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Morris Eaves, William Blake's Theory of Art

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REVIEWS

MORRIS EAVES

William Blake's THEORY OF ART

PRINCETON ESSAYS ON THE ARTS



Morris Eaves. *William Blake's Theory of Art*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1982. 216 pp., 3 illus. Cloth, \$18.50; paper, \$8.95.

Reviewed by Hazard Adams

Morris Eaves has taken the familiar triad artist-work-audience as the basis for his study of Blake's theory of art. From this triad (lest some of you are worried), he has managed to produce a fourfold structure, bifurcating his study of Blake's notion of the work into two separate chapters. But wait! We are not out of the forests. Chapter Three (one could make much of this) is subdivided into six parts. It might even be regarded as a sort of Behemoth, being over ninety pages in length.

Not to worry! We discover that this sixfold emanation in its entirety is promptly redeemed in the form of one set of variations on the relation (in Reynolds) and the

identity (in Blake) of content and form. More of that (since there is an immense amount) later.

Eaves limits himself largely to Blake's theory of art (in the sense of all the arts) as it is expressed outside his poems, instead of what might be abstracted from his artistic practice; and to the so-called "direct" statements rather than to what can be abstracted as statements from his poetry. These distinctions are not easy ones to hold to in dealing with Blake, since little in him is "direct" in Eaves's sense, which in any case is a somewhat Reynoldsian sense, I think. I shall, however, pass beyond querying where and how Eaves draws the line, only to remark that he seems to think that the "indirect" poem *Jerusalem* contains all of Blake's theorizing in the form of identity and that the so-called "direct" theorizing is scattered abroad in a lesser or fallen form through letters, annotations, prose pieces, and various fragments. This view is decidedly *not* Reynoldsian, though I suspect that Blake would consider *Jerusalem* direct and the rest some fallen emanation of it—cloudy coloring of *Jerusalem's* lines, perhaps. This might have led Eaves to observe that there must be something fallen about "direct" theorizing and to consider the consequences of this for what he is doing. That does not occur here, though it seems to me that Eaves is on the edge of it and may know that he is.

The reason I make the assumptions above is that Eaves's book actually moves toward and culminates in the famous lines from *Jerusalem* (plate 97:28-40) about the imaginative conversation of the Zoas. The whole book, we suddenly see, is a way of presenting an explication of that passage. This in turn seems to endorse my sense that Eaves knows he is on the edge of having to write an ironic metacommentary. As a result of this, however, there is a large question in my mind as to why there must be a one-paragraph epilogue containing the following sentence, certainly *not* a metacommentary.

The creative moment that Satan cannot corrupt is the expressive moment defined in these pages: the moment in which the artist's imagination expresses itself in clear outline; the moment in which readers find themselves in those outlines; the moment that reveals the potential integrity of artist, artistic work, and audience. (p. 205)

Do I detect a Reynoldsian editor encaverned on Nassau Street, and worried about what is not explicit to idiots, or has the Spectre of strong Eaves gotten in the last word? And how would Blake have liked the very last sentence: "Seen properly, any one of the three can be seen from the perspective of the others; as, in Coleridge's formula, multeity in unity, unity in multeity?" Formula? A Mock! Multeity in unity? Isn't the notion corrupted by all that nonsense having to do with harmony inherited from the silly Greek and Latin slaves of the sword? The Blake-Coleridge connection is too abstract. But I grant Eaves his problem and allow him this slip, after proper chastisement. The critic must always, I am afraid, have a little of the Reynoldsian pedagogue about him, though perhaps

not *in* him. The shape of Eaves's book (except for the lapse of the epilogue) is consistent with its message.

To be frank, I am having a good deal of trouble writing this review because I am in fundamental agreement with Eaves's argument. Eaves has written an excellent, thoughtful book, which performs a synthesis useful to all scholars and students of neoclassicism, romanticism, and the history of criticism, both in the visual and the literary arts. Having to say all this in Eaves's own journal is embarrassing; it ought to be obligatory in such situations to take issue with the author if only to escape accusations of complicity. Therefore, I begin this paragraph again in a deliberately crankier mood, conjured up into a hoar frost and a mildew: I have had a good deal of trouble writing this review because I have found myself vacillating from page to page between "Indeed, that must be so" and "Yes, I know, get on with it." This may only be to say that Eaves leaves no page of Blake (outside the poems) on the subject of art unturned. The two fundamental themes of Eaves's work have to do with (1) Blake's wiry bounding line of "rectitude," which contains both an artistic and an ethical principle, and (2) the concept of identity, which begins as a term denoting the integrity of artistic imagination and becomes a term redeeming the relation artist-work-audience. Eaves believes that Blake reestablishes the Enlightenment value of line over color, but on new, romantic grounds. The line is now connected with the idea that art always expresses personal identity. As Blake takes the value of linearity over into romanticism, so does he take over the idea of expression from the Enlightenment idea that expression is the expression of character in a painting to the romantic idea that it is the expression of the artist not just *in* but *as* the work. These points are the principal themes of Eaves's first and second chapters. The third offers six variations on the theme of the identity of form and content in Blake, and the final chapter, which is a repetition of Eaves's well known *PMLA* article of 1980, carries the Blakean notions of identity into the relation of work to audience, thus completing a four-fold unification of the fallen, dispersed trinity.

One of the vexing aspects of the history of Blake criticism has been the lack of common interest, taste, and vocabulary among art and literary critics. Eaves observes rightly that Blake raises issues important in the history of painting and printmaking rather than in the history of literature. This is perhaps stated not quite rightly: the point is that the figurative language of Blake's theory is drawn from the visual arts and their criticism and that literary commentators have not given enough attention to this fact. At the same time, art historians have not paid sufficient attention to the relation of Blake's words to his visual art. Eaves remarks,

A reader coming to Blake from his poetry will have more difficulty figuring out Blake's objections to generalization than someone who thinks of it as Blake did: as a blurred line unable to decide its own

identity. The complication is that Blake, who did not think of his principles as visual rather than literary, applied them to both arts and implicitly to all arts. Because art historians have a clear view of one aspect of the history behind Blake's theory, they have tended to conclude that the theory is simpler than it is. Because literary historians see it in a distorted context, they have tended to conclude that it is more bizarre than it is, or no proper theory at all. . . . (p. 5)

This seems to me an exact assessment of the situation and an excellent reason for Eaves to have written his book.

I add that Blake's work was for a long time caught between a view of him as an outsider in the eighteenth century and one that saw him as an outsider in the early nineteenth. The result was that he was not taught in the academy by specialists in either field. Eaves doesn't mention this, but he makes some interesting observations connected with this now happily distant phenomenon. Eaves points out that Blake's principle of the line repeats Enlightenment glorification of the line over color. In Enlightenment theory the emphasis on drawing and line comes from doubts about the senses. Color is merely a secondary quality of experience. Line is connected with objectivity or primary experience, and it shapes nature according to intellect rather than sense. Blake also glorifies the line, not because it produces a primary imitation of the real, but because it is the projection of an internality, the intellect, but an intellect that unifies experience according to imagination. Nature as primary may have no outline. Imagination is outline. This projective imagination, I might add, is the contrary of the form of art theory that offers us either a subjective, totally internal act or an objective, totally external one—Mallarmé on the one hand; Zola, on the other.

At this point, Eaves makes a shrewd remark that reveals the important difference between Blake and certain other romantic theorists: "While Blake's shift to imagination is characteristically romantic, his opposition of mind and nature is not. . . . the center of authority is imagination, which (to put it simply) finally realizes that the external is a metaphor invented by the imagination itself . . ." (p. 32). This is an immensely important point. It might have been approached somewhat differently by a more rigorous examination of just how Blake uses the words "nature" and "imagination" in his writings. Eaves's important notion of the external as a metaphor suggests that with Blake we might profit from starting with his words when we discuss him and thereby avoid misunderstandings that arise when we seem to be positing meanings that we think the word "nature" *ought* to have in Coleridge, Wordsworth, Blake, and others. The notion of the projection of externality in a word suggests a theory of fictions, not in the sense of a falsity but in the sense of a creation. It is everywhere in Blake, not least in his creation of the emanation. Projection, as I have described it, allows Eaves to make the claim for art as personal identity, and that connects with the identification of the line as the true emanation of imagination.

I wish that Eaves had explored the word "identity" a little more for its richness and paradoxicality. Identity is at least twofold, and I think Blake would have insisted on the identity of its twofoldness. "Identity" means, of course, self-identity; but it also suggests identity with other things: sameness and difference at once, which is the true contrary to the negation difference/indifference. Eaves is very good on the idea of self-identity, but doesn't do much of anything with the side of the term I would call "identity," though he edges up to it by claiming Blake thinks metaphorically. At the end of the first chapter, Eaves leaves undeveloped the important point, "... making a line signals readiness for relation [identity?], and the result is the opening of a line of communication" (p. 44). This isn't quite what I have in mind, but it is close, and matters become closer as the book proceeds.

In the title of Eaves's second chapter "Works: Artists Expressing Themselves as Works of Art," we see all at once the important Blakean idea that the projective power of imagination puts one into one's words, leaving for the critic only an historical husk in the form of an anti-author to query about intention. Expression for Blake has moved from the periphery of enlightenment theory, where it does not refer to the artist but to what is expressed *as* the work. This chapter weaves a neat opposition between Blake and Reynolds on this point, claiming for Blake the "only truly unmediated vision in English romanticism" (p. 55)—a large claim to be made about any poet today, but one I am willing to accept, with certain reservations, as a fair means by which to contrast Blake with Wordsworth and Coleridge. It might make sense, however, to say that in Blake's long poems a sort of mediation is performed by the fallen world, the stubborn structure of the language, under the hammer of Blake-Los. In the end, though, the consolidation of this error is consumed by a world of pure conversation behind which there need be nothing. There is some careful argument by Eaves in this chapter, contrasting Coleridge and Blake on the creative process: "The difference," he says, "can be measured by the extent to which Blake's arguments overwhelm descriptions of process with identities" (p. 56). But there are times when the connections Eaves makes are too easy, as in his brief comment on "negative capability" or his willingness to equate "organic" as used by Coleridge and the German romantics with Blake's "physiognomic." He should be more sensitive to the differences here, particularly since he claims we must pay attention to the figurative character of theoretical discourse. Again here it would be better to work outward from Blake's use of certain words rather than inward from somewhere else.

These have been for the most part quibbling remarks. One readership for this book ought to be the historians and critics of the visual arts, who need to escape the criticism Eaves makes of Reynolds:

Reynolds' suspicion of any style that appears characteristic makes it no surprise to find Gainsborough's style compared to the language of a person who doesn't know what he is saying as he tries to communicate the impression of an energetic mind. But the most remarkable feature of the description lies in the implication that Gainsborough cannot know the language he speaks because others do not know it. This is of course an extreme and unconscious Enlightenment parody of the oracular knowledge that the oracle may deliver but cannot understand. The resulting vision of one who speaks, then steps outside oneself to learn one's own language with a group, then presumably translates oneself for oneself into the language of the community, is a stunning indicator of one of the limits of Enlightenment comprehension. (p. 75)

Concluding Chapter Two, Eaves remarks that Blake's idea of originality lies in the originality (identity) of the human personality "expressed in works of art that perfectly unite conception and execution" (p. 77). It is interesting to notice that a century later Yeats completes the movement that begins with the romantic wrenching of the term "character" and opposes the older notion of character to "personality." This is further carried out in his primary/antithetical distinction. Character is imposed from without; personality emanates from within.

The third chapter considers the identity of conception and execution mentioned in the quotation above. This is, as I have said, a very long chapter—almost half the book—and like Wordsworth we are never quite certain whether we have passed the summit. Early on, Eaves reminds us again that Blake's vocabulary is conservative Enlightenment and his position radical romantic. The chapter is a thorough investigation of ideas surrounding the following two statements of Blake taken as one: "Execution is only the result of invention" and "Invention depends altogether upon execution or organization." Eaves claims that Blake's assertion of "significance in every letter and mark differs fundamentally from similar assertions associated with various critical schools of this century that want to emphasize the formal and internal properties of the work apart from any notion of the author's intention" (p. 83). Eaves does not name these schools or discuss them so we are left only with the assertion. I believe it is misleading and in some sense perhaps wrongly put. Blake's view doesn't differ so much fundamentally as superficially from, say, Wimsatt and Beardsley on the "intentional fallacy," where their argument is principally the practical one that as critics we can't exhume a dead author and ask the ultimate question, nor if we could ought we to trust the author's answer. They write from a practical critic's perspective. Now, indeed, Blake's insistence on the artist *becoming* his work and the historical artist as only a husk or elaborate fiction of externality or anti-author can be made to be very close to Wimsatt and Beardsley's position, though a different perspective.

There are parts of this chapter that could have been compressed if Eaves were to have queried certain words Blake uses as words. What is really contained in Blake's use of "essence" and "accident"? Why does Blake deliberately

insist on *his* meanings for these words and not Reynolds'. Does this behavior distort our sense of Reynolds' intent? What is involved in their respective uses of "genius"? Are they talking about the same thing? But in general Eaves is on target. Blake sees Reynolds degrading the individual in favor of the community of taste, which for Blake gives a false meaning to the word "genius." What is a false meaning? How does one find the true meaning? Or is it, as Stanley Fish has implied, all a matter of power? Some previous critics have defended Reynolds because they say he is writing to audiences of students at different stages and that this rhetorical situation brings an air of pedagogic practicality into Reynolds' discourse that Blake pays no respect to. Eaves's answer here is that Reynolds' principles lend themselves to the sort of pedagogy that Reynolds indulges in and that is the trouble. True enough, and in this sense it is surely correct to say that Blake was fair to meet the argument where he does. But whether Blake was not something of his own enemy in the tenor of his remarks remains a question. Here (fn. p. 95) Eaves becomes more a champion of the resentful and self-pitying Blake than I think he need be.

Eaves's chapter carefully interweaves the idea of the identity of invention and execution with Blake's argument that art is not progressive, that artists may improve within their identities but that *art* does not. He makes the excellent point that Blake's experimental pictures parody the idea of experiment (p. 113) with its connections back to Bacon as the avenue to truth. He invents the term "anti-experiment" for this, as one wishes Blake had allowed Los to invent "anti-system" for the famous speech in *Jerusalem*: "I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's." Eaves shows that for Blake the statement that an artist has not brought something off ought to be corrected to say that the artist produced something trivial. There was no previous thing in the sense of an idea to be brought off. (In this matter Blake is more radical than Croce, who joined intuition and expression, but separated them off from externalization.) Eaves observes that Enlightenment pedagogy can't grasp this example of identity and produces differences, principally those of invention/execution and form/content. Eaves then quotes his co-editor Morton Paley (for him no doubt this was as obligatory as my own carping here) as saying of Blake's view that when form and content are together, works are successful. But Eaves goes on to say that for Blake form and content are always together, and this is what defines art as an activity. It is the nature of the activity to be so. "On Homer's Poetry" is puzzling on this point until one reads it as Blake's complaint that the identity that must be there is obscure to him. (I would have liked to see a full analysis of this work right about here in Eaves's text.)

I believe there is a third term missing from Eaves's discourse. What he calls "identity" is too much like

"indifference." The term "identity" ought to be reserved as a contrary to the negation difference/indifference, in which difference is always going to win out, as do soul over body and good over evil in Blake's fallen history—and as difference indeed does in the discourse of structuralism and post-structuralism. Art holds for identity against this negation, which is necessary to the discourses of the natural sciences and is employed in the social sciences (sometimes to their detriment).

Blake's identity opposes the negation. Needless to say, by the nature of what they do, critics have to separate form and content even as they theoretically claim their identity. They need the tool of irony for this.

Inevitably Eaves comes to discussion of such things as "decorum" and stylistic bowdlerizations. Much fun is had at the expense of Roger De Piles' and Jonathan Richardson's scorecards of artists' abilities in composition, drawing, coloring, and expression respectively. This is difference with a vengeance. Blake's remark is sufficient: "Instead of Following One Great Master . . . follow a Great Many Fools." In connection with stylistic bowdlerization Eaves offers us a marvelous, dreadful example in his reproductions of Blake's "Resurrection of the Dead" and William Bell Scott's "There Shall Be No More Death," based on it. The latter is a travesty of stylistic bowdlerization resulting in an identity of the most inane sort.

Eaves's last chapter is already familiar to romantic period scholars from its *PMLA* appearance. In this new context it accounts for the third part of Eaves's triad. Eaves sees another side to the picture of romantic privacy and suspicion of audience. These things, he rightly claims, were not a necessary product of romantic theories. Indeed, it seems to me, they are a necessary end point for the Enlightenment attitude that makes subject and object differ, leaving the negated subject the only domain of art. The romantics inherited this problem, and some accepted it as truth. Not Blake. For Blake, the issue is whether public tastes will so dominate artists that they will not be able to break out of stifling conventions and give in to outrageous expectations. Blake never philosophically indulged in the negation subject/object except to raise up its contrary. The true opponent, as Eaves rightly sees, is an artificial public and connoisseurship. Eaves contrasts the Enlightenment ideal of logical detachment to the romantic one of empathetic identification and notes that the themes of Blake's illuminated works are: (1) the battle to reintegrate the disintegrating identity of the artist and thus reunite the artist with the work; (2) the struggle to reunite the artist with the audience of art. This may be taking a somewhat special view of what Blake's works are about (separating form and content), but there is no doubt that these themes are abstractable from the works, just as Eaves finds them in Blake's more "direct" statements.

Relation of work to audience raises the old question (said by some to be a red herring) of value judgments and

how they might be expressed. If identification is the appropriate mode of reading, and if it is opposed to logical detachment, then Eaves must believe that Northrop Frye is correct in claiming that *statements* of value judgments are always based on some extra-artistic principle in politics, psychology, or whatever. This similarity to the views of Frye is not the only one in Eaves's book. In the emphasis of the following paragraph, coming at a moment of climactic importance in Eaves's book, the relation to Frye is clear, even though the emphasis at the end sounds, out of context, more Shelleyan than anything else:

In theories that generate a social order from the individual, public is an expression of private, in contrast to a theory like Marxism, in which the true form of the individual is an expression of social need. By defining the individual in terms of imagination, the theory produces a social order of imagination, just as, by defining the individual in terms of economic needs, other theories produce an economic order for "economic man." Under the social contract generated from economic values, individuals are bound one to another by the cash nexus; in the religious and artistic versions the nexus is love or some other strong emotion that conditions all other relationships. (p. 196)

Eaves's view of Blake's theory belongs in the tradition of "symbolic form" criticism with which Frye has strong affinities. The often unrecognized patron saint of that tradition is William Blake. I'm not about to quarrel with this latest expression of that tradition.

Joachim J. Scholz. *Blake and Novalis: A Comparison of Romanticism's High Arguments*. Frankfurt am Main, Bern, Las Vegas: Peter Lang, 1978. ["European University Papers," Series XVIII: Comparative Literature, vol. 19]. 397 pp., SFr. 64.00

Reviewed by Detlef W. Dörrbecker

This rather expensive book, reproduced photographically from the corrected typescript, contains Joachim Scholz's Ph.D. thesis, written under the guidance of such literary critics as Victor Turner, Manfred Hoppe, and Edith Hartnett at the University of Chicago. A comparative study may investigate the reception and remodeling of one poet's works in the writings of another author, and this is what all the recent publications on Blake's *Milton* have in common, despite their otherwise differing approaches. Or a comparative study may make a parallel investigation of the formal and iconographical concepts of two or more

poets who were contemporaries of each other, and this is what Scholz attempts in *Blake and Novalis*. (The same subject has been dealt with before in a short essay by Jean Wahl, in Jacques Roos's study of Boehme's and Swedenborg's influence on early romanticism, and, more recently, in the dissertations of Susan Skelton and Amala M. Hanke.)

Joachim J. Scholz might have written a rewarding and competent book on either Novalis or Blake. The strictures hinted at in the following notes come in where he tries to write on both of these poets at the same time. Thus where I disagree with the results of his study I deal with more general problems in methodology which by no means are those of Scholz alone. What makes two poets comparable? Is it their biography?—certainly not as long as we try to take poetry as an independent and peculiar mode of gaining knowledge. Is it their subject matter or their style?—though the emphasis is clearly on the former, Scholz sometimes attempts to work both fields. If, nevertheless, I argue that his book fails where he actually compares the German romantic with the London poet and painter, it is because of a "mechanical parallelization" which takes style and subject matter as only loosely connected, and leaves the level of creative method (which initially unifies the realms of style and content) unexamined. Comparability in literature must have to do with similar workings of the poetic imagination, and the use of comparable methods of molding the material which outward experience supplies must be more important than the arbitrary allusions in any two poets' "high arguments."

Knowing what I knew about the subject matter, the imagery, and the style of Blake's and Novalis' major works, I could not imagine that an attempt to compare (for example) the *Hymnen an die Nacht* with the nine "Nächte" of *Vala* would lead to any remarkable new insights. Now, having read Scholz's study, I still cannot see that the actual contrasts in both poetical structure and imagery are outweighed by the rather abstract similarities in content which are brought forward by the author. In addition—and arguing from the stance provided by Blake's own aesthetics—I doubt that there is much critical value in a method which is based on the division or separation of the minute particulars of form from the meaning of a work of art. They then are conceived of in terms of "abstract philosophy," and only as such do they become "intermeasurable" with each other. And yet "Art & Science cannot exist but in minutely organized Particulars / And not in generalizing Demonstrations of the Rational Power" (*Jerusalem* 55:62–63). Even though the latter tendency is perpetually lurking behind the pages of this book, Scholz's work may still serve as an example of both the advantages and the dangers of the comparative method. In his finest moments the author actually succeeds in elucidating one poet's work by confronting it with the other's, and one might argue that, in the end, it