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N E W S

Blake in the Institute

Robert P. Kolker

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(or two offprints, for mounting) to Mr. Todd. His address is Ca'n Bielo/
Galilea/ Mallorca/ Spain.

One of the articles missed in our last checklist is "Blake and the
Grotesque" by Dennis Douglas, which appeared in *Balcony*, VI (Summer 1967),
9-16. We thank Michael Tolley for sending us a copy (*Balcony* is published
in Australia). And G. E. Bentley, Jr. writes: "The reference in the June
1967 *BNL* to E. J. Rose, "The Circle of the Life of Man," *Connoisseur* CLXI
(January 1966) is a ghost; on this page is merely a photograph of the
Arlington Court picture; it is not connected with an article at all, and
Rose has no article in the journal."

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Blake in the Institute

He said himself that he was speaking to future generations, and the fact
is that William Blake is finally being exposed beyond the--to now--somewhat
small circle of friendly Angels to a wider literary public, many of whom have
considered him some kind of excrescence upon the otherwise smoothly cultivated
land of English literary history. One of the most pleasant events in this
progress of exposure occurred at the meeting of The English Institute, September
3rd through September 5th, at Columbia University (where, coincidentally, Orc
is currently being reborn and bound).

Under the careful guiding hand of David Erdman, three papers and a prize
essay were read, each dealing with some aspect of the dramatic vision in Blake's
work. Martha England read a superb piece, speculating upon Blake's debt, in
"An Island in the Moon," to Samuel Foote's dramatic improvisations in the Hay-
market. Her analogies between Blake's methods of characterization, his settings,
his jokes, his songs in "An Island" and the things Foote was doing in his
satirical stage pieces were rather convincing. Irene Taylor presented a meticu-
lous analysis of Blake's illustrations to Gray's "Ode on the Death of a Favourite
Cat," an analysis which attempted to demonstrate how Blake interpreted in visual
terms Gray's satirical allegory. The prize essay, by Robert Simmons, was con-
cerned with *The Book of Urizen*. It was an ingenious attempt to show an in-
credibly formal symmetry in the structure of the book, in which all the elements,
arrangement of stanzas, arrangement and style of illustrations, produce an in-
tricate and literally graphable structure of vision. This was a valuable exer-
cise, important perhaps to those who still think that Blake was some kind of
disorderly thinker of half-baked ideas. But the dangers of such a subjectively
formal analysis may outweigh the advantages: the prospect of abstracting the
Prophecies into geometric forms is not a happy one, even though one might agree
that in a book about Urizen, Blake might well have wanted to parody the very
things Urizen is doing. Mr. Simmons recognized some of the parodic elements
in the work, though he stressed too strongly his notion that in this book Blake
is a "visionary of the comic."

The best event of the proceedings was David Erdman's slide lecture on
America. Despite an intractable projector, he managed to demonstrate the full-
ness, scope, detail, and power of Blake's vision and execution. If there were
any unbelievers left in the audience, Mr. Erdman had to have convinced them of

the extraordinary synthesizing powers of Blake's imagination. The proceedings were properly friendly and informal; the papers served well to indicate the kind of work that is being carried on. But I think one bit of general criticism might be offered: more and more people are studying and writing about Blake, and although exposure of their findings to a wider academic public is beginning, it is only beginning. Would it not be proper, at this stage, for programs such as that at the English Institute to concentrate on Blake's place within the literary and artistic framework in which he was working? In other words, for a general audience of literary scholars and critics, is it not necessary still to establish Blake as a poet and painter among poets and painters and not some kind of sport to whom no one but a small group of enthusiasts need pay much attention? Certainly many of the papers read did take this problem into consideration to some degree. But my general impression was still of one group of the knowing talking to another group of the knowing. To my mind, the paper that did the most toward furthering a general understanding of what Blake was about was one read in another section. In a profoundly suggestive piece on the changing attitudes toward imitation in eighteenth-century English literature, William K. Wimsatt presented both a paean to and a brief analysis of *Poetical Sketches* that, hopefully, left the audience with a feeling that Blake is a creator they'd better come to grips with if they are to understand fully the organism of literary history.

Robert P. Kolker
Columbia University

David V. Erdman adds:

Honorable mentions were awarded to three people: Alicia Ostriker (Rutgers) for "Thomas Wyatt and Henry Surrey: Dissonance and Harmony" (not a Blake paper but by a Blake scholar); W. J. Thomas Mitchell (Ohio State University, Columbus) for "Blake's Composite Art"; and Helen T. McNeil (Hunter) for "Blake's Confidence: A Study of Formal Originality in *The Four Zoas*." Altogether 25 Blake papers were submitted; more than half of them well worthy publication.

MLA: Seminar 55

Blake discussion was so lively at this year's English Institute; so many people seem to be "finding out how" to read Blake's illuminations or to be changing their opinions on the question, I was encouraged to pop the topic into this year's MLA list of scheduled discussion groups (now called "seminars, limited to 35!!"). The Annual Meeting program will announce: Seminar 55: Methods of Studying Blake's Illuminated Works and Illustrations, Malmaison 8, Americana (that's a hotel room). When? Like the third morning of the convention: Sunday, 29 December at 8:45 A.M. (to 10). Bring your own grapefruit. Seminar 60 sounds more feasible, at 1:15 P.M.: "Student Rebellions and the Profession of Literature." Same topic?