

Tom Dunne and William L. Pressly, eds. *James Barry, 1741–1806: History Painter*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010. xviii + 268 pp. £65.00/\$119.95, hardcover.

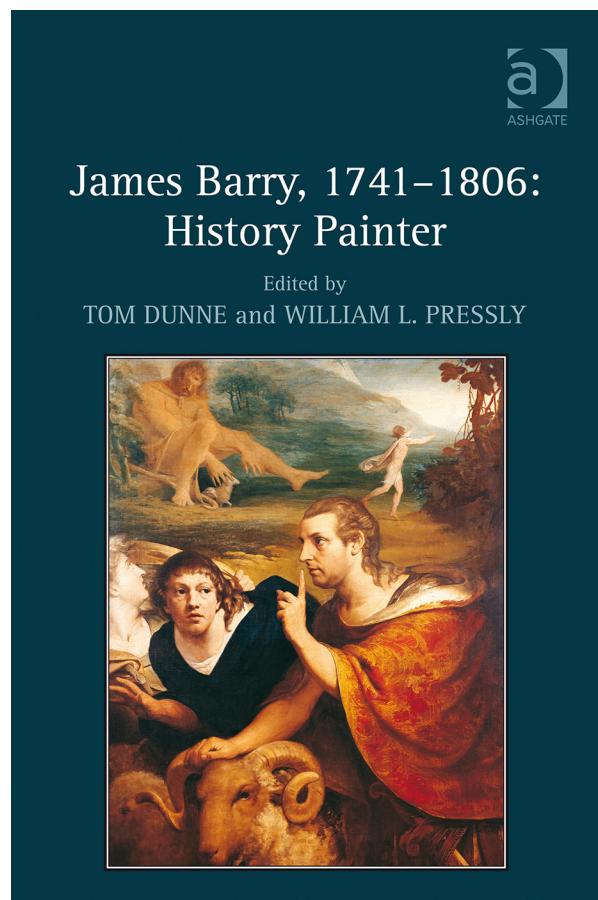
Reviewed by Dennis M. Read

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- 1 WILLIAM Blake considered James Barry a kindred spirit. In his annotations to *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, Blake wrote,

Who will Dare to Say that Polite Art is Encouraged, or Either Wished or Tolerated in a Nation where The Society for the Encouragement of Art. Sufferd Barry to Give them, his Labour for Nothing[.] A Society ... Suffering an Artist to Starve while he Supported Really what They under pretence of Encouraging were Endeavouring to Depress.—Barry told me that while he Did that Work—he Lived on Bread & Apples[.] (E 636)

- 2 Blake was referring to Barry's *The Progress of Human Culture*, a project he began for the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce in 1777 and finished seven years later. (Or, perhaps, put aside for a time. Like Blake and his *Vision of the Last Judgment*, he made alterations on the project for the rest of his life.) His six monumental paintings covering the walls of the Great Room of the Royal Society of Arts commemorated the march of Western civilization from classical times to his day, with the last two paintings concentrating on the leading figures of English art. Blake is right in asserting that the society paid Barry nothing during the years he painted the huge allegorical works, but he does not mention that the society later awarded Barry 250 guineas and a gold medal.
- 3 During his lifetime, Barry experienced professional success and, more emphatically, a professional decline. Extremely forthright in his opinions, he antagonized anyone who did not share them. Because he shifted ground in his causes and beliefs, it was not easy to stay in his good graces. An Irishman and a Catholic, he hailed, like Blake, the American and French Revolutions as the dawn of a new age, but later found them to be different incarnations of the same



tyrannical power. Unlike Blake, however, Barry moved to promote his brand of Catholicism as an apocalyptic cure-all, a version that strips the authority of the pope in all civil matters. A member of the Royal Academy, he lost his position as professor of painting to Fuseli in 1798 after he published his vituperative *Letter to the Society of Dilettanti*. In his last years he was virtually a recluse, working on his immense canvases and prints in his Castle Street home and studio, a place of mounting squalor and wreckage.

- 4 In recent years Barry has gained serious attention, with a major exhibition of his works in Cork, Ireland, in 2005, a monograph that year by David G. C. Allan, and extensive discussion of his aims and contributions by Martin Myrone in *Bodybuilding: Reforming Masculinities in British Art, 1750–1810* (2005) and Daniel R. Guernsey in *The Artist and the State, 1777–1855: The Politics of Universal History in British and French Painting* (2007). This growing interest began with the publication of William L. Pressly's *The Life and Art of James Barry* in 1981, followed by a major exhibition of Barry's work at the Tate in 1983 and John Barrell's numerous references to Barry in his 1986 study, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt*. In this volume, Dunne and Pressly have collected fourteen essays from various hands, including Allan, Myrone, Guernsey,

and Barrell, addressing a wide range of topics and questions involving Barry's life and art. If the essays do not speak in one voice, they complement each other to a great extent.

- 5 Most relevant to students of Blake is David Bindman's essay, "The Politics of Envy: Blake and Barry." Bindman argues that both Blake and Barry were victims of the envy of Joshua Reynolds and his cohorts, "who pretended to stand for painting in the Great Style" but actually wanted "to paint flattering and lucrative portraits of those in wealth and power, while the artists who stood for the ideals of high art that could lead society towards virtue were literally starved out" (121). Bindman finds the most powerful expression of this quandary in both artists' conceptions of the figure of Milton's Satan, the ultimate envier and hypocrite. "For Barry and Blake," he writes, "Satan was not an abstraction, but a name for the force that bound together all the moral, political and artistic resistance to man's true self-realization, made all the more threatening by the attractive face he presented to the world" (124).
- 6 Bindman exempts Fuseli from the envious academicians. In her essay, "Barry and Fuseli: Milton, Exile and Expulsion," Asia Haut applies the figure of Satan in quite another way. Pointing out that "dispossession permeates *Paradise Lost*," Haut suggests that the great interest both Barry and Fuseli pay to Milton's epic can be attributed to their "self-exile" from their native countries, Ireland for Barry and Switzerland for Fuseli. "With the theme of Satan, Sin and Death," Haut argues, "Fuseli, Barry and Milton, in their different and yet similar ways, raise the issue that apparently revolutionary shifts in power might be little more than redistributions of hierarchy, rendering affiliations chaotic" (109).
- 7 Haut might well have included Blake in this group. But however temperamentally similar the two artists may have been, they had strikingly different approaches to the execution of art. Liam Lenihan notes in his essay, "History Painting and Aesthetics: Barry and the Politics of Friendship," that "Blake's most famous criticism of Reynolds and Burke, '[t]o Generalise is to be an Idiot,' might surely be applied to Barry, who found perfection in abstract and general nature" (150).
- 8 Both Barry and Blake believed in the power of art to transform social thought. John Barrell writes in "Reform and Revolution: James Barry's Writings in the 1790s" that Barry "was convinced that high art, history painting ... was the most effective means of teaching civic virtues and civil rights, and that the society that is most favourable for the production of high art will also be the most just society, the society that best safeguards the rights of its members" (130). Barry's vociferous republicanism necessarily brought about a rift between him and the prevailing powers.
- 9 In the most provocative essay of the collection, "James Barry's 'Hairbreadth Niceties': Risk, Reward and the Reform of Culture around 1770," Martin Myrone refers to J. J. Winckelmann's assertion in his *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture* that "the line by which Nature divides completeness from superfluity is but a small one The Greek artist ... adjusted his Contour, in every figure, to the breadth of a single hair." (Students of Blake might well equate this with Blake's "bounding line.") In his letter to his then-patrons Edmund and William Burke, Barry invokes Winckelmann's distinction when he refers to the "hair-breadth niceties" in his art.
- 10 Barry, Myrone asserts, steadfastly stuck to his conception of art while artistic taste in Britain vacillated wildly in an unpredictable stock market of fashion. "Barry's originality," Myrone writes, "could also be eccentricity; his precision, mere sterility" (39). Barry's stalwart stance "was not simply self-destructive, deluded or willful; it was a form of position-taking within a game of culture whose rules were in the process of being radically overhauled" (37). Myrone concludes, "Barry's 'tragedy'—his tragic alienation from society, from the general taste, his material suffering—may be, rather than an obstruction to or distraction from the realization of his innate 'greatness,' the necessary and socially predictable precondition for his art" (39). Following Myrone's line of thought, Barry's subsequent expulsion from the Royal Academy was inevitable.
- 11 The volume includes eleven color plates and fifty-five black-and-white illustrations. Its scholarship is impressive, its writing stimulating, and its approaches engaging. Blakeans will benefit from these lively discussions of another renegade artist.
- 12 In his foreword to the collection, Pressly states that Barry "is Britain's greatest history painter." The contributors certainly are intent on advancing Barry's reputation, if not to that supreme position, at least to a higher level. Others may incline toward the judgment of Henry Crabb Robinson, who wrote in his diary entry of 30 January 1815 that "excessive pride equally denoted Blake & Barry."