

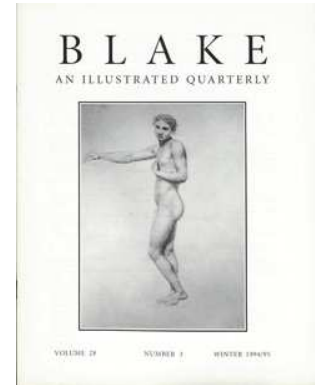
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Morris Eaves, *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy: Art and Industry in the Age of Blake*

Ronald Paulson

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 28, Issue 3, Winter 1994/95, pp. 101-102



R E V I E W S

Morris Eaves, *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy: Art and Industry in the Age of Blake*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992. xxix + 286 pp., illus., bibliography. \$37.95.

Reviewed by RONALD PAULSON

In one sense Morris Eaves's book fills in the context of earlier art histories for Blake's narrative of art history in his *Public Address* and *Descriptive Catalogue*. This is to focus on chapters 3 and 4. But in a larger sense the context is the book. This is a fascinating study in historiography—a narrative of "narratives," "histories," and "stories" of the English School of painting and engraving, with heroes and villains in its artists and patrons. Eaves shows the interdependence of the narratives of art and of British commerce and religion. He studies the alternative narratives, their variants and common structures, categorizing them as progressive based on improvement of technical and aesthetic education (the Vasari canon, the Carracci eclecticism, the de Piles *balance de la peinture*), cyclic and regressive based on recovery and return, and static based on native ability (due possibly to the English climate). Narrative is a more flexible term than discourse, more various than deterministic, suggesting more of Propp than Foucault. It permits Eaves to separate truth from myth, showing how a myth reflected in the interested party who invented and promulgated it, and often how narrative—also another word for theory—fitted with practice.

It is a relief to read that "the fit between the simplicities of official theory and the complexities of practice had become ill indeed; the margins were threatening to outgrow the text." Eaves's book covers most of the same ground as Barrell's *Political Theory of Painting* but offers a much broader, less claustrophobic perspective. Barrell's book explored one master discourse (or theory) which projected one narrative, the one sanctified by Reynolds in which English art grows from the imitation of continental art (but in practice essentially the collecting of it), reaches its peak in the patronage of Charles I, declines in the iconoclasm of his Puritan opponents, and except for the momentary flowering of Wren and Thornhill's St. Paul's (in Prince Hoare's narrative), only recovers when Reynolds reunites the English School once again with the continental and founds an academy on the French model.

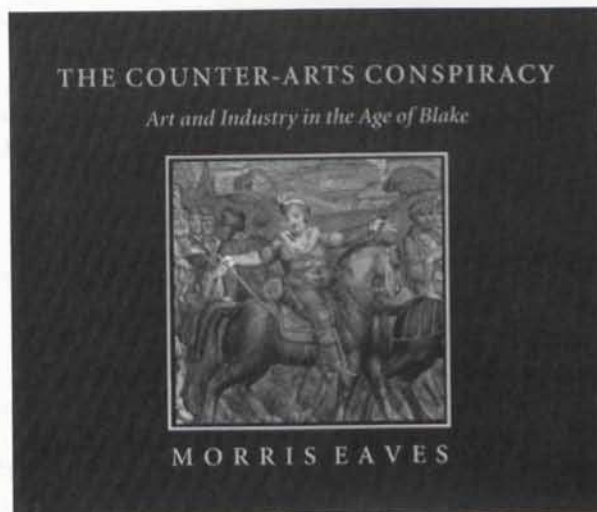
The great printseller John Boydell is the central figure of Eaves's own narrative. He is the symbolic middleman, initiator of the Shakespeare Gallery project which fulfilled the earlier narratives of blocking and opportunity, bringing together painter and engraver with the great English literary subject, Shakespeare. Boydell's personal myth of the shopkeeper Maecenas (in its most elaborate form laid out by John Pye II) is shown being created, developed, discredited, and utilized by artists from James Barry to Prince Hoare and John Landseer. Eaves focuses on the historiographical moment when Boydell, the art of reproductive engraving, and the international dissemination of English prints triumphantly merged, just before the French Revolution changed all the rules. Eaves—who ends with an exceptionally lucid chapter on the technical problems of engraving in the period—demonstrates the centrality of the history of engraving in the Boydell era, when engraving was "coupled with the commercial success of English painting"; it served the Reynolds ethos of academic copying and expanded the audience of art (in theory at least) beyond imagining, while at the same time—as Landseer and Blake were to show—its distinctions between original and copy undermined the role of the artist.

The counter-narrative, suppressed but implicit in Boydell's project, surfaces in Hazlitt (the villain of Barrell's academic narrative) and, above all, in Allan Cunningham, whose *Lives of the most Eminent British Painters* (1829-33) has been unfairly shunted aside by art historians as a mere popularization. Indeed, their writings are a culmination of that large body of relatively journalistic (as opposed to "philosophical") material that from the 1730s onward had projected an opposing tradition. In Cunningham's story of the Reformation, far from a disaster, begins the process of liberating English artists from foreign influence and domination (Roman Catholicism, and Holbein, Rubens, and Van Dyck), making way for a Protestant and therefore English artist, Hogarth. This was, of course, Hogarth's own narrative, pointing the way to the primitivistic Signpainters' Exhibition, which consisted of examples of that form of aboriginal English painting; but more than Cunningham seems aware he developed and demonstrated, in his engraved works, the principles of Protestant iconoclasm itself. Cunningham picked up through the Hogarth narrative, at its most agitated in the academy dispute of the 1750s, when Hogarth opposed the primary principle of Reynolds and his followers who argued for "the continuity of English with continental art."

Cunningham's words on Hogarth show how anti-theoretical this narrative is to the academic: (1) Hogarth was antiacademic and original: "That his works are *unlike those of other men*, is his merit, not his fault. He belonged to *no school of art*; he was the produce of *no academy*; no man living or dead had any share in forming his mind, or in rendering his hand skilful." (2) And he was native English: "He was the spontaneous offspring of the *graphic spirit of his country*, as native to the heart of England as *independence* is, and he may be fairly called, in *his own way*, the *first-born* of her spirit" (emphasis added). Although the perennial "in his own way" is retained, to delimit his genius, Hogarth is given the temporal priority reserved in the academic discourse for Reynolds. It is, of course, another myth, as prejudiced as the Reynolds-Royal Academy one, but it is good to see Cunningham, if not Hogarth himself, replaced in the history from which theorists from Reynolds to Barrell have elided him.

Boydell was near enough in time to recognize this, and his Shakespeare Gallery was signalized—as was his term as lord mayor—by the purchase of the copperplates and publication of the folios of Hogarth's engraved works. For Hogarth was *his* model, as the first English painter to show how painting can be commercialized, how the international market can be broached, how more and less expensive versions of a print can be produced, and how to exploit all the intricacies of subscription and every other kind of publication Boydell later developed. Hogarth even anticipated aspects of the business of popularizing "high art" missed by Boydell but exploited by Wedgwood, such as the talent for "commercializing history" by utilizing events, heroes, and villains. Though he did not fit into Barry's academic discourse, he also prefigured Barry's Society of Arts paintings with his St. Bartholomew's Hospital paintings.

After the marshalling of these conflicting narratives, in chapter 3 Eaves turns to the other "original," William Blake. The main point is clear enough—that Blake traced the history of engraving all the way back to Egypt and Moses and wrote a history in which the Bible and the technology of engraving intersect in interesting ways that are now, in the light of the various more conventional narratives we have seen, much more easily understood. It is less easy to turn from exposition of the discursive prose of Hazlitt and Cunningham to the density of Blakean myth and poetry to its exegesis. We lose (at least in chapter 3, if not 4) the broad perspective we enjoyed with the other narratives. We are reading *inside* this narrative and our au-



thor is a Blakean who takes us from rational analysis to special pleading; from public argument, in a shared discourse, to personal imagery based on these arguments *and* a private system, which carries over into the "discursive" *Public Address* and *Descriptive Catalogue*. Characteristically, Blake introduces a Christian narrative: his vocabulary (Florentine vs. Venetian, original-imitation, art-counter-arts, Christian-Neoclassical, artist-priest, white-black, Jesus-Moses) is all based on the old New Testament-Old Testament contrast of spirit and law. As Eaves puts it plainly, Blake's argument "soars high above the average level of the most acute critiques of English-school discourse" (183).

With a few exceptions in the Blake chapters, Eaves's book treats his subject with brilliant commonsense, and it will be a pity if his book does not enjoy the same level of critical attention accorded recent art-historical studies of the period which have offered formulas, easily expanded by eager graduate students, into which such complex pictures as Eaves's will not easily fit. Eaves's study, in all its gaudy variety, is of greater utility and imagination, as well as enjoyment in the reading.

Typographically the book offers further pleasures. The illustrations are generous and well-placed. The text which accompanies them sometimes runs on for pages at a time parallel with the regular text. The effect is somewhere between Derrida's *Glas* and a *Time-Life* art book. The lessons, both theoretical and practical, in the history of print technology and engraving techniques are alone worth the price of admission.