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R E V I E W

Benjamin DeMott, Blake and Manchild

Morris Eaves

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Reviews.

Benjamin DeMott. *Blake and Manchild*, a tape recording. Sound Seminars. New York: McGraw-Hill, recorded 1968. 36 minutes. Reel-to-reel (75998-7) or cassette (81580-1) format. \$11.

Reviewed by Morris Eaves

Blake and Manchild is thirty-six minutes of meandering, and the meandering begins with a title that has nothing to do with the matter recorded on the tape. After an apology to the audience for his cold, and a related anecdote about his visit to the office of President Johnson, where DeMott's cultivated sensibility was thrown off balance by the old warrior's secret tic, a ferocious snort before speaking, DeMott announces the ostensible subject of his talk: "the Higher Innocence," which he promises to get to by a road through "The Lamb" and "The Chimney Sweeper" from *Songs of Innocence*.

But to recall the terrain before setting out, we listen to pleasant recitations of the poems. Then, not "The Lamb" and "The Chimney Sweeper" as expected, but a fifteen-minute detour through the eighteenth century, looking for its "characteristic gesture," which when we find it turns out to be "comprehension" and "mastery at a remove." In the poetry of the century, we "hear" this "gesture" in the voice of the "preceptor"--the voice that says such things as "Whatever IS, is RIGHT" and "Let Observation, with extensive view, / Survey mankind, from China to Peru." Side 1 of the tape is over.

Side 2 sets out in search of the characteristic gesture of "The Lamb," which we learn is "cuddling"--taking life to oneself, as the child takes the lamb into his arms, and acting tenderly towards it, even if still a little bit preceptorially. It is not clear whether DeMott means that the narrator actually takes the lamb into his arms or not. Nothing in the words of the poem tells him that, and the lower part of the plate shows the child standing at arm's length from the lamb, which is about the closest DeMott can afford to get to "The Lamb" and still find his "characteristic gesture."

He then brings in "The Tyger" in order to conclude that Romantic man's characteristic gesture is a motion back and forth between the pole of the "act" of "The Lamb"--cuddling--to the pole of "The Tyger"--cosmic "nagging." Thus Blake represents those Romantics who want "Innocence beyond Innocence," as "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" combine into

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a "vision of the Higher Innocence," the chief pleasure of which is--*memory!* And the tape runs past its last electromagnetic squiggles to tell us that "the great pleasure, the first Romantic pleasure, is, then--in Blake, in my imagination of him--is the pleasure of memory."

On the one hand DeMott knows enough about Blake's critics to have picked up a thesis about Higher Innocence, while on the other he knows too little about Blake or his critics to know that, if other Romantic poets were gesturing Memory, Blake was standing in the window of Higher Innocence gesturing Imagination back at them. Even when stopped up with a cold, DeMott is as pleasant to listen to as most lecturers, and his words on the "preceptorial gesture" of the eighteenth century are probably worth the time it takes to hear them, but on Blake he'd have done better to leave off at a summary of other people's opinions.

The lecture never gets to "The Chimney Sweeper" as promised. DeMott may have quit, the tape recorder may have broken, or McGraw-Hill may have economized. No one will care which, because one more meander would have added only another layer of diffuseness to this uninformative thirty-six minute gyp.

But DeMott is not the only culprit in this media game, and questions about his understanding of Blake are not the only questions his lecture raises. McGraw-Hill has shown little good sense and less good will in publishing its Sound Seminars. The prices are outrageously high and the pricing policy is irrational. Tapes that run fifteen minutes and those that run seventy minutes are all \$11 apiece. No matter how short the tape, \$11. No matter how long? Well, no: the price jumps to \$12.50 for tapes over about 70 minutes.

If \$11 for DeMott's thirty-six-minute tape is in line with the prices on McGraw-Hill's books--that is, if the retailer's profit is about 40%--then tapes are simply too expensive to produce for the mass market. But why the recording companies can produce tapes of, say, forty-five minutes of *music* for less than \$6, and yet McGraw-Hill cannot seem to produce fifteen minutes of *voice* for less than \$11 is beyond me. Musical recording requires enormous expenditures on studios, musicians, composers, and technical assistance. The kind of recordings McGraw-Hill is producing could be done at home by anyone with semi-professional equipment.

I would estimate that a transcription of DeMott's recording would take up fewer than ten pages of type. The question, then, is what special use justifies the publication of *Blake and Manchild* as an extraordinarily expensive tape recording rather than as an essay in one of DeMott's books? First, DeMott probably wouldn't want the matter recorded on the tape to appear in the slightly classier company of his essays. Second, I frankly can't imagine any special use that the tape allows. Teaching? Who would spend the better part of an hour having students listen to something that could be summarized without loss in five minutes? Students themselves would not stand for the tape unless they

were being relieved of something alive and worse. Home? I would have DeMott to dinner, but only to write a review would I trap myself in a room with his taped voice.

In short, what could be deadlier than a taped lecture, except a required live one? What is designed to bring more certain calamity to the classroom and the home? Only reviewers, teachers without consciences, and practical jokers would mess with this stuff. Readings by poets with stirring voices at reasonable prices, yes. The hypnotic spells of jumbo-mumbling lecturers spun on reels of brown tape, nevermore.

Available in the same series with *Blake and Manchild*: Benjamin DeMott, *Hardy and Manchild*, fifty minutes, \$11. Could that be a better buy?

The Blake Collection of Mrs. Landon K. Thorne. Catalogue by G. E. Bentley, Jr. Introduction by Charles Ryskamp. New York: Pierpont Morgan Library, 1971. Pp. 65 + 30 plates. \$10 paperback.

Reviewed by Robert N. Essick

Although *The Blake Collection of Mrs. Landon K. Thorne* was issued in conjunction with the exhibition of Mrs. Thorne's collection held at the Pierpont Morgan Library from 19 November 1971 to 22 January 1972, it is not an exhibition catalogue. Rather, Bentley's work is the definitive catalogue of one of the last three great Blake collections in private hands. As such, this handsomely produced volume goes far beyond the commemorative function of the usual exhibition handbook both in the amount of detailed information it provides and in its lasting importance to Blake scholarship.

Bentley's description of Mrs. Thorne's ten illuminated books, five of which are color printed, and her copy of *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise* form the heart of the catalogue. The format is more convenient than that used in the Keynes and Wolf *Census* because the information is arranged under marginal headings ("Paper Sizes," "Numbering," "Binding," etc.) rather than lumped together in paragraph-length notes. The bibliographic details provided for each book frequently add to the information in the *Census*. For example, Keynes and Wolf state only the number of pages with a watermark, whereas Bentley lists each page where it occurs. Further, Bentley has paid more attention to

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offsetting, stab holes, and other keys to binding history. This may appear to some as only so much useless trivia, but it can be crucially important to someone investigating the original sequence of plates and whether or not the present arrangement corresponds to Blake's intended ordering of his work. I have not been able to check Bentley's entries against Mrs. Thorne's copies themselves, but I suspect that the enrichment of details has brought with it an increase in accuracy. Only the following comments seem called for.

Page 19 *There Is No Natural Religion*, title-page. Bentley's statement that "in no copy is the author, printer, place, or date supplied" is potentially misleading. This is true of the title-page, under which heading this sentence appears, but it is of course not true of the whole book. As the first reproduction in the catalogue reveals, Blake inscribed in reverse "The Author & Printer W Blake" on the frontispiece to the first series of *There Is No Natural Religion*. Bentley considers the reverse lettering an error, stating that Blake "forgot to etch it reversed to make it print straight" (p. 20) while experimenting with his new technique of relief etching. It seems unlikely that Blake would have made this kind of mistake. Although his new mode of printing no doubt offered some unique difficulties, Blake had been long familiar with intaglio etching and engraving where writing in reverse on the plate, or employing some process for transferring writing from paper to plate in a way that reverses its direction, is no less necessary than in relief work. One should at least consider the possibility that Blake had a purpose for reverse lettering on his first frontispiece, just as he did years later in *Jerusalem*. However, the fact that the inscription is very faintly printed, and in some copies partly colored over, suggests that Bentley may be right, and further that Blake tried to minimize the consequences of his error.

Page 21 watermark. Bentley states that "no copy of *TheL* is watermarked," but the *Census* records three different watermarks in the Morgan proofs (copy a), in copy F, and in copies N and O. In her facsimile edition of *TheL*, Nancy Bogen confirms the *Census* readings.

Page 21 variants. "In pl. 3, the men at the right . . ." should read "In pl. 3, the men at the left . . ."

Page 22 *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, title-page. In his transcriptions of titles, Bentley consistently makes no distinction between vertical and slanted letters, except in this case, where the decorative letters of "Marriage" are transcribed as italics. It is practically impossible to represent accurately an etched title with type, but it seems possible to indicate slanted letters in Blake's titles without getting into too many difficulties. For example, THE | BOOK | of | THEL is a little closer to the original than Bentley's THE | BOOK | of | THEL. "Marriage" presents special problems, and only a reproduction can give a sense of the original.