

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY

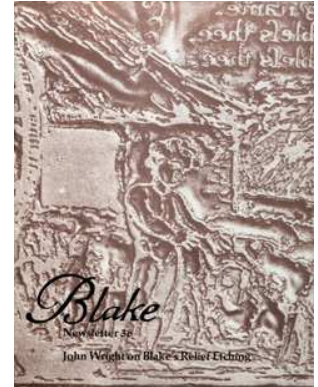
# BLAKE

R E V I E W

Mark Roberts, *The Tradition of Romantic Morality*

Leslie Tannenbaum

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Bentley, who has evidently compared all copies, might have given us a fuller report on these matters. But one detail which Bentley does call attention to inclines me to forgive him all his errata.

Under "plate 2" (ii) in his list of variants Bentley notes that there is "a quite different design (in the British Museum Print Room) . . . apparently inscribed 'AMERICA' in large, obscure letters, as if for a title-page." In the cloth-bound ABF this design is reproduced as plate 27, with Bentley's (or Easson's) caption: "An untitled drawing often identified as a rejected design for the title page of *America*, courtesy The British Museum." (The lack of cross-references either way might lead the user of the paperbound "format" to go all the way to the British Museum to look.) I have been mulling over a photograph of this page, and trying it on other people, for some time. The artist's note to himself, on the drawing, reads: "Angels to be very small as small as the letters that they may not interfere with the subject at bottom which is to be in a stormy sea & rain separated[sic] from the angels by Clouds." For some time I have had a note ready for the revised Double-day text (if that ever gets published) observing that the phrase "stormy sea & rain" suggests the title pages of *Visions* and *America*; that the bottom scene is a variant of that in the *America* title page; that the first word of the title is "The"; that the second and third words, roughly blocked in, could have become "MARRIAGE" and "HEAVEN," though the latter would need much more space. Bentley's reading of the second word as "AMERICA" provides the missing clue. I see now that the word is "AMERICAN" and the third word, so much too short for my earlier guess, is "WAR": "The AMERICAN WAR"! One remembers Blake's letter to Flaxman of 12 September 1800: "The American War began. All its dark horrors passed before my face . . . ." Probably Blake was recalling his first idea for the poem that became *America a Prophecy*--a version possibly different far from extant versions One and Two.

Can we date this title page? Here is a matter for students, though the suppliers of material don't tell us about possible watermark or about what may be on the back of this drawing. My own notes say it is a watercolor design for a fan, perhaps by Stothard. And I pull down from the shelf at my elbow a copy of *Blake Newsletter* 27 which displays this fan design on its outside cover--and contains an article by Andrew Wilton identifying the fan design as Blake's, of "around 1782." I pass along the shivery thought that Blake's planning a poem on "The American War" may have begun as soon as the war ceased! But of course it is more likely that the verso of the fan design was sketched upon only much later, when the fan had lost interest. Too bad there isn't a lower-case *g* in the title.

The only other plate that seems newsworthy is plate 26, a pencil drawing inscribed "Chaining of Orc," offered as "an analogue for plate 3[K 1]." It is that, but again the student would be helped by some dating and bibliography. The symbolism of contrasting domed and spired churches, as in *Jeru-*

*salem* 46, probably belongs decades after *America*. In Keynes, *Separate Plates* (1956, p. 51), not mentioned in this book, the drawing is identified as a fairly close preliminary sketch for the plate on which Blake etched the conveniently dated caption, "Type by W Blake 1812." Keynes does mention that the scene, Enitharmon and Los standing over Orc chained, bears some resemblance to *America* Preludium 1. But thrown at the student this way, dateless and undiscussed, this sort of material seems more for bewilderment than study.

The "Check-List" by Roger Easson (pp. 14-21) is perhaps properly lean, but it seems odd that the fullest recent commentary on *America* line for line, the notes in W. H. Stevenson's Longman *Annotated Blake* (1971) is not mentioned, though his unpublished dissertation is (p. 18, footnote).

**Mark Roberts. *The Tradition of Romantic Morality*. London: Macmillan; New York: Harper and Row, Barnes and Noble Import Division, 1973. 398 pp. \$15.**

Reviewed by Leslie Tannenbaum

As the title of the book indicates, and as Mark Roberts states in his first chapter, *The Tradition of Romantic Morality* deals with Romanticism as a moral phenomenon rather than as a literary or artistic one. Roberts' thesis is that there is at the center of Romanticism a moral position that he calls "energy of the soul," the establishment of energy as the exclusive source of values and as the sole guide to human conduct. Furthermore, Roberts asserts, while Romanticism as a literary impulse has exhausted itself, this Romantic morality survives and exerts an insidious influence--insidious because unrecognized--that has revealed itself most blatantly in the ideas, attitudes and actions of dissidents during the last decade.

Robert's purpose, then, is to establish the presence of this moral tradition, examine some of the forms it takes and evaluate it. He begins with a discussion of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* to define the problem he is confronting and to postulate his answer to it. Disturbed at Osborne's sympathetic portrayal of Jimmy Porter, whose antisocial and frequently cruel behavior ordinarily would not warrant our sympathy, Roberts sees this "failure of moral perspective" on Osborne's part as a serious aesthetic flaw in the play. The popularity of the play in spite of this flaw can be explained by the presence of a moral tradition that permits the audience to identify with Osborne's "over-simplifying emphasis upon 'energy of the

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soul.'" A modern audience will tolerate Jimmy's excesses and will sympathize with him because he displays a capacity for strong feeling and because he proclaims the value of openly immersing oneself in life, of experiencing whatever pain, dirt or humiliation is necessary to maintain one's sense of livingness.

Osborne's play exploits a moral position that has emerged since the late eighteenth century as a reaction to neo-Stoicism, which Roberts, in his second chapter, sees as the orthodoxy of that period. Discussing Johnson's *The Vanity of Human Wishes* as a representative statement of the prevailing moral beliefs of its time, Roberts maintains that Johnson and his contemporaries--however critical they were of Stoicism--adhered to the essentially Stoic position of mistrusting the passions and seeking to avoid the perturbations of mind that they cause. The familiar concepts of duty, the sufficiency of virtue, the rule of Right Reason (which is synonymous with living in accord with the laws of Nature) Roberts identifies as a part of the eighteenth century's adaptation of Stoicism.

The Romantic reaction to this moral position is described in a series of chapters that follow the same method as the first two: each is devoted to a single author, focusing on one or more works by that writer. Appropriately, the chapter on the established orthodoxy is followed by one on Blake, whom Roberts finds to be the major spokesman of Romantic thought. The fourth chapter offers an almost Blakean reading of Wordsworth, in which Roberts maintains that Wordsworth, despite his technical innovations, was essentially orthodox in his thinking. Emily Bronte, in *Wuthering Heights*, is caught between the claims of that orthodoxy and the newly emerging Romantic morality, while Carlyle's thinking carries a less dramatic but equally significant mixture of the old moral order and the new. Conrad's *Victory*, according to Roberts, is a critical analysis of Romantic morality, whereas Browning, Nietzsche, Ibsen and D. H. Lawrence endorse that morality in varying degrees. The concluding chapter analyzes an anthology of dissent called *BAMN: Outlaw Manifestos and Ephemera 1965-70*, whose glorification of energy and mistrust of order and determinacy are cited as evidence of the continuing and pervasive influence of the Romantic moral tradition. Here Roberts most explicitly condemns the Romantic morality he has been tracing. He states that while the proponents of neo-Stoicism erred in separating Reason from the passions--siding with the claims of Reason--the Romantics did not heal this break by swinging to the opposite pole. Ultimately, says Roberts, the Romantic morality is an escape from the complexities of moral problems, a regression to a childlike state.

Although the discussion of Blake is crucial to his provocative thesis, it is an essentially orthodox reading of Blake--orthodox in that it does not offer any new critical interpretation of Blake's works or ideas. More concerned with the historical ramifications of those ideas, most of Roberts' discussion relies upon ground that has been broken

by previous scholars and critics. He is sensitive to the limitations of the approach he is using and renders an accurate and tactful exposition of the moral ideas contained in Blake's writings. The discussion relies heavily upon *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, identifying Blake--as one would expect--with the energetic proponents of the Devil's party; but Roberts also cites Blake's later works to note that the poet's emphasis upon energy shifts to an emphasis upon the imagination as a source of values. However, Roberts insists upon the centrality of energy in Blake's thought, maintaining that Blake's concern with the imagination is really a concern with the proper outlets for energy.

The chapter's main virtue is the clarity with which Roberts deals with the complexities of Blake's thought. Perhaps the best part is the discussion of Blake's annotations to Watson's *An Apology for the Bible*, where Roberts delineates the precise grounds upon which Blake parts company with both Paine and Watson. Equally helpful is Roberts' careful consideration of the ways in which Blake's morality would work in practice. Only once does Roberts depart from this standard: when he asserts that Blake's radical conception of the Fall included the idea that "the corruption of nature had gone so far that one could not find beauty in it"--an oversimplification that is the result of ignoring Blake's mythopoetics.

It is this dealing with Blake as a polemicist that makes the chapter on Blake the least interesting one in the book. The chapters on Bronte, Browning, Ibsen and Conrad show a greater sensitivity to the ways that ideas operate in the context of a work of literature. The book's delineation of the historical significance of Blake's ideas, which Roberts claims to be his contribution to current discussion of Blake, offers very little on that subject. While it is pleasant to hear another voice affirming that Blake is at the center--perhaps even at the head--of the Romantic movement, the net result of this assertion is to make Blake the fountainhead of the "permissive morality" that has become a favorite target in the political rhetoric of the past decade. Despite Roberts' obvious intelligence and his constant effort to avoid facile judgments, his book contains the oversimplifications of a finger-pointing moralist who is attempting to lay present moral ills at the doorstep of the Romantics. His method necessarily begs the question when he selects particular authors and works, at the expense of others, to support his thesis. An obvious omission is Shelley, whose "Speculations on Morals," *Prometheus Unbound* and *A Defense of Poetry* are central documents of the morality of the Romantics. Roberts briefly notes that Shelley was concerned with moral questions, but dismisses him on the grounds that "his moral influence is comparatively restricted"--a peculiar statement in light of Blake's comparative obscurity and Shelley's wider exposure during the nineteenth century. Similarly, Byron is quickly dismissed as not being "a major moralist or a major moral influence" because to English readers he represented "something far more complex and more equivocal" than the figure he cut in the eyes of other Europeans.



These and other exclusions make Blake not simply the major Romantic writer to assert the Romantic morality that Roberts describes, but the only writer in the nineteenth century to do so--as all the other literary figures discussed in the book, with the exception of Lawrence, see that morality as problematical. Therefore, one doubts the viability of the term "Romantic morality" and Roberts' belief that the morality he is describing is essentially literary in its origin and influence. Clearly there are forces other than literary ones that need to be accounted for. The book's chapter on Nietzsche is a step in that direction, but Roberts' need to justify the inclusion of the philosopher in a literary study points to the book's main problem: it attempts to walk a tightrope between literary history and the history of ideas, failing at the former because it often ignores important works and contexts, and failing at the latter because it is too narrow in its selection of evidence.

Because of these failures, *The Tradition of Romantic Morality* can be most accurately described as a series of individual essays--some of which offer significant insights--which Roberts attempts to unify with an untenable thesis. The readings of *Wuthering Heights*, "Bishop Blougram's Apology," *The Master Builder* and *Victory* have a value that is independent of the flaws in the book's main argument. However, the author's obvious lack of sympathy for his subject gives the entire book a particularly cranky quality, and in its attack on the now dated ephemera of the sixties, Roberts' argument becomes what it beholds.

**The Mental Traveller**, a dance-drama based on the ballad by William Blake. Presented 19 August-7 September 1974, Crown Theatre, Hill Place, Edinburgh. Cast: Heidi Parisi and Neil Tennant. Lights: Sonia Mez. Score: Wanda Laukenner. Sound: Cameron Crosby. Choreographer: Heidi Parisi. Director: Heidi Parisi. Producer: The Oothoon Dance Theatre in association with the Edinburgh University Theatre Company. Costumes: Megan Tennant.

Reviewed by Frank M. Parisi

In his engraved works Blake addressed himself to "the intellectual powers," which means he intended his work to be not just an aesthetic treat for the eye and the ear, but a total communication from mind to mind through many senses at once. Since Blake's time the graphic arts have followed many programs less synaesthetically complete than this; but one art form, the ballet, has preserved the fullness of Blake's vision. Of all the arts of the twentieth century, it is the ballet which "unites music and drama on their common basis in the dance, just as the Job engravings unite poetry and painting on their common basis in hieroglyphic, and it can hardly be an accident that Blake's vision of Job makes an excellent ballet."<sup>1</sup> "The Sick Rose" has also been successfully choreographed, and following the lead established by these adaptations of Blake's art to dance, the Oothoon Dance Theatre presented "The Mental

