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R E V I E W

William L. Pressly, *The Artist as Original Genius*

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Gilchrist's vision of Blake as hero, Swinburne's vision of Blake as rebel, Yeats's vision of Blake as symbolist, Visconti's vision of Blake as artist, and now Hutchings's vision of Blake as musician and composer. However valid these critical approaches are, they all reveal as much about the critic as they do about Blake or Blake's work. The value of this project, therefore, and there is value, rests in the attempt to understand Blake's songs in the context of the creative process. From inspiration to recording to postproduction, Hutchings has clearly struggled to understand the unity of invention and execution, just as Blake did and all musicians do. Thus, when he claims to have learned much in creating *Songs of William Blake*, I believe him and congratulate him for the insights he has gained from his investigations of Blake's creative process. How much this CD has to offer as a musical artifact, however, depends upon a shared sense of taste; those who like folk music will be more apt to enjoy this disc than those who do not.

On the question of what musical interpretations of Blake potentially can teach us about his compositional intentions, Hutchings makes a theoretical point with which I disagree. He suggests that Blake's lost melodies—the essential missing component in a creative triad of words, imagery, and music—if recovered, would help critics today better understand the complexities of Blake's paradoxical vision, just as “Blake's musical performances” may have “helped his contemporaries to navigate such ambiguities” (6-7). Here, in conjunction with the claim that “there can be no doubt that access to Blake's original melodies would provide us with important interpretive cues, cues that would help to guide and to shape our understanding of what his poems mean—or at least what they meant to the poet himself” (8), Hutchings goes one step too far. It would of course be wonderful to have access to Blake's original music, but the sphinx riddle of what meanings he intended will surely remain in the midst of whatever woes are influencing the Blakean explorer. If we had Blake's music, or even samples of his singing, we would not be any closer to a definitive interpretation of the ambiguities at the center of his works. There is, after all, no reason to believe that Blake's music would be any more explicit to idiots than his words or his images. Allowed to witness an actual Blakean performance, we would certainly know more, but the possible meanings engendered by such an experience would more likely expand the number of potential interpretations than it would reduce them—infinite particularity indeed.

In terms of the performance, the CD is never stronger than during the first song, “Introduction (Experience).” When the music begins, it has a wonderfully mysterious sense to it before the first lyrics rather jarringly declare academic folk as the genre. For me, the blow is fatal. But again, those readers who appreciate music of this variety will no doubt find much to like here. Further, the accompanying booklet is very fine in terms of conception and design. The CD and its packaging are beautiful things. Hutchings's introductory essay is accessible to those with little knowledge of Blake, and, again, he makes a good case for approaching Blake from the point of view of

music. So, although it may appear otherwise, I do recommend *Songs of William Blake*, if for no other reason than to support the attempt to draw out some of the nectar that is embedded within the silenced versions of these remarkable poems. But if the desire is for audacity and newness, a much better interpretive engagement with Blake might be Jim Jarmusch's film *Dead Man* (1995). And if folk music is not your preferred musical genre, there are many other approaches, as Hutchings recognizes in his essay. Ultimately, Hutchings must be thanked, and one hopes that musicians will continue to turn to Blake and his works for inspiration, for it is in the processes associated with these creative turns that one finds the keys to the doors of perception. Hutchings has clearly opened them for himself in creating his *Songs of William Blake*, though I stubbornly and perhaps unreasonably refuse to walk through with him. I wait in hope for an interpretation of Blake with more of an edge, more of an attitude, more like Amy Winehouse on the brink of rehab, and less like folk on the brink of academia.

William L. Pressly. *The Artist as Original Genius: Shakespeare's "Fine Frenzy" in Late-Eighteenth-Century British Art*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007. 235 pp., 123 illus. \$80.00/£68.50, hardcover.

Reviewed by Stephen C. Behrendt

A HALLMARK of William Pressly's work has always been the breadth and depth of cultural awareness that inform it. Whether the project be an exhibition catalogue or a full-blown interdisciplinary study like this book, Pressly can be counted on to bring a thorough understanding of the primary materials and the cultural contexts that help us to read those materials, both from a modern, contemporary perspective and from the point of view of the artists and their actual and virtual audiences. This is especially important today, when the proliferation of theory has so often produced critical writing that seems to begin with an author's current favorite paradigm and then proceed backward, passing any number of works of art through the sieve of that theory in order to discover that the artists were—surprise, surprise—forward-looking theorists themselves. Pressly's is the approach of the traditional (art) historian: he starts with the artifacts, moving outward from what they reveal within their own spaces and toward widening concentric rings of culture and signification. At the same time, he crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries much in the fashion of the eighteenth century, when artists and critics alike—and not a few consumers as well—ranged

easily and confidently over multiple aesthetic and cultural categories. Expansive and flexible criticism of this sort has perceptibly eroded over the past two centuries, despite the insistently visual nature of contemporary technoculture and the seemingly endless inundation of multimedia stimuli to which we are all subjected.

I mention this as a sort of preamble to my discussion of *The Artist as Original Genius* because the artists who are Pressly's subjects were responding to an analogous swerve in the direction and emphasis of popular culture during the later eighteenth century, the period upon which Pressly focuses. The central event of the eighteenth-century British "art world" was probably, by consensus, the founding of the Royal Academy in December 1768. Shamed by the absence of national academies of arts like those that existed in continental Europe, and by the hierarchical cultural nationalism implicit in all such institutions, Britain finally responded with its own Royal Academy, joining to George III's patronage the oh-so-serious direction (and annual discourses) of its founding president, Sir Joshua Reynolds. From the first, it was understood that the Royal Academy was obliged to establish a native school of history painters who would not just rival but thoroughly trump their continental contemporaries.

Within the hierarchy of the arts in the eighteenth century, grand-style history painting occupied the position analogous to the exalted place held in literature by the epic. The highest and noblest of the genres, each was understood to possess unusual national cultural significance; each presented for popular emulation a heroic figure (and an attendant constellation of values and social mores) whose exploits and fate (or perhaps better, whose destiny) were understood to be more than usually important to the nation itself and to the abilities of its citizens to define themselves as members of that nation. Pressly reminds us that it was the fatally brilliant James Barry who observed that the execution and appreciation of history painting and sculpture constituted "the tests by which the national character will be tried in after ages, and by which it has been, as is now, tried by the natives of other countries" (15). William Blake would write in 1809 that "England expects that every man should do his duty, in Arts, as well as in Arms, or in the Senate" (*Descriptive Catalogue*, E 549). Blake's allusion to Admiral Nelson's fa-

mous statement at Trafalgar was no coincidence, of course, but rather an indication of the extent to which he regarded the artist's exertions as a no less sacred *duty* to his nation and its citizens than those of the warrior and the lawmaker. Within this widely accepted rubric, the artist (for instance, the Benjamin West who created the iconic *Death of General Wolfe* [1770, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1771]) was necessarily almost as much a part of the heroic agenda of such works as the subject matter. One could reasonably expect to speak of a grand-style British history painter almost as one did of a "Homer," by which name the sophisticated audience understood both the epic poet himself and his great poems.

Despite Reynolds's exhortations to artists to dedicate themselves to grand-style painting, the market for such works seemed not to be there late in the century. Indeed, as Chris-

topher Rovee has recently demonstrated in *Imagining the Gallery: The Social Body of British Romanticism* (2006), the popular taste was increasingly infatuated with portraiture, which for many of Reynolds's mindset represented an unfortunate and indeed enervating capitulation to an emerging and degraded bourgeois taste. Working in Rome, classically trained artists like the American-born West, the Scot Gavin Hamilton, and the Englishman Nathaniel Dance aped the models of Raphael and his academic circle in works of varying success and repute. But it remained for the wild Swiss, Henry Fuseli, to graft to this academic heritage a disturbing and destabilizing supernatural element that marked something distinctively new in a national school of history painting that never-

theless remained both inferior to its foreign competitors and uninviting to its British consumers.

The challenge faced by British artists was what Pressly calls "tradition's crippling burden" (25), an accumulated weight and mass of inherited materials, protocols, and expectations that, during the eighteenth century, had tended increasingly to hamstring would-be history painters. In short, the burden of the past—of the tradition of grand-style *istoria*—left ever less space for genuine innovation, either in subject matter or in technique. To continue in the old way was to risk, at best, a descent into decadence and a hollow and hopelessly self-indulgent celebration of the outworn. The answer, it became clear, lay not in perpetuating that particular and highly

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coded past but rather in striking out in a new direction. For eighteenth-century England this meant turning to what became known as original genius, a quality that the English located in the iconic figure of William Shakespeare. Indeed, much of Pressly's book has finally to do with why Shakespeare *became* iconic during this century. What turned an obscure and to all appearances relatively unlettered Elizabethan into the William Shakespeare? In large part, the answer is to be found in a cult of originality that was signaled early in the century by Dryden, promulgated in earnest by Edward Young at mid-century, and brought to fruition by a cadre of interdisciplinary artists and commentators toward the century's end. Both Young and Edmund Burke argued that the classical heritage had been accorded too much cultural capital, at the expense of indigenous genius. For them and others, Shakespeare became the ultimate measure of individual native genius, in part because his obscure origins and experiences rendered the customary trail of intellectual evidence (and classical enculturation) invisible, if not irrelevant. Shakespeare became the English exemplar *par excellence* of the "modern" artist whose success made him a rival and even a conqueror of the "ancient." He provided a model of artistic inspiration that could be—and was—reasonably presented as emerging without crippling debts to classical traditions, a spontaneous genius, a spark that set alight the dry tinder of his times and illuminated those of succeeding generations.

The Artist as Original Genius, then, traces this cultural propagandizing of Shakespeare—and through him of England and of English art—in the works of several major end-of-century artists. Transferring this Shakespeare to visual and sculptural art, moreover, became a growth industry that fueled a new, alternative artistic consumerism while simultaneously creating (crafting, in the word's full sense) a Shakespeare that was both more than and different from the historical playwright. Pressly's first and second chapters examine John Hamilton Mortimer's fiercely anticanonical art, which evolved from the artist's infatuation with the aesthetic extremism of Salvator Rosa, whom Pressly calls another representative of "an independent, spontaneous approach to art" (64). For Pressly, it is significant that all these artists who made Shakespeare (the man and the works) so major a subject of their art also indulged in what are essentially heroic self-portraits. With artists like Mortimer, who relished the extravagant and whose visual fantasies are radically destabilizing, it was probably inevitable that Shakespeare's ostensibly idiosyncratic genius would yield not just material for dramatic pictures but also the impetus for self-mythologizing self-portraiture. For Mortimer and others, the artist as original genius "has more in common with Satan, the archrebel, than with God, the archetypal creator" (83). It is worth noting that while Pressly's focus in this formulation is upon Shakespeare as the originary writer, the passage just quoted turns upon Milton, the other great "native genius" whose *Paradise Lost* provided so much material for many—if not most—of the visual and sculptural artists Pressly considers here.

After a brief chapter on John and Alexander Runciman's Shakespearean subjects, Pressly turns to longer assessments of Fuseli (whom he calls "Shakespeare's Painter" [95]) and the (justifiably) less well known James Jeffreys. Whereas Fuseli effectively apotheosizes Shakespeare (again, man and works alike) in highly dramatic, even melodramatic, compositions of unquestioned emotive impact, Jeffreys sets out to don Shakespeare's visionary mantle by challenging the entire host of his contemporaries. "In taking on Shakespeare's mantle," Pressly writes, "he was seeking not only to challenge himself to the highest standard but also to find assurance that such an exalted rank was possible for an English artist" (137-38; my emphasis). Wildly extravagant and stunningly inventive, Jeffreys's monumental figure studies and dynamic group scenes hint at the mental instability that characterized so many of the artists of this circle and that is so troublingly apparent in their many self-portraits.

If Fuseli and Jeffreys represent what Pressly calls "the Artist as Satanic Creator" (110), then the wild and self-destructive Irish history painter James Barry embodies the "Artist as Martyr" (139). In his sixth chapter Pressly explores that artist's remarkable large-scale Shakespearean subjects, demonstrating, for example, how Barry effectively revisits Annibale Carracci's *The Dead Christ Mourned* in his depictions of Lear and Cordelia. It is not just that Barry borrows from Carracci; rather, in doing so he daringly "attempt[s] to find a visual vocabulary that could adequately convey the wrenching emotions of Shakespeare's tragedy" (142). In the tradition of grand-style history painting, Barry both uses and uses up his source materials, investing their traditional intellectual and iconographic import with an entirely new coding and transposing upon those materials the Shakespearean content in a visual presentation that points at once in both directions, toward Shakespeare and toward the continuity of visual history and iconographic tradition. Not surprisingly, Pressly reminds us that Barry, too, devoted significant time and canvas (and paper) to self-portraiture, most of it decidedly heroic in nature. Indeed, in the self-portraits Barry frequently invests himself with the attributes and the iconography of the Son of God (especially as he is portrayed by Milton, whose works Barry also illustrated).

Succeeding chapters take up George Romney, John Flaxman, W. H. Ireland, Samuel Ireland, and, in passing, Richard and Maria Cosway, tracing the further intermingling of the Shakespearean, the self-dramatizing, and the self-portrayal in their works. Indeed, so widespread and so visible had this move toward fusing self-portraiture with Shakespearean self-dramatizing (the artist as the untutored, spontaneous genius) become that Richard Cosway's affected and feminized self-portrait of 1786 (fig. 117) was soon burlesqued in an anonymous print (fig. 118), as was his portrait of Maria Cosway (figs. 120, 121). These paired images, as Pressly observes, point up the ongoing and contentious debate among the art elite (and the visually literate public) concerning the uneasy relationship between smugly self-satisfied self-imaging and

unmediated personal creativity. If the genuinely creative artist is, as was often quoted, more inspired than calculating, more driven by an eye "in a fine frenzy rolling" than by an eye glued to the works of past masters, then the self-dramatizing works of the artists considered in *The Artist as Original Genius* force us to confront the inevitable and perhaps irreconcilable conflict between vision (unvitiating content) and execution, between art and craft. By 1786 the eighteenth-century Shakespeare craze had led to John Boydell's concept of the Shakespeare Gallery, the popular but unprofitable venture that went public during the 1790s. That it did prove largely unprofitable tells us much about the direction that the popular taste was taking by those years. History painting was widely admired but nothing more, rather in the manner of Dr. Johnson's famous remark about *Paradise Lost* being "one of the books which the reader admires and lays down, and forgets to take up again." To Keats's friend Benjamin Robert Haydon, perhaps the last of the grand-style history painters in Britain, this disregard for history painting was particularly galling. As Tom Taylor put it after Haydon's death, "he would paint large pictures with a high aim. The patrons did not want such pictures, the Academy did not favour them, the public could not buy them. They flocked to see them exhibited, but that was all."¹ What did sell—and the Shakespeare Gallery artists were quick to pick up on this—were genre pieces, sentimental renditions of moments of "sensibility" as the eighteenth century understood them, and fantastically "soft" portrait-impressions of Shakespeare's characters. All these could be—and were—reproduced in engraved form for the "popular" consumer who could afford them. Grand-scale history paintings could not be reduced in this fashion, either in size or in medium, without becoming fairly silly: without their grand scale, there was little to recommend them to the emerging bourgeois viewer and would-be connoisseur. And so while Shakespeare the native original genius continued to prosper as an image, a myth, and a capital industry, that variety of visual art that had sought at once to emulate and to popularize a (self-serving) vision of this sort of original artistic genius was, relatively unceremoniously, edged out of the market.

While Blake is mentioned in passing throughout *The Artist as Original Genius*, he is nowhere the focus of sustained commentary, in part because his extra-institutional status necessarily excludes him from a discussion that is so centrally grounded in the Royal Academy, its members, and its doings. The one exception to this rule is Pressly's fascinating suggestion, in a chapter called "Alienation, Persecution, and Liberation through Sacrificial Death," that the figure in Blake's famous *Albion Rose* (*The Dance of Albion*) "was originally conceived as an image of Blake as Chatterton in the same manner as Flaxman's conception of himself as Chat-

terton" (179; Flaxman's drawing is reproduced as fig. 112). Pressly makes a compelling argument, and the resemblance between the two drawings is striking, despite some obvious differences in subject and treatment. Moreover, Pressly's explanation of the image's relation to Blake's personal circumstances (including his dramatically altered estimate by 1808 of his former friend Flaxman) makes a good deal of sense. Indeed, within the context of Pressly's discussion of the cultural and mythological function of the suicidal Chatterton for all of these artists, there is much to think about here, even if Pressly himself admits that he does not have that proverbial smoking-gun proof for his claim. In any event, Blake is nevertheless present everywhere in the book, if only by implication, and the profusion of illustrations (none, alas, in color) will provide the viewer with many obvious contexts for Blake's visual works, putting Blake, his art, and its visionary singularity into productive dialogue with the artists and works that were his contemporaries during those volatile years.

Robert Rix. *William Blake and the Cultures of Radical Christianity*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. x + 182 pp. £55.00/\$99.95, hardcover.

Reviewed by Andrew Lincoln

ANYONE who has tried to keep up with the developing field of Blake studies will find in this book much that seems familiar. But Robert Rix surveys the field of Swedenborgianism and related movements with a thoroughness that clarifies many issues. He demonstrates that in order to deal adequately with the question of how Blake was influenced by Swedenborg and other religious writers, we must take into account "the reading practices of late eighteenth-century interpretive communities" (1) and be alert to the intricate relations and rivalries among them. The complexities are expertly unraveled and lucidly explained here, which will make this book a helpful introduction for anyone new to the field and a useful point of reference for seasoned scholars. At the same time, though, the study exposes the difficulty of evaluating the relevance of historical "microcultures" to an understanding of Blake's works.

Rix has a deep and wide knowledge of the intriguing world of religious groups relatively little known beyond the realm of Blake studies. This usually allows him to avoid settling too easily on an individual strand or tendency as the key to Blake and to provide a gentle corrective for those who do. In the face of previous attempts to compare or associate Blake's ideas

1. Benjamin Robert Haydon, *The Autobiography and Memoirs of Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786–1846)*, ed. Tom Taylor, new ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1926) 2: 825.