

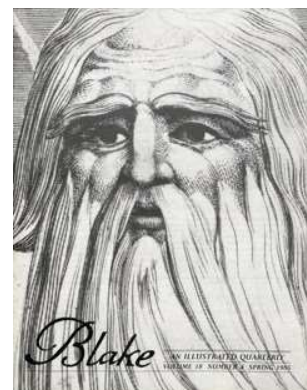
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R E V I E W

Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution*
(1789-1820)

Nelson Hilton

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REVIEWS

REPRESENTATIONS OF REVOLUTION (1789-1820)

Ronald Paulson



Ronald Paulson. *Representations of Revolution (1789-1820)*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1983. xviii + 398 pp., 98 illus. \$29.95.

Reviewed by Nelson Hilton

The Goya painting of Saturn devouring one of his children, which adorns the dust jacket of this book, has always seemed to me somewhat ridiculous. Intriguing as it naturally was to my mind when young, I nonetheless remember even then being unable to relate the giant to the well-developed form he clutches. For me the picture does not offer a Paulsonian moment of grotesque collapse into undifferentiation but rather a comic incongruity or disparity: a scarecrow bogeyman. But in

just this way, I hear the book saying, are anxious pre-sentiments of castration, *vagina dentata*, *penis captivus* and the *Devoradora* or devourer-of-men (all from p. 369) repressed.

The painting offers an apt cover for *Representations of Revolution*, whose last chapter—over a fourth of the book—is devoted to Goya and which is loosely framed by references to Pierre Vergniaud's 1793 observation that "The revolution devours its own children." Paulson finds these "the words that reverberated abroad in England and in Spain," for "Vergniaud's words are the most terrible of all those spoken" (24). The chapter on Goya builds to a discussion of the *Saturn*, and "behind the Saturn is more specifically Vergniaud's words describing the real process of the French Revolution" (367). "The real process," as a pervasive substratum of Freudian imagery suggests, involves "the relation of generations" (the sublime, the book wants to suggest, is the coming-to-consciousness of sublimation). So Vergniaud reminds us that "The cannibalistic devouring of the father by his jealous sons . . . becomes [sic] the primal horde (ironic fraternity)" (24). On the other hand, Goya's *Saturn* "does not represent the primal horde but the saturnine Father devouring his sons . . . a turning of the tables on the cannibalistic sacrifice" (377). Thus does the book commit its own act of revolution, that act which (it says) "pulls us back to the very origins of culture . . . the moment when there is no differentiation between devourer and devoured, between parent and child, between artist and object" (384). Such drift toward eliding difference is the hallmark of the grotesque, the "defective twin of the sublime" which is "all in all the dominant aesthetic mode of the period" (379, 7).

One example of this aesthetic is presented in Chapter 4, "Blake's Lamb-Tiger." As it is later summed up: "If Burke saw the Revolution as the sublime of terror and Paine saw it as a beautiful pastoral, Blake, by bringing together the two interpretations, the sublime and the beautiful, emphasized the incongruous and unnatural juxtaposition—the tiger that is half-lamb—and so implicitly classified the phenomenon . . . as grotesque . . ." (170). The argument here hinges on what Paulson terms "Blake's central realization of the discrepancy between word and image" (106). In the illustration to "The Tyger," "The tiger no longer burns bright: it has lost its fire and its nocturnal ferocity, its revolutionary figuration" (99). Wellek and Warren's snooty dismissal of Blake's ability to illustrate his poetry—"A grotesque little animal is supposed to illustrate 'Tyger! Tyger! burning bright' [!]"—is revolutionized. But the point is confused in this rhetorically curious contrast: "We see before us on the page, in the Urizenic words and the Blakean image, the angel's [i.e. Burkean] vision and the reality" (99). Such elisions of difference are scattered throughout the discussion of "Songs of Innocence

and Experience [sic] (the combined work)" (89).² Regarding *Songs of Innocence*, for example, we are told that "there is no significant level of supraliteral meaning" (one wonders what Paulson makes of the two-day-old speaker of "Infant Joy"). The inadequacy of this formulation speaks for itself in the characterization of *Songs of Experience* ("Blake's most sublimated representation of revolution") which echoes, at least in half, the earlier, non-supraliteral *Songs*: "children imprisoned in the houses of their parents, in the black coffins of chimneys, sometimes in their black bodies (of slaves), and in the cages of schools" (117). Here we learn that "The School Boy" is a "typical" instance of the collection, "in which Blake opines 'How can the bird [etc.]'" (117). Such insight into authorial motive leads Paulson to argue that "On a primary level of Blake's intention the tiger exists in relation to the word *tiger* in its 1790s' context" (97). There is, evidently, no difference between "tyger" and "tiger"—hence the easy confidence that "'The Tyger' starts out as a description of the tiger" (101). (Is there no difference if we say it "starts out as a description of the tyger"?) To cap this discussion, we have the proposal that "Blake's literary source in Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* and counterrevolutionary polemic" was supplemented by the opening injunction of Horace's *Ars poetica* against joining opposites like tigers and lambs.

The height of confused differentiation is the note transposing the dates of Rowlandson and Blake (111), not worth mention in itself except for the novel information that "Rowlandson [i.e. Blake] was born 28 November 1756 or 1757—there is some argument as to which it was" (Professor Bentley please note). The wary reader might mark as well that the work by Macpherson is *Oithona*, not "Oothoon." And it's odd that while Paulson sees *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* as connecting "Leviathan and tygers in the vision of the French Revolution conjured by a Burkean angel" (98), he neglects the concrete referential possibilities of the Paris Leviathan appearing (seen from the Greenwich meridian) "to the east, distant about three degrees." The omission of any reference to Blake's overt representation of revolution, *The French Revolution*, surprises as well.

But if the chapter on Blake will not entirely satisfy readers of this journal, the other chapters present a more engaging story, an instructive reminder of the overwhelming and unprecedented experience the Revolution offered all onlookers. The succinct chapter on *The Monk*, *Caleb Williams*, and *Frankenstein*, coming halfway through the book, leads us to agree, more strongly than before, that the popularity of gothic fiction in the 1790s and beyond "was due in part to the widespread anxieties and fears in Europe aroused by the turmoil in France finding a kind of catharsis in tales of darkness, confusion, blood, and horror" (221). And Paulson's detailed sense of the century's aesthetic currents gives us some provocative

formulations; discussing Addison and Burke, for example, he finds that "Beauty for both is repose, a comfortable, perhaps enervating status quo, but the sublime projects the mind forward to ultimates, positing a confrontation with power and change that for Burke at any rate is the essence of terror" (69). But for Blake, we might add, such confrontation is "the essence of vision," while such "beauty" is to be seen (and heard!) as "Beulah," the sweet and pleasant "Shadow to repose in" (*M* 31.7).

Paulson's wide knowledge of artistic practice, as well, leads to some intriguing possibilities: commenting on the self-portrait frontispiece to Goya's *Caprichos*, he notes that "It is difficult not to think of Blake's piper and his bard, who are established before each phase. . . . The practice goes back to the artist's placing his head on the frontispiece of his folio of prints" (342). One would like to know more about this. The wonderfully illustrated discussions of Rowlandson and Gillray constitute an essential introduction to the popular caricature prints (which Blake felt "ought not to abound so much as they do"). Readers of this journal who take pleasure in Rowlandson will appreciate the footnote in which Paulson shares Jeremy Potter's wicked suggestion that "If Bacon was Shakespeare, might not Blake be Rowlandson?"

The central tension in *Representations of Revolution* is that while it focuses on "how to represent the unprecedented," its awareness of the history of the sublime and grotesque suggests that "we can perceive as unprecedented only that for which we have already been prepared" (27). Different preparations equal different representations, representations (it would seem) thus "always already" there in the psycho-cultural coding of the artist. The subject isn't "revolutions of representation," the Revolution being (in Matthew Arnold's words), "a great movement of feeling, not . . . a great movement of mind." As it turns out, then, we here see Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Burke's *Reflections*, and Blake's prophetic books "as about the experience of coming to terms with the Revolution, not simply as a representation of the phenomenon itself" (251). And "the phenomenon itself"? the ellipsis in the quotation summing up Blake's use of "the tiger that is half-lamb" (para. 3, above) says that Blake thus "implicitly classified the phenomenon, or at least the complex phenomenon that appeared to external observers such as the artist, as grotesque." With such qualification, can we speak of "the phenomenon itself"? and if not, perhaps the truly revolutionary experience is that of coming to terms with one's inability to come to terms, to re-present the phenomenon itself.

We might think of our experience today in representing, even conceiving, the slightly less tumultuous but overwhelming and unprecedented electronic revolution. In one of the more interesting books on the topic,

The Network Revolution,³ Jacques Vallée tells the story of an early, visionary network project that ended up as merely a fancy, commercial text-editing system. Perhaps it is the author's French heritage that summons up his comment, "Once again, computer technology had devoured its own children" (113). Saturn again appears as the figuration of Revolution—but we might remember that the Greek figure of the original is Cronos, which returns us to the etymology of the temporal *revolutionem* and those sublimely difficult presentations, time and change. But I imagine a book on "representations of time and change (1789–1820)" turning out quite differently than this one.

¹ René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd ed., Harvest Books (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), p. 128.

² Consider this incongruent coordination: "The poem ['The Tyger'] is an expression of anxiety—anxiety transformed into terror and awe, which sums up Blake's analysis of Burke and/or of the Blakean view of the Revolution" (101); or this: "The words censor, the images naively expose, but the words also reveal subtleties denied by the visual image." (108)

³ Jacques Vallée, *The Network Revolution: Confessions of a Computer Scientist* (Berkeley: And/Or Press, 1982).

Ronald Paulson. *Book and Painting: Shakespeare, Milton, and the Bible: Literary Texts and the Emergence of English Painting*. Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1982. xi + 236 pp. with 98 illus. \$19.95.

Ronald Paulson. *Literary Landscape: Turner and Constable*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982. xii + 274 pp. with 83 illus. \$21.50.

Reviewed by Morton D. Paley

"The recent emergence of literary scholars as a new audience for art history," wrote Kester Svendsen in 1961, "has been almost as spectacular as their venture some twenty-five or thirty years ago into the history of ideas. . . ." In the subsequent quarter-century this phe-

nomenon has if anything become more pronounced. This is partly because some British artists, most notably Blake, had received insufficient attention from art historians, a situation which happily no longer exists. Another reason, however, was and is that the methods and subject matter of art history are so closely related to those of literary history that there arose, in Svendsen's words, "a special branch of cultural history over which Panofsky may be said to share domain with Lovejoy." The work of Ronald Paulson has both continued this tradition, as in his *Hogarth* (1971), and extended it, as in *Representations of Revolution* (1983)² and the two studies under consideration here.

What Paulson has been attempting in his triad of recent books may be described as the application of some recent concerns of literary criticism to the criticism of art. More specifically, he is interested in the work of art as a system of signs, signs which are not to be decoded into supposed verbal meanings but rather to be understood in relation to one another. This view of paintings does not float freely in self-referentiality but ultimately rests upon the model of Freudian dream-work. As Paulson puts it in *Literary Landscape*:

My inference is that the work of art must be taken as the totality of the symptomatic scene in which desire, meaning, and dream come together, in the sense of their joining as a shared social experience (*faute de mieux* in words). The work of art does not end with the marks on canvas any more than the 'dream' does with the fugitive, essentially lost experience of the dream itself. This model includes, therefore, the phases of creation and revision, as well as analysis, but without losing sign of the intense concentration and enigmatic beauty of the original marks on the canvas.

This approach almost necessarily occasions controversy, and the reviewer's task is complicated by the temptation to indicate agreement or disagreement with a myriad of details in the discussion of individual designs. More useful would be a consideration of what can be learned from Paulson's method, especially with respect to the