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N E W S

MLA: Seminar 55

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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-