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Editions of Illustrations to the Divine Comedy and
Swinburne's William Blake, MLA Annual Meeting
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NEWS

MLA: Seminar 55

Eternity's sunrise was just about the hour that MLA members met on Sunday, December 29, in Malmaison 8, Americana, to discuss "Methods of Studying Blake's Illuminated Works and Illustrations." The early morning seminar (8:45-10 a.m.), attended by thirty-five or forty persons was ably led by David V. Erdman, who started things off by showing a slide of one of Blake's designs and simply asking, "What's going on here?"

Whether or not one knew the plate was "Famine" from *Europe* was irrelevant with this approach: the implication was that one could look with fresher eyes if the context of the plate were forgotten. Certain aspects of the design did suddenly become more puzzling--as, for example, the pearl necklace of one of the women. If she were starving (as the plate's context suggests), why the necklace? Is she a historical figure, an allegorical figure, or both? Similar questions, leading to many observations, suggestions and comments were made informally about a variety of other designs, but principally *America*, Plate 6, and *Jerusalem*, Plates 94 to 100.

Issues were raised regarding how (or even whether) to identify figures in designs, whether designs should or should not be taken out of context, of the importance, if any, of facial expressions or "hidden faces", and of the significance of expressive gesture in Blake's designs. Mr. Erdman suggested that the relation between Blake's figures and the gestures of modern dance illuminate each other.

Regarding discussions of individual plates--some details of the comments concerned, for example, the extent or degree of regeneration implied by the figure sitting on top of the grave in *America*, Plate 6; the question of why a father-son image was chosen for Plate 99 of *Jerusalem*; and who is the figure with the sun (ball of fire) in Plate 100?

Although no conclusions were reached about any of the designs, the seminar was certainly stimulating. The enthusiasm and interest of the group demonstrated how topical the subject of the seminar was, and how many university teachers are attempting to present Blake simultaneously as a painter and poet. It seems to me that a discussion like this one could be fruitfully repeated from year to year, perhaps combined with, or followed by a coffee party where people could become better acquainted with each other.

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Professors Roger R. Easson and Kay Long of *Blake Studies* inform us of a forth-

coming edition of A. C. Swinburne's *William Blake*, with introduction and notes by Hugh J. Luke. The edition will include two short articles on Blake from *La Republique des Lettres* (1877), thought to be by Swinburne. The publisher is U. of Nebraska Press.

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A limited edition (1,100 copies) of the *Illustrations to the Divine Comedy* has been published by the Da-Capo Press, 227 West 17th Street, New York 10011. The edition is in portfolio form, the reproductions measuring 9 1/2 x 13 inches. There are 109 plates and 5 text pages. Price: \$100.00.

Mr. Alan J. Marks, Executive Editor for Da Capo Press, writes:

The "first edition" of this portfolio was published in 1922 in England by the National Art-Collections Fund. The Fund had solicited contributions so that Blake's drawings for Dante might be purchased at auction during the sale of the Linnell estate and then distributed among seven or eight museums throughout the Commonwealth. Once the drawings were purchased, and prior to their distribution, the Fund commissioned Emery Walker to prepare two hundred and fifty portfolios of collotype reproductions of all of the drawings, and these portfolios were given to the subscribers whose contributions had enabled the Fund to make the purchase.

Our edition is a "second edition" insofar as the Emery Walker printing did not include the seven engravings based upon the drawings which Blake had managed to complete prior to his death, and ours does. These engravings are reproduced full-size from a set which a private collector was good enough to lend to the Meriden Gravure Company. Otherwise, except for the portfolio itself, and of course the paper, it reproduces the first edition exactly, although the people at Meriden believe that they have actually been able to improve upon the printing, and we tend to agree with them.

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The *Blake Newsletter* congratulates the MLA Executive Committee for its decision to move the 1969 Annual Meeting from Chicago to Denver.

which seems close enough to be a source. Pope's whole discussion of the relation of reason to self-love (Blake's "reason") can be usefully compared with Blake's analysis.

One of Blake's most-quoted phrases is "the human form divine" (from "The Divine Image"), and several scholars seem to think this comes from Milton, but the source is apparently in Pope's *Ode on Solitude* (l. 258):

"No more was seen the human form divine"

Stevenson, in his *Book of Proverbs, Maxims, and Familiar Phrases*, gives this