed to near obscurity in his own lifetime was much admired in the film, and is indeed one of the most fascinating aspects of his achievement. In Ackroyd's estimation, this prodigious triumph over isolation was made possible by the very phenomenon that caused it: the visions. Blake's engrossing private spirit world certainly caused him professional problems, condemning him to poverty and much neglect, but, if Blake is to be believed, it also compelled his creativity utterly, providing him with both the substance of his works and the strength to beat down despair and labor upwards into futurity.

Ackroyd also argued that it was Blake's alienation, intensified after the catastrophe at Felpham, that gave him his insightfulness about the society that had rejected him, and his deep compassion towards the suffering that he saw throughout that society. He considers the inclusiveness of Blake's social vision as one of his truly prescient insights, which would not find a popular echo until our own century. He cited the egalitarian stance of "The Little Black Boy," as well as the following couplet from "Auguries of Innocence" in which Blake insists upon the ethical relevance of animal suffering:

Each outcry of the hunted Hare
A fibre from the Brain does tear.

In the same poem, Allen Ginsberg finds a startling precedent for a modern critique of the societies responsible for producing widespread destitution as well as the damage to the ozone layer:

The Beggar's Rags, fluttering in Air,
Does to Rags the Heavens tear.

Much of the documentary was filmed in London's streets and open spaces, strongly suggesting that Blake's vision "London, a Human awful wonder of God!" a vision of our London. This sense of continuity was powerfully communicated by the director's combining panoramic photography of London's modern skyline, with Loughnan's delivery of Blake's poetry about the city. The powerfully compassionate poem "London" was spoken over a silent film of familiar London streets with their traffic of cars and ordinary people bearing the "Marks of weakness, marks of

Woe" of our own period. Blake's joyful epiphanies were also rehearsed in modern London: the innumerable heavenly host crying "Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty," and the tree full of glistening angels on Peckham Rye.

The program's use of Blake's own words was a very successful strategy. Performances of his poetry by Loughnan and by Allen Ginsberg did justice to Blake in a way that some of the invented monologues did not. Ginsberg's delivery of Blake was fascinating and oddly compelling. Reading the words from a facsimile, he sang the "Introduction" to the *Songs of Innocence* and "The Tyger," in an improvised recitative style with a rhythmic accompaniment from a hand-held pump organ. The effect was completely unlike an ordinary folk ballad, such as "The Maid of Islington," which was featured in the program: it was much more direct and intense, more bardic perhaps. The performance of "The Tyger" was surprisingly pacy and joyful, dispensing with the fear which the poem can evoke when spoken aloud, but retaining the sense of awe.

As well as Blake admirers from the literary and artistic worlds, the film featured representatives of modern science and commerce: the biologist Rupert Sheldrake and the industrialist Peter Parke. Sheldrake echoed Blake's critique of Newtonian abstraction, blaming this kind of science for causing radical damage to our civilization: "It has split the sciences from the arts. It has split science from religion. It has fragmented our whole culture." He predicted that the science of the future would validate Blake's objection to the dead mechanistic universe posited by Newton. The world of future science would be "a living world. A world permeated by consciousness and spirit, full of life and quality."

Peter Parker said that "The Sick Rose" had changed his life, opening up a channel of Blakean influence throughout his career. This has amounted to a conviction that Blake's anti-materialist stance, his determination to see through the eye, not with it, is "crucial to the health of modern society." In the spring 1995 inaugural edition of *The Journal of the Blake Society at St James's*, he wrote that Blake's refusal to be dominated by reductive rationalistic thinking had fed directly into his own attitude to management: "His purpose was not to generalise, but to raise the faculties of the individual to action against poverty, privilege, cruelty and inequalities to sex or race, intolerance - in short, unimaginativeness." Blake's rejection of Newton's dead world has become an ethical imperative to see human situations as particularly and minutely as possible. The documentary both began and ended with the hymn usually known as "Jerusalem" (And did those feet") Ackroyd pointed out the incongruity between the patriotic emotions usually associated with the hymn and Blake's own attitude to the monarchy and the Established Church. However, as Parry's music soared to its final crescendo and the camera came to rest upon the rapt features of the engraved

Blake portrait after Phillips, I felt that this most famous lyric may have attained its hold on the British public partly through Blakean merits of its own, similar to those which the documentary had celebrated. What we find in Blake is a yearning for vision, a capacity for faith, and a mighty determination to transcend the empty cruelty of nature and create a world full of meaning and value, to build Jerusalem amongst the dark satanic mills.

N E W S L E T T E R

Twenty-First Century Blake: Call for Papers

"Twenty-First Century Blake." The Wordsworth-Coleridge Association invites papers for a session on William Blake at the MLA Convention in San Francisco, 27-30 December 1998. Papers should explore new directions in Blake studies, particularly the convergence of Blake and hypertextual media, the development of computer-based approaches to Blake's poetry, new methods in textual editing, and the relevance of Blake's work to the approaching millennium. Send 15-minute papers or detailed abstracts by 1 March to: James McKusick, Department of English, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Baltimore MD 21250. Email: mckusick@umbc.edu.

Blake and the Book: The Materiality of Books in the Life and Times of William Blake: Call for Papers *St. Mary's University College, 18 April 1998*

Proposals are invited for 30-minute papers on all aspects of William Blake and the production, consumption, and reading of books. Blake was involved throughout his life in the illustration of texts (his own and those of others); he subscribed to books by friends; he created "bookworks" that sought to bypass his period's normal avenues of publication. The general theme of the conference is the book as material object in Blake's time. Morris Eaves (University of Rochester) will deliver the keynote address, "Graphicality: The Problem with Pictures."

Suggested topics might include: Blake's relationship to children's books, emblem books, book illustration, booksellers and publishers, book collecting, printing technology and other aspects of the art, culture, economics, market, history, and production of books in the romantic period. Abstracts (2 copies) of no more than 400 words should be sent to: Keri Davies, Blake Conference, St. Mary's University College, Waldegrave Road, Strawberry Hill, Twickenham TW1 4SX, UK. Fax: +44 (0) 181-967 9376. Email: kerid@efirstop.demon.co.uk.