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R E V I E W

The British Neo-Romantics, 1935-1950, an
exhibition held at Fischer Fine Art Ltd.

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as the subtitle suggests, on the scheme of Innocence and Experience (which is to say that the lighter matters go mostly in the first act and the heavier in the second). Pastiche and disregard for chronology are virtually inevitable in a biographical monodrama that must be squeezed into a mere hour and a half, but they impose on the dramatist a special need for care in the selection, arrangement, and emphasis of his materials. How well Hayes has fared in this regard may be gauged from the many Blakean lines that he has reset in false contexts. For instance, when Blake exclaims, "O rose thou art sick," he is not addressing himself on the subject of his final illness; "A Poison Tree" is not a personal confession of his envious disposition, nor is the "foe" of that poem Sir Joshua Reynolds; when he speaks of exploring "the secrets of the vegetable world," he does not mean that he likes taking long nature walks.

The playwright's treatment of Blake's texts seems as capricious at times as his juggling of their contextual settings. In a presentation of "London," for example, Hayes relies entirely on the Notebook draft, ignoring the authority of the final etched version. Furthermore the Hayes text conflates readings that Blake saved for etching with readings deleted at early stages of the poem's drafting. Among Hayes's dubious restorations are "dirty" (in place of the famous "charter'd") and the earliest of three rejected try-outs for the fourth stanza:

But most the midnight harlot's curse
From every dismal street I hear,
Weaves around the marriage hearse
And blasts the newborn infant's tear.

Left unexplained is the playwright's decision to edify his Stratford audience with these inchoate beginnings rather than the imperishable lines that Blake himself chose to print and reprint for half a lifetime.

A nineteenth-century aura hangs over this production. The Blake of Elliott Hayes is essentially Gilchrist's Blake. Many of the charming though dubious old anecdotes are here—William and Catherine playing Adam and Eve, Blake swept away by the mob in the Gordon riots—and most of the biographical data presented in the play come from Gilchrist's early chapters (very closely paraphrased in some spots). The result is a skewing of biographical emphasis, for the really key events in Blake's life are simply left out. There is room for Blake's boyhood encounter with Goldsmith, for his participation in the opening of the tomb of Edward I (a mere conjecture in Gilchrist here turned into fact), and for his courtship, but no mention of Hayley or the three years at Felpham, no failed exhibition of 1809, no Ancients, and, most astonishingly, considering its inherent drama and its theatrical potential, nothing of Schofield and the sedition trial at Chichester (one begins to wonder how far Hayes actually read in his biographical sources). In artistic and intellectual matters, the situation is much the same. There is a reasonably good representation of Blake's views on art, but not a

word in the play about illuminated printing. There are random passages about "vision," a dash of libertarian politics, but nothing on Bacon, Newton, and Locke, no doctrine of contraries, no allusion to Blake's mythic cosmos or even to his interest in myth making. Hayes nearly redeems himself by reserving to a climactic point the great passage from *Milton*, "I come in self-annihilation and the grandeur of Inspiration" (splendidly rendered by Campbell), but this "nearly" is not good enough, coming as it does after such extended thinness of substantive content.

Hayes, who is a member of the Stratford Festival staff, received his commission to write *Blake* from the Festival itself. This then is very much an in-house script, which raises an important point. Stratford is Canada's major classical theatre and an international tourist attraction. Many people come to see its plays who have never seen any other live drama. We can only be grateful therefore that it has chosen to celebrate Blake and to make him known to its audiences in an engaging performance. At the same time, however, the Stratford Festival bills itself as an important educational resource, for which it is handsomely subsidized by the Canadian and Ontario governments. In what is essentially a documentary dramatization, it has an obligation to provide accuracy and substance as well as entertainment. Instead *Blake* gives us charm and eloquent locution, and along with these, trivia, avoidance of substance, and garbled texts. If this play comes to your neighborhood, see it but take care to warn students.

A text of the play is published by Echo Hill Ltd., Stratford, Ontario (1983), and is available from the Stratford Festival.

The British Neo-Romantics, 1935–1950, an exhibition held at the Fischer Fine Art Ltd., London, 13 July–19 August 1983, and National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, 27 August–25 September 1983. Catalogue with foreword by Peter Cannon-Brookes. 40 pp., 75 illustrations.

Reviewed by Martin Butlin

It has long been suggested that there is a line of development from Blake, through the Ancients, to a school of British artists working in relatively isolated conditions during the Second World War. Such a development was spelled out by examples in a section preceding the main exhibition of Blake's work held at the Tate Gallery in 1978 and was at least in part the argument of the exhibition under

review. The first section, of thirty-two works, included examples of Blake's illustrations to Thornton's Virgil, prints by Linnell, Calvert and Samuel Palmer, by whom there was also a sepia drawing, and a further group of prints ranging in date from 1913 to the 1930s by artists such as F.L. Griggs, Robin Tanner, Paul Drury and Graham Sutherland. In some cases the feeling of continuity arose more from details of technique than from overriding mood or purpose, but in a general sense a re-evocation in the early twentieth century of the aspect of Blake's late work particularly influential on his followers could be seen.

The second section of the exhibition, eleven works under the heading "Emergence of a New Style," spelt out the continuation of this development in further, more mature works by Sutherland together with a group by John Piper and examples of the work of other artists; Paul Nash's surrealist works were mentioned in the introduction to this section but were not represented in the exhibition itself. John Piper's works introduced a new element in British twentieth-century neo-romanticism, the influence of J.M.W. Turner; his name, together with that of Caspar David Friedrich, was indeed mentioned in the introduction to the first part of the catalogue.

The main body of the exhibition, entitled "The Flowering of Neo-Romanticism," consisted of sixty-eight works by a fairly homogeneous group of artists including Michael Ayrton, John Minton, John Craxton, Keith Vaughan, Robert Colquhoun, Robert MacBryde, further works by Piper and Sutherland, Ceri Richards, Bryan Wynter, William Scott, David Jones and others. Francis Bacon and Lucien Freud had, apparently, refused to allow themselves to be represented. In many works the visionary tradition of Blake could be seen in one way or another. The monochrome drawings of Minton and Craxton clearly pursued the development in engraving of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century examples earlier in the exhibition. Works by Sutherland, Richards and Vaughan combined text and design in a way that could perhaps be traced back to Blake, though here there is also a strong French influence; in fact in many of these artists the example of Picasso was as strong as that of any local British artist. David Jones, unfortunately represented by a single work only, was perhaps the artist most akin in spirit to the tradition. Other claimants, such as Cecil Col-

John Minton (1917-1957), *Summer Landscape*. Pen and ink, 62.2 x 70.7 cm., 1945. Private Collection.



lins (who was represented, if only as a result of pressure from my colleagues, in the Tate display), were not included. On the other hand "Suburban Garden" of 1947 by Victor Pasmore, painted shortly before his conversion to abstraction, seemed alien to the whole spirit of the exhibition.

The exhibition clearly suffered not only from the abstention of Bacon and Freud but also from the exigencies of what works happened to be available for loan at the time. What is now needed is a far more thorough examination of how far, and in what precise respect, twentieth-century artists can be said to have returned either consciously or unconsciously to the imaginative landscape and figurative tradition established by Blake and Palmer, and, alternatively, how much of this can be seen as an independent line of descent from the tradition established by Turner, whose influence is already apparent in the later works of Palmer and Linnell. That there is some continuity is now clearly apparent, thanks to exhibitions such as this.

David Punter. *Blake, Hegel and Dialectic*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1982. 268 pp. \$23.00.

Reviewed by Nelson Hilton

David Punter obviously is interested in Blake and in dialectic; in addition to this book, he has published an article on "Blake, Marxism and Dialectic" (*Literature and History* 6 [1977]). The shifting middle terms of the article and the book—which was completed, he writes, in 1975—suggests something about the nature of his interest in their brackets, an interest confirmed by another article of the same general time and orientation, "Blake: Creative and Uncreative Labour" (*Studies in Romanticism* 16 [1977]). In all of these, Punter's recurrent concern is with Blake's "conception of the social role of poetry" ("Blake, Marxism and Dialectic," p. 219), Blake's "attitude toward the social determination of form, an attitude which places the figure of the poet at a crucial point in the dialectic of social experience" ("Blake: Creative and Uncreative Labour," p. 561), his vision of Blake's and Hegel's "doctrine based on social progress" and its roots in "objective social changes" (pp. 253, 255). There are the predictable references to Herbert Marcuse and N.O. Brown. Such formulations may strike us now as somewhat passé—

not that the social issue, after Thatcher and Reagan, has in any way progressed—but because of our deepening sense that the informational, technological complexities underway are reformatting all vestiges of our classical, nineteenth-century sense of the "social." To speak of the "human-shaped" world while the Spirit was moving toward a recognition of the disappearance of man would be to throw sand against the wind. Of course we will come to the question of which (whose) side is Blake on. Still, I think that *Blake, Hegel and Dialectic* would have had more effect if it had been published when first completed; as it is, it seems likely to become just a glitch in the graph of Blake studies.

So, to begin with the perennial question, "what is dialectic"? As I understand Punter's view, dialectic names, if named it can be, the progression that orders and emerges from the strife of contraries, the major experienced form being History. At any rate, through initial sections on Heraclitus, Giordano Bruno, and Boehme, Punter makes clear his stand with [his] Hegel that "formal perception of contrariety is not tantamount to a realisation of dialectic" (p. 35). The idea of Progression is essential, for Punter, if we are to have "any notion of *real* change, as opposed to that change which merely repeats itself cyclically" (pp. 43–44). Since the fundamental contrary is that of (potentially) infinite man and finite nature, the progression, by some uncertain logic, must involve the social dimension. Of course, since Blake and Hegel both reject "a simple high view of 'human nature,'" they are "therefore prevented from adopting the optimistic belief that progress is necessarily direct" (p. 222). Nonetheless, it's still there, the spectre of a theology, a teleology. So in the "Conclusion" Punter summarizes:

Blake's dialectic and Hegel's are indeed dialectics of "contraries and progression", and it is, as we have said in several contexts, the element of progression which constitutes the advance made over previous version of dialectical thought. The necessity for conceiving of a doctrine based on social progress emerges, it seems fair to say, from the experience of doubt and from the struggle against disillusion. (p. 253)

True enough, we might agree, for Hegel—noting Walter Kaufmann's observation that "So far from closing his eyes to the misery of humanity, Hegel needed his work, his philosophy to cope with it. He tried to show himself and others that the indubitably monstrous sufferings recorded throughout history had not been altogether for *nothing*."¹ Yet despite the edifying outcome of a "doctrine based on social progress," one wonders what would result, to adapt Punter's expression, from a struggle *for* disillusion. All of which is to say that Hegel's dialectic is part and parcel of his Absolute Idealism,² whereas for Blake, as Punter notes in "Blake, Marxism and Dialectic," there is "the question of whether Blake is setting out this [Hegel-like] theory of knowledge on a materialist or an idealist basis" (p. 233).