

MEMORANDUM

Bennington College
March 26, 1951

To: Students in Aspects of Romanticism

From: Mr. Belitt

I suggest that the class meet at the scheduled hour and place, during the period of my absence, and discuss together the indicated texts, under a system of rotating group leaders. It will be the function of the group leader to organize discussion around the interpretive problem, as she sees it, to invite and direct the exchange of opinion, and keep some record of the subject matter covered, and the attendance and participation of class members. The texts should be developed in the following order:

1. There Is No Natural Religion. Group Leader: Mallen Carpe
2. All Religions Are One. Group Leader: Lynn Fletcher
3. The Aphorisms of the "Laocoon." Group Leaders: Roselyn Karol
and Marcia Lang
4. On Homer. Group Leader: Fay Sigel

I. THERE IS NO NATURAL RELIGION

Analyze both the content and the developing phases of the argument carefully, for both its continuities and discontinuities. Read, in connection with it, "The Confession of a Savoyard Vicar" from Rousseau's Emile, as a credo of "natural religion." Note the dialectical character of the argument, in which two opposing propositions are turned upon one another to illuminate a truth which is the product of their opposition. Note that Blake is erecting a theory of knowledge -- of how perception comes about and creates a world that is not merely the sum total of organic sensations and natural objects perceived, but a constant act of imagination. Reconstruct as best you can, Blake's point of view, examining, on the one hand his hypothetical case "for" organic or natural perception; then his attempt to demonstrate its inadequacies and absurdities as a true account of human perception; and finally, in the second half (his rebuttal), his case for extra-sensory perception that does not merely report phenomena, but creates reality out of intuition, energy, and desire.

II. ALL RELIGIONS ARE ONE

Continue to develop Blake's theory of knowledge -- of how perceptions originate and manifest themselves -- implied in Blake's argument. What is the significance of his constant passion for unity in diversity, for Oneness among Many-ness? Was there evidence of a similar preoccupation in "There Is No Natural Religion"? How does Blake account for the seeming multiplicity of religious and philosophical sects behind the fundamental "oneness" of religion. What is the value of inspiration and prophecy for Blake and to what elements of the Hebraic tradition does he ally them?

III. THE APHORISMS OF THE LAOCOON

Note throughout the consistent transposition of values -- esthetic and creative, for religious and theological -- which these aphorisms seek to bring about. If it is true that Blake is "translating" the terminology of religious thinking into a credo for imaginative artists, what esthetic premises can you infer from this set of aphorisms? With what position does Blake identify the Old Testament tradition of prophecy? What is his attitude toward the tradition of Graeco-Roman classicism? Analyze the cumulative context for words like War, Money,

Empire, Caesar, Greece, Roman, etc. Can you see any connection between this set of aphorisms and his position in the previous tracts? What significance would you attach to the gnomic method which employs epigrams and enigmas in lieu of argument here?

(See plate of the LAOCOON as engraved by Blake, reproduced in Todd's "Footprints in the Snow.")

IV. ON HOMER

Analyze the argument, both in its own terms, and for the further light it may shed on Blake's constant quest for the inspirational factor unifying all multiplicity and transcending all false dualisms of part and whole, content and form, body and spirit, good and bad. Explore further Blake's special contexts for all manifestations of Graeco-Roman rationalism, in so far as they relate to Homer. Is he anti-Homer, ambivalent, or contradictory?

PAPER: Due April 30.

Students are free to choose any of the assigned topics, though it will be clear that many, such as those bearing on the Promethean figure, are designed for the last half of the semester, when greater familiarity with Blake's cosmology can be assumed. Papers dealing with imagery in the Songs and Lyrics of Blake are feasible at this time; though perhaps the topic within the present range of all would be the study of the set of aphorisms in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. Here, as in the aphorisms relating to the Laocoon, the task would be to infer the center of belief, the fundamental philosophical and esthetic position which such a "system" of epigrams and "riddles," seem to imply.

NOTE: The opening chapter in Frye's FEARFUL SYMMETRY should prove especially helpful in the interpretation of these tracts and the general discussion of Blake's theory of knowledge as a whole. A careful perusal of collateral texts in general is urged. Simultaneous reading of Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell is also recommended, at this time.