

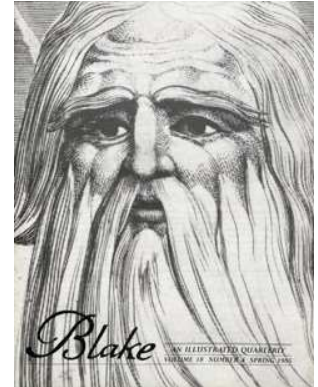
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Ronald Paulson, *Book and Painting: Shakespeare, Milton, and the Bible: Literary Texts and the Emergence of English Painting*; Ronald Paulson, *Literary Landscape: Turner and Constable*

Morton D. Paley

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 18, Issue 4, Spring 1985, pp. 223-226



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

manner in which it differs from that of literary historians who seek to translate paintings into verbal statements that are somehow assumed to be their real meanings.

Book and Painting is not, as the title might imply, a history of illustration but rather an interpretation of the rise of British painting as an intertwining of literary subjects and pictorial motives. The artist, in Paulson's view, dispenses with the text in order to render a parallel statement that derives from his own (as ever, fictive) fidelity to nature. This results in "the possibility of the mock-text," which Paulson finds exemplified equally in Butler's *Hudibras* and in Hogarth's illustrations for *Don Quixote*. "What Hogarth does is find a graphic equivalent for Quixote's delusion . . . in the sweeping baroque forms . . . of heroic painting." Such an illustrative mode is but a step away from Hogarth's comic histories, which offer "not an illustration that completes a text but an image that offers a visual substitute, with its own more or less materialized implied verbal text." In book illustration and especially in illustrations for *Hudibras* and for *Don Quixote* Paulson sees the germ of English narrative art.

Shakespearean subjects obviously require a chapter, and perhaps the most provocative part of it is the analysis of Hogarth's *Falstaff Examining His Recruits*. A word must be said here about the quality of this and some other reproductions in *Book and Painting*. *Falstaff Examining* is such a dark halftone that the reader simply cannot follow Paulson's argument about the picture and must go elsewhere (in my case to plate 22 of David Bindman's *Thames and Hudson Hogarth*) for a clear view. In other instances pictures are crowded together, the most egregious example being pp. 212–13, where reproductions of six subjects by Michelangelo and by Blake are squeezed onto two facing pages. Captions are at times too limited: one might like to know the names of the engravers of the Boydell Shakespeare plates reproduced on pp. 180 and 181. It seems odd that a publisher who can produce such a well-printed book as this one cannot provide adequate illustrative material for it.

Paulson sees Hogarth's *Falstaff* not as an affable irregular but as "closer to Blake's *Urizen*—a judge with the power and the will to send men to their deaths, assuming a blasphemous pose of fiat lux." The last detail rests on Paulson's contention that *Falstaff's* gesture resembles that of God the Father in the Sistine Chapel. Here the text is not clear, however, on whether or not we are to suppose this to be Hogarth's conscious intention, and it is also not quite clear whether Hogarth's audience is imagined as having all of both parts of *Henry IV* in mind while looking at the picture. Both assumptions would seem to me doubtful, but here two further points need to be made. Blake scholars frequently write of Blake as if he were at any time capable of referring to any detail in any one of his own works, or in Mi-

chelangelo's or Raphael's or Milton's, among others. What we normally mean by this is that the artist and to some extent his audience too are supposed to have internalized the salient features of a shared cultural tradition. In the instance of *Falstaff's* gesture, it may be regarded as drawing upon a repository of culturally recognizable images to which we all have access. As far as *Henry IV* is concerned, there is surely no reason to think Hogarth was less aware of the brutality of this scene than we are. At the same time Paulson does justice to the fact that this is not merely a satirical image. His Hogarth is "Shakespearean" in his ability to present the world through multiple perspectives rather than from a single moral position.

The Bible in English art once more involves Hogarth, but first comes a contrast between the structure of sacred history presented in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel—multi-tiered and vertically structured—and the Raphael Cartoons, where the mode of progression is for the most part horizontal. Paulson argues that "the free spatiality of Blake's paintings" follows the Sistine Chapel model while the main stream of English history painting follows that of the Cartoons (which is not, of course, to deny the importance of Raphael to Blake's art). Hogarth is discussed as an artist in the tradition of the "Raphael Bible," presenting temporal action along horizontal lines. At the same time Paulson acknowledges that the Hogarth he is presenting is "very like Blake" in that both present examples of "subversive analogizing" in producing images that at the same time support and undermine official ideology. But isn't it important to make a distinction here between what seems the genuine ambiguity of some of Hogarth's designs and the pointedness of Blake's? In Blake, for example, once we recognize the Wife of Bath as the Whore of Babylon, she *is* the Whore of Babylon, which is dissimilar to the motion Paulson sees "from either-or distinctions to both-and equations" in Hogarth's art.

Perhaps the most complex of Paulson's Hogarthian "both-and equations" is the one he argues for in *Paul Before Felix*. Here the central figure is seen as "the final summation of Hogarth the provincial, advocate of provincial (i.e., English) art," an interpretation that Paulson sees as reinforced by the signature "William Hogarth, Anglus, pinxit."³ The "Shakespearean" quality of multiple perspectives is amply supported by the various expressions of the listeners (in emulation, of course, of the Cartoons). Yet the argument that Paul's hand is, in John Ireland's words, "rather improperly placed" in relation to Drusilla, and that this is, in Paulson's words, Hogarth's way of indicating "where the source of Felix's sin lay" is less likely to compel agreement—especially as the placement of the hand does not seem all that improper. The question is similar to that concerning plate 21 of Blake's *Milton*, where it has been suggested

that more than a hand is not properly placed. Such views seem to me to ignore the nature of our perpetual consciousness of the fictitious nature of pictorial space, which precisely because it involves a two-dimensional field in which three-dimensional events are represented cannot be arbitrarily warped back into two-dimensionality.

Milton is for Paulson the great promulgator of the single moral perspective, but Miltonic subject matter can nevertheless be taken up by the "Shakespearean" artist. With respect to Hogarth's *Satan, Sin and Death*, Paulson ingeniously points out that the previous depictions, starting with Henry Aldrich's (once thought to be John Medina's) in 1688, placed Satan in the middle, and that it was Hogarth who made Sin the mediatrix, thus turning the situation into a family romance in which father and son prepare to fight around the body of the mother. This composition is later followed, each in his own way, by Fuseli, Barry, Gillray, and Blake, each bringing out some aspect of the Oedipal conflict in the Miltonic situation. In Blake's visual idiom this translates into a battle between Orc and Urizen over Vala, a phenomenon seen not as liberating but as part of a cycle from tyranny to revolution and back again. If such a view does not quite square with Paulson's statement that "Blake assumes the Other's point of view as exclusively as Milton does the deity's," that may be because the generalization applies to the Blake of the Lambeth period while the cyclical view implicit in *Satan, Sin, and Death* (c. 1800) becomes dominant slightly later.

Paulson sees Blake as an artist in the multi-leveled mode of Michelangelo, building a subversive structure of images in the leaves of his illuminated books. At the same time he embraces the interesting heresy that "the word in Blake's hands is so powerful that it overwhelms (and among other things, may make us regret) the graphic decorations with which he surrounds them." It would be too facile for us merely to cite in opposition the relatively recent dogma of Composite Art, but a book review does not allow scope for adequate discussion of this extremely important subject. What should be observed at this point, at least, is that the illuminated book that engages most of Paulson's attention here is curiously *Urizen*—the one about which the heretical view would seem hardest to defend, for if anything the powerful designs of *Urizen* threaten at times to overwhelm the text.

If Paulson's Blake adheres to a reversed Miltonic perspective, Paulson's Fuseli establishes a single perspective of his own, one which is neither the Deity's nor the Other's. Its hallmarks are foreshortening and diminishment, both of which are seen as occurring to males in relation to females, with frequently low views suggesting a child's view of the parent. Such representations are highly charged examples of Burke's sublime

of terror, as instanced by Fuseli's Bard, who "is seen from the frog's eye view with which we regarded [Fuseli's] Macbeth." One could extend this argument to help account for Blake's rejection of such Burkean-sublime pictorial situations, for despite the many affinities between Blake and Fuseli, Fuseli's world is one essentially fixed in its structures and regarded with gloomy pessimism, while in Blake's universe energy is always seeking new forms in which to manifest itself.

Book and Picture concludes with a discussion of Turner's *Juliet and Her Nurse*, one in which Paulson attempts to explain why the Nurse and not Romeo is seen by arguing that Turner characteristically chooses "the moment of doom" for his subject, as in this instance "presaged by the blackness, the earth colors, the sunset of the nurse." Although it's true that once-splendid, now-decayed Venice suggests for Turner now-splendid, to-be-decayed England, this still does not show why, having taken such liberties, Turner could not have worked in both tragic protagonists, as he did in *Hero and Leander* (admittedly a night scene). Paulson addresses the second frequently asked question about this picture more convincingly, following Jerrold Ziff in positing a conflation of Shakespeare's play with a story that does take place in Venice: that of Giuletta and Marcolini in Samuel Rogers' *Italy*, illustrated by Turner in 1836. Conflation of this sort is not limited to *Juliet and Her Nurse*, as Charles Stuckey has brilliantly demonstrated with respect to *Masaniello and the Angel*,⁴ and in his catalogue entry for *The Angel Standing in the Sun* Turner placed texts from Revelation and Rogers' *Voyage of Columbus* in sequence. He was indeed a painter for whom "glosses," to use Paulson's term, were of special importance, and this aspect of Turner, as we would expect, bulks large in *Literary Landscape*.

The multiplicity of paintings discussed in Paulson's study of Turner and Constable makes it necessary for a reviewer to focus on a few examples, and *The Angel Standing in the Sun*, because of both its own importance and the importance of texts to it, is almost inevitable. Paulson sees Turner's imagination as heliotropic, arguing that even the artist's name is significant in this respect. (If we are tempted to think that such a view is necessarily modern, we should remind ourselves that a hostile critic referred to the artist as over-Turner, and that Turner recalled with pleasure that Tom Girtin's father was a turner by trade.) The sun of course is one of the set subjects of sublimity, going back before Burke to John Dennis, and its overpowering role in Turner's art is so evident as to require no demonstration. In *The Angel*, Turner represents the text of Revelation but conflates it with Rogers' "The morning march that flashes to the sun,/ The feast of vultures when the day is done." The sun in Turner's painting is presented in all its apocalyptic force, its angel an agent of the destruction of

the captains and the kings of the earth.

Paulson follows a number of previous critics beginning with Jack Lindsay who have seen a link between Turner's Angel and Ruskin's portrayal of Turner himself in the first edition of *Modern Painters*, volume I. This passage was later deleted by Ruskin but not before it had been savagely parodied by the Reverend Eagles in his infamous *Blackwood's* review. The supposition, then, is that the Angel is the artist towering over horrid events in the world below: Delilah about to cut Samson's hair, Judith giving her handmaid the severed head of Holofernes (or receiving it from her), and Cain fleeing while Adam and Eve mourn—a group that has been compared to that in Blake's *The Body of Abel found by Adam and Eve*.⁵

Paulson recognizes that works like *The Angel Standing in the Sun* will not yield to a full verbal explication, and at the outset he states that in contrast to his *Emblem and Expression*, verbal meaning "is no longer given a privileged position here." He does nevertheless fruitfully relate literary texts to works of art, as when he sets a passage from *The Mysteries of Udolpho* against *Hannibal Crossing the Alps*, thus continuing the exploration of Turner and the Gothic initiated by Jack Lindsay in *The Sunset Ship*. Paulson is also interested in the landscape tradition Turner inherited from Wilson, Gainsborough and Louthembourg. However the formal analysis of the first two is too compressed to allow sufficient scope for the argument that "Gainsborough's characteristic curve [is] a long, loose S or pair of intersecting Ss" while in Wilson's middle distances "the C is constantly striving to close itself into an O." More immediately convincing is the contrast between "the secure place Louthembourg always allows for the viewer" in cataclysmic pictures like the Tate Gallery *Avalanche* and Turner's practice: "Turner puts his viewer in the position of the endangered person himself, leaving him no ground to stand on. Thus we can regard Turner's sublime as the shrinkage of the humans (the historical) to a mere vestige of landscape, or adding them to the landscape as a hold upon history." Here we can see the transformation of the sublime from its stagelike representation in Louthembourg to something more immediately related to internal reality. As Paulson puts it, "Turner expressed a new epistemology, one that supposes a powerful reflexivity in the subject; he projected his imagination on a landscape, creating even more than Gainsborough a landscape of the mind."

Perhaps the hardest British artist to discuss in literary terms is Constable, whose enterprise was to reject the analogy of history painting to the literary epic and to become a "natural painter" whose appeal was to the "innocent eye." Even in recognizing this ambition as resting on assumptions as literary as the traditional hierarchy of modes, we can see the fundamental difference in aim between Constable's six-footers and, say, Fuseli's

Milton Gallery. Nevertheless, Constable was a writer of lectures and of letters, and Paulson makes use of both to demonstrate "Constable's careful approximation of verbal syntax to graphic structures." More typically, however, the paintings are engaged on a psychological level. "Constable's visual image of a landscape," Paulson suggests, "may have contained a nostalgia for the open field, a desire to escape from demarcation and subdivision into the open field." Structural description is linked to psychoanalytical interpretation centering on Constable's prolonged courtship of Maria Bicknell, their long-deferred union, and Constable's eventual bereavement. With the death of Dr. Rhudde, who had prevented the marriage, Constable "finds the experiential structure he is about [in 1819] to impose upon his paintings of the Stour Valley: a complex relationship between death, decay, fertilization, spring, and resurrection."

In trying to establish such connections, Paulson is always attentive to the status of the work of art as such. His exposition escapes the occupational hazard of much Freudian criticism, reductionism, just as his prose is free of the obscurantist jargon that disfigures so much contemporary literary theory. The phenomenon cited at the beginning of this review—the incursion of literary scholars into the history of art—continues to produce results of importance to both disciplines.

¹ "John Martin and the Expulsion Scene of *Paradise Lost*," *Studies in English Literature*, 1 (1961), 67.

² See the review by Nelson Hilton elsewhere in this issue.

³ A point Blake seems to turn at least ninety degrees in his "Public Address": "Even Hogarth cannot be Copied or Improved Can Anglus never Discern Perfection but in the Journeyman's Labour?" *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), p. 582.

⁴ Charles F. Stuckey, "Turner, Masaniello, and the Angel," *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen*, 18 (1976), 155–75.

⁵ Gerald Finley, "Turner, the Apocalypse and History: 'The Angel' and 'Undine,'" *Burlington Magazine*, 121 (1979), 687–88.