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THEORIES OF IMAGE-MAKING  
IN HOGARTH, REYNOLDS AND BLAKE

BY  
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A thesis submitted  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Arts  
Major in English Literature

South Dakota State University  
1982

THEORIES OF IMAGE-MAKING  
IN HOGARTH, REYNOLDS AND BLAKE

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

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THEORIES OF IMAGE-MAKING  
IN HOGARTH, REYNOLDS AND BLAKE

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## INTRODUCTION

The source of artistic invention was a major aesthetic issue in the eighteenth century. Is art teachable by rules or is it a divine gift? To what extent must art follow convention--either the unities of time, place and action, or the more specific "rules" distinguishing lyrical from didactic poetry or history painting from portraiture? Was creation of wholly new ideas possible, or was all art, as Plato had suggested, merely a recollection of pre-existent form? The debate could be traced from Plato to the aesthetic theories of Horace and Longinus, and followed throughout every succeeding century.

In Augustan and Neoclassical England the debate continued with renewed interest in a specific issue which also derived from Platonic theory: imitation. Is imitation of the successes of earlier masters essential to new art? Or is the highest imagination that which is free of the past, inspired instead of learned? The question becomes: how free is the artist, how much is he a product of history and therefore a student of it? To what extent can the artist hope to improve or surpass the accomplishments of Homer, Virgil, or Horace in literature, or of Phidias or the "divine" Michaelangelo in the visual arts?

These questions demanded of the artist both a personal confrontation and a clear view of the social function of art in his own age. Nearly every major writer and thinker of the century recorded an opinion on the subject. In 1711, Alexander Pope, in his Essay on Criticism, had expressed the view that the rules of art were meant to be broken when required by high or profound feelings:

If, where the rules not far enough extend  
 (Since rules were made but to promote their end)  
 Some lucky license answer to the full  
 The intent proposed, that license is a rule.  
 Thus Pegasus, a nearer way to take,  
 May boldly deviate from the common track.  
 From vulgar bounds with brave disorder part,  
 And snatch a grace beyond the reach of art,  
 Which without passing through the judgment, gains  
 The heart, and all its end at once attains.<sup>1</sup>

Joseph Addison, in an essay in Spectator No. 592 (1714), corroborates this view:

There is a greater judgment shown in deviating from the rules of art than in adhering to them; ...there is more beauty in the works of a great genius who is ignorant of all the rules of art than in the works of a little genius who not only knows, but scrupulously observes them.<sup>2</sup>

The expression of this "greater judgment" can lift a work of art above the mass of the careful but unoriginal works that surround it. The unsolved question was where did this greater creative ability come from--was it attainable by human effort, or was it god-given--the result of a divine singling out of certain artists to be the lasting spokesmen of their age. Edward Young, in his essay Conjectures on Original Composition (1759) admits that artistic genius seems independent of human resources:

What, for the most part, mean we by genius, but the power of accomplishing great things without the means generally reputed necessary to that end. A genius differs from a good understanding as a magician from a good architect: that raises his structure by means invisible; this by the skillful use of common tools. Hence genius has ever been supposed to partake of something divine.<sup>3</sup>

But Samuel Johnson's strong sense of humanism prevented belief in the artist-as-god. While admitting "no man ever yet became great by

imitation," he insisted that the qualities of genius were not mystically conferred but were accessible to the right attitude and rigorous discipline. For Johnson the "greater judgment" of a great artist consisted in adding some new insight to the existing store of human knowledge. In 1751 he wrote in the Rambler (No. 154):

Whatever hopes for veneration of mankind must have invention in the design or the execution; either the effect must itself be new, or the means by which it is produced. Either truths hitherto unknown must be discovered, or those which are already known enforced by stronger evidence, facilitated by clearer method, or elucidated by brighter illustrations.<sup>4</sup>

Invention is not divine inspiration; it is improvement on a very human scale. Thirty years later, Johnson held the same view:

There is nothing so little comprehended among mankind as what is genius. They give to it all, when it can be but a part. Genius is nothing more than knowing the use of tools; but there must be tools for it to use: a man who has spent all his life in this room will give a very poor account of what is contained in the next.<sup>5</sup>

Outside England Johann Winckelmann (1717-1768) wrote in 1755, "There is but one way for the moderns to become great, and perhaps unequalled; I mean, by imitating the ancients....It is not only Nature which the votaries of the Greeks find in their works, but still more, something superior to nature; ideal beauties, brainborn images, as Proclus says."<sup>6</sup>

In 1762, Anton Raphael Mengs (1728-1778), Winckelmann's mentor and artistic advisor, wrote:

There are two ways which lead the rational seeker to good taste; one of these is more difficult than the other. The more difficult is to select the most essential and beautiful

from nature itself; the other, easier way is to learn from works of art in which such selection has already taken place.<sup>7</sup>

These two critics speak for the conservative body of thought associated with the rise of academies of art in both Europe and England in the eighteenth century. The form of a subject to be sought by the artist was its general essence, a refined "idea" of itself that would elevate the mind and emotions and surpass all particular comparisons. This was thought to be the greatest achievement of the ancients. In his history of Neoclassical art Lorenz Eitner explains the importance of the Greek art models to the eighteenth century:

The belief in the perfectibility of man and the general progress of the human race, two notions deeply imbedded in the ideology of the Enlightenment, needed the support of history: it was important to be able to look back to the reality of a Golden Age in the past to feel confidence in the promise of a future Utopia. Antiquity provided the example of a state of humanity so exalted that a future worth striving for could be conceived in its image. This gave the movement of progress a concrete goal, and it suggested, at the same time, a practical method for reaching it: the systematic study and imitation of Antiquity, that historical moment of human perfection which, having once before been realized, could be attained again, though it was not likely to be surpassed.<sup>8</sup>

\* \* \*

This is a study of artistic imagination--literally, the process of image-making--the act of translating sensory information into visible symbols. Specifically, it is a study of three eighteenth-century artists' detailed theories of imagination, and a comparison of the visual effects described by these theories. William Hogarth, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and William Blake are three roughly contemporary artists who each describe a means of approaching nature, recording

sensory facts and translating them into the images of art. I intend to pose three related questions to these artists and to seek answers in their respective treatises on aesthetic composition. Two of these are formal analyses: Hogarth's Analysis of Beauty (1753) and Reynolds' fifteen Discourses on Art (1769-1790). Blake's opinions will be collected from three major sources, his "Annotations on Sir Joshua Reynolds' Discourses on Art," his Descriptive Catalogue of 1809, and his public address accompanying an exhibition of Chaucer engravings in 1810.

My hypothesis in posing the following questions to Hogarth, Reynolds, and Blake is that these artists represent three degrees of objective/subjective "seeing," and that the issues of imitation, originality and sensual appreciation of nature, which are so critical to eighteenth-century aesthetics, are more clearly illustrated in the visual artist's experience than in the poet's or historian's. While all art involves contemplating and interpreting the world, visual art--because it does not necessarily involve translation into more abstract language--is often more immediate and more accessible: A picture of a tree is likely to be recognizable to a Russian, an Indian, a Hausa tribesman or an Englishman; the word "tree" is not. To understand the aesthetic choices made by these three articulate, practicing artists is to be aware of imaginative options open to all artists of their time. This awareness in turn resists easy generalizations about the state of the arts in Neoclassical England, and provides a point of departure for further critical study of image-making in a particular age.

The first question to be answered by Hogarth, Reynolds and Blake is: What is the artist's attitude toward nature? "Nature," in the context of most eighteenth-century aesthetic discussions, seems to refer to everything in the world that is not art, or the "untranslated world." The possibilities arising from this question can best be understood in terms of a dialectic between the eye of the artist and an external physical object--a tree or a table, for instance. One artist may look at an oak tree and paint a thick trunk and spreading leafy branches. This "realistic" image is easy to identify as "a tree." Another artist may look at an oak tree and paint a vertical cylinder topped with a cloud of polka dots. This image may or may not "look like" a tree. The specific act of "seeing" which produces in art the "realistic tree," the "impressionist tree," the "abstract tree," the "allegorical tree," or any other tree, is the first and most limiting step of image-making. Whether the artist "sees" an object most clearly as itself, as an extension of himself, or as a symbol of a personal or cultural value (wealth, leadership, fear, courage) determines his entire aesthetic system and, to a large extent, his view of the social role of art as well.

The second question is really the theoretical reverse of the first: What effect does the artist seek to produce in the spectator? Should one's art be, as Matisse hoped his would, primarily a "mental soother, something like a good armchair in which to rest from physical fatigue"?<sup>9</sup> Should it moralize, idealize, criticize, incite to action? Or does artistic creation lie beyond specific social



functions and serve them only by secondary application, after it is finished, framed and considered by critics and the public?

A final question deals with individual methods of execution: What does the artist consider to be the primary animating principle of artistic composition? This question springs from the premise that form and content are indivisible, that the individual elements composing a painting are part of its overall effect. The answer to the question can be a personal preference (coloring, lights and shadows, perspective); a cultural institution such as Greek symmetry; or the formal principle of a "school" of art--the wild colors and brushwork of the nineteenth-century Fauves, or the carefully superimposed angles and frames of the Cubists.

A separate section will be devoted to each of the three artists, and a final section will draw conclusions from the first three.

## NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

1. In The Norton Anthology of English Literature, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1974), I, 2145.
2. Ibid., p. 2435.
3. Ibid., p. 2437.
4. Samuel Johnson, in Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism, ed. R.D. Stock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974), p. 34.
5. In The Norton Anthology, p. 2437.
6. "Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture" (1755), in Neoclassicism and Romanticism 1750-1850, vol. I: Enlightenment/Revolution, ed. Lorenz Eitner (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), p. 6.
7. "Thoughts on Beauty and Taste in Painting" (1762), in Eitner, Neoclassicism and Romanticism, p. 32.
8. Ibid., p. 30.
9. Robert Goldwater and Marco Treves, eds., Artists on Art from the XIV to the XX Century (New York: Pantheon Books, 1945), p. 413.



## I

The Analysis of Beauty, published in 1753, is William Hogarth's attempt to study and formally explain the process of objective seeing and to show how seen objects, by their juxtaposition, variety, size and shape, affect the observer. Three main convictions distinguish Hogarth's aesthetic theory from the prevailing aesthetics of his age: 1) the importance of immediate observation of nature over imitation; 2) the goal of art being to capture whatever most "pleases and entertains the eye"; and 3) the theory of the Line of Beauty--the Serpentine Line--as an organic principle of visual art. Joseph Burke, editor of the Analysis, and author of English Art 1714-1800 and numerous other works on Hogarth and eighteenth-century art, describes the historical importance of the Analysis:

Written by a painter, grounded in the baroque, who yet became the great master of satiric rococo, [the Analysis] throws a sharp light on the stylistic problems of the age. Moreover, it is the first work in European literature to make formal values both the starting point and basis of a whole aesthetic theory. It is a cardinal post-Renaissance aesthetic treatise, a novel and original attempt to define beauty in empirical terms.<sup>1</sup>

Hogarth's most radical departure from the established art theory of his time was to propose the untutored, objective observation of nature as the most effective study of art. While he felt much could be learned from studying the masters, to use them as primary models of subject, composition and interpretation was to remove oneself from the most immediate artistic experience--the original sight of the object itself. In his Autobiographical Notes, Hogarth says,

I grew so profane as to admire Nature beyond Pictures and I confess sometimes objected to the devinity of even Raphael

Urbino Corregio and Michael Angelo for which I have been severely treated. I do confess I fancied I saw delicacy [in] the life so far surpassing the utmost effort of Imitation that when I drew the comparison in my mind I could not help uttering Blasphemous expressions. <sup>2</sup>

That the imitation of nature surpasses imitation of art in freshness and immediacy was a defiant position in 1753 English aesthetics. Nature was generally considered the raw material of art, the chaos from which the artist drew form and order. Samuel Johnson's Neoclassical sage Imlac instructs Rasselas that "the business of a poet...is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances. He does not number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades in the verdure of the forest." <sup>3</sup> That is, the proper subject of art is humanized, synthesized nature, or nature idealized. It was felt that such refined form had been perfected in Classical art, and that since the eighteenth-century artist could not hope to equal quintessential Classical forms, his best effort would be to imitate them, or the Renaissance masters who came closest to matching the Classical ideal, rather than to trust his own artistic instincts.

Hogarth vehemently disagreed. He saw the artist's dependence on vague general ideas of nature, embodied in "second-hand" imitations of Raphael's or Titian's subjects, as a weakness rather than a strength; it implied the loss of both creative power and the responsibility for original insight. The systematic "rules" of art--the proper subjects, acceptable props, Classical poses--appeared to Hogarth not as inviolate directives but as roadblocks to artistic integrity. It was essential for the artist to see and interpret for himself before he

could produce a picture of vigor and honesty. In the Introduction to the Analysis he explains:

The reason why gentlemen, who have been inquisitive after knowlege in pictures, have their eyes less qualified for our purpose, than others, is because their thoughts have been entirely and continually employ'd and incumbered with considering...the various manners in which pictures are painted, the histories, names,...and little or no time has been given for perfecting the ideas they ought to have in their minds, of the objects themselves in nature: for by having thus espoused and adopted their first notions from nothing but imitations, and becoming too often as bigotted to their faults, as to their beauties, they at length...totally neglect...the works of nature, merely because they do not tally with what their minds are so strongly prepossessed with. 4

By a continuous process of retrospection, by obliging imitation untested by reference to nature, the art of a single artist or of an entire age was in danger of becoming decadent, void of new energy, and socially meaningless. The artist must school himself in nature and beware "the surprising alterations objects seemingly undergo through prepossessions and prejudices contracted by the mind.--Fallacies, strongly to be guarded against by such as would learn to see objects truly." 5

Hogarth anticipated the disdain with which his academic peers and the reigning connoisseurs of English art would receive such honesty:

I have but little hopes of having a favorable attention given to my design in general, by those who have already had a more fashionable introduction into the mysteries of the arts of painting and sculpture. Much less do I expect, or in truth desire, the countenance of that set of people, who have an interest in exploding any kind of doctrine, that may teach us to see with our own eyes. 6

It is not defiance, however, but simple logic and clear vision

with which Hogarth makes his argument in favor of direct, individual perception: "Who but a bigot, even to the antiques, will say that he has not seen faces and necks, hands and arms in living women that even the Grecian Venus doth but coarsely imitate " 7

Hogarth consistently attempted to inspire the artist's faith in himself and thereby to free him from the twin tyrannies of imitation and financial patronage. These institutions complemented and sustained each other in eighteenth-century England, and both distanced the artist from real creativity. To copy Michaelangelo one had to go to Italy. Such a luxury usually required the financial support of a patron; financial dependence meant conforming one's art to the dictates and taste of one's patron. Ironically, the insight to be gained abroad was compromised by the means of achieving it.

As a painter and engraver, Hogarth himself depended on the business of the wealthy, but he was determined to support himself by his art rather than submit to the luxury of patronage and the artistic compliance it demanded. While it was not unusual in eighteenth-century England for artists to be of the middle class, Hogarth differed from the others, says Nikolaus Pevsner, author of The Englishness of English Art, in that "he squarely stood for the ideals of his own class instead of representing in his art, as was customary, the ideals of the class for which he worked." 8 This political position is in line with his aesthetic standpoint: to accept a patron's support was to surrender one's economic freedom just as to study someone else's view of nature was to remove oneself from true knowledge of the world. Hogarth sets himself apart from

those gentlemen who have labour'd with the utmost assiduity home at academys for twenty years together without gaining the least ground....Whereas if I have acquired anything in my way it has been wholly obtain'd by Observation by which method, be where I would with my Eyes open, I could have been at my studys so that even my Pleasures became a part of them and sweetened the pursuit. <sup>9</sup>

In the Analysis Hogarth describes a detailed system of direct empirical observation of nature which defies secondary imitation of any kind and gives back to the eighteenth-century artist much of the responsibility and freedom his contemporaries had relegated to other ages and talents. In his preface to the text of the Analysis Joseph Burke points out that while Reynolds had painted his self-portrait beside the bust of Michaelangelo as an expression of his artistic aspirations, "Hogarth chose to be commemorated with the works of Shakespeare, Milton and Swift." <sup>10</sup> Unlike art, "literature had long since enjoyed, by the sale of books, that measure of independence from private patronage which Hogarth was seeking to obtain by the sale of prints." <sup>11</sup>

If the artist were to remain free from the strictures of academic training and from study in foreign galleries, where and how was his education to take place What kind of "observation" could sharpen and train the eye more deftly than methodic study of the best existing art Surprisingly, Hogarth answers that perhaps "the only way to learn to draw well [is] never to draw at all." <sup>12</sup> He meant that the eye might be more readily trained independently of the hand, that the unquestioned practice in drawing from life (or pictures) of looking-sketching-looking almost guaranteed a distorted, incomplete appreciation of the subject. In a passage which was stricken from the



final edition, but preserved in Burke's collection of the Rejected Passages, Hogarth says,

it occur'd to me that there were many disadvantages [sic] attended going on so well continually copying Prints and pictures altho they should be those of the best masters nay in even drawing after the life itself at academys. For as the Eye is often taken off the originall to draw a bit at a time, it is possible to know no more of the original when the drawing is finish'd than before it was begun. <sup>13</sup>

Hogarth's observation was based on an ingenious method of visual memory. By the time the artist addressed his canvas and palette he should have studied, internalized, practically memorized, the object under consideration. Ideally this process should be continuous and all-encompassing, beginning in childhood and developed throughout life. It was a prerequisite of graphic representation and the visual clarity it provided surpassed any that rote imitation could produce. Hogarth explains:

More reasons I form'd to myself but not necessary here why I should not continue copying objects but rather read the Language of them (and if possible find a grammar to it) and collect and retain a remembrance of what I saw by repeated observations only trying every now and then upon my canvas how far I was advanc'd by that means. <sup>14</sup>

The result of such visual mnemonics is integral knowledge of the whole object, the object as it exists rather than as it appears-- complete knowledge rather than a limited knowledge of only one, and that a frozen, view of the object. In Hogarth's scheme, the eye is free--both from the controlling, selecting hand and, in a sense, from time--to surround the object, to know its back and sides as well as its front, its agitated state as well as its calm, its coloring at

dawn as well as at dusk. It is a rich, three-dimensional vision opposed to the static two-dimensional result of mere mechanical copying.

As Joseph Burke points out in the preface, the Art of Memory, memoria technica, was a classical concept described by Cicero in De Oratore and Quintilian in his Institutes.<sup>15</sup> While Hogarth's idea of visual memorization may have sprung originally from these classical sources, his elaborate means of developing such memory is highly original and suggests that his idea of visual memory is also the result of his personal commitment to direct observation of nature. In the Introduction to the Analysis he instructs the artist to

let every object under our consideration, be imagined to have its inward contents scoop'd out so nicely, as to have nothing of it left but a thin shell, exactly corresponding both in its inner and outer surface, to the shape of the object itself; and let us likewise suppose this thin shell to be made up of very fine threads, closely connected together, and equally perceptible, whether the eye is supposed to observe them from without, or within; and we shall find the ideas of the two surfaces of this shell will naturally coincide.<sup>16</sup>

The value of this highly contrived method becomes clearest when put to the test. A red apple on a white plate, for instance, viewed at a distance from behind an easel, offers only one image of itself. It is frozen into a two-dimensional composition and, if reproduced by the usual method of copying by repeated glances and interrupted lines, it will probably appear as some variety of red circle on a white plane or perhaps a red circle on a white oval on a larger plane. The elements of composition--the circle and plane--are two-dimensional and even though they may be developed and refined by subtle highlights and

color variations, they remain two-dimensional on the canvas because they were conceived so.

On the other hand, if the artist considers the apple as a scooped-out shell of itself, he will have in his mind a much more complete image. An apple may be weighed in the hand, tossed in the air, polished, sliced open, perhaps peeled and seeded, even eaten. To consider it as a hollowed three-dimensional shell is to be aware of what is inside the apple skin as well as what is outside it (air, the plate, another apple). To draw the imagined threads which define the "shell" requires seeing outward, from the apple's core, as well as seeing the outer form from the usual distance. An apple drawn from this image will have volume, weight, and meaning--literally im-port-ance--that the more static image could never produce.

Says Hogarth:

The oftener we think of objects in this shell-like manner, we shall facilitate and strengthen our conception of any particular part of the surface of an object we are viewing, by acquiring thereby a more perfect knowledge of the whole, to which it belongs: because the imagination will naturally enter into the vacant space within this shell, and there at once, as from a center, view the whole from within, and mark the opposite corresponding parts so strongly, as to retain the idea of the whole, and make us masters of the meaning of every view of the object, as we walk round it and view it from without. 17

This method of seeing objects is the "language" of observation; the lines which make up the shell-like images are the "grammar." Like the alphabet from which we build words, phrases and structured sentences, the lines in Hogarth's theory of visual memory also give rise to corresponding relationships--distance, texture, depth, and space. Just as we remember ideas by their particular expression in



language, "he who will thus take the pains of acquiring perfect ideas of the distances, bearings, and oppositions of several material points and lines in the surfaces of even the most irregular figures, will gradually arrive at the knack of recalling them into his mind when the objects themselves are not before him." 18

Next to the preference of direct observation over imitation, the most distinguishing aspect of Hogarth's aesthetic theory is the view that aesthetic beauty is the result of specific logical principles of composition, instead of some superlative quality springing from the superhuman abilities of certain artists. The greatest part of the Analysis of Beauty is just that--a systematic dissection and examination of the formal elements of visual beauty. Hogarth concludes the Introduction with the expressed intention "to consider the fundamental principles...in those compositions in nature and art, which seem most to please and entertain the eye, and give that grace and beauty which is the subject of this enquiry." 19

The theory that the achievement of beauty was the province of a more or less superhuman ability--an unteachable if not actually divine faculty--flourished in the Renaissance and was still widely held in eighteenth-century England. Hogarth, with customary pragmatism, demystifies the great painter's "genius" and, in keeping with his belief in the prime importance of observation, reduces it to mere visual acumen:

The Common Saying that a person has (naturally) a genius for this or that art or that a man must be a born Painter mean no

more than this, viz that when the organs of sight or hearing are more particularly [sic] perfect than common we find a facility in obtaining what ever we intend to acquire by them. 20

Thus it is significant that the Analysis was written by a painter; to speak of the mechanics and problems of artistic composition without having tested one's theories would dilute their credibility. That Hogarth's theories followed his experience with canvas and paint, instead of the reverse, is apparent throughout the Analysis.

In the twelve chapters of the Analysis Hogarth discusses the depiction of beautiful forms in terms of six cardinal principles, and many minor aspects, "all of which cooperate in the production of beauty, mutually correcting and restraining each other occasionally." 21 These six principles--fitness, variety, uniformity, simplicity, intricacy, and quantity--are chosen and defined by their ability to engage the eye and mind in a kind of visual and intellectual exercise. The premise that beauty can be proven by visual trial and taught by a series of directives was not a viewpoint sympathetic to eighteenth-century aesthetics. In his recently published book on Hogarth's life and art, David Bindman reminds us of

the essential loneliness of his theoretical position in the early 1750's. His determined empiricism and attempt to reduce the Beau Ideal to an observed method could hardly appeal to those influenced by the classical idealism of Rome. Nor could the connoisseurs, with their elevated conception of art, be really interested in a work which claimed to consider things which "seem most to please and entertain the eye." 22

To understand this phrase is, in a sense, to understand the aim, for Hogarth, of all beautiful form. Nowhere in the Analysis, except

perhaps in the section on the psychological effects of quantity, do we find a reference to "elevated emotion," "transcendent form" or "grandeur of mood"--all cornerstones of the Neoclassical academic theories expressed by Reynolds in England, and in Europe by Winckelmann, Mengs, and Piranesi. But, as Bindman remarks, while Hogarth

speaks scathingly of treatises which take the "more beaten path of moral beauty,"...his objection to them is not that they embrace such questions, but that they stop short of the real issues by falling back on phrases like "Je ne sais quoi" or call beauty a gift from heaven. <sup>23</sup>

Hogarth's aim is much less exalted. He intends "to shew what forms or rather what appeara[n]ces of those forms the Eye best likes as a book of cookery points out what is most relishable to the Palette." <sup>24</sup> Hogarth admits that he has "no other way" of demonstrating these principles "but by my own feeling describing how I have felt myself upon the careful examination and enquiry into the sight of objects." <sup>25</sup> But, as his whole aesthetic theory is based on individual observation, it is consistent that the parts of his argument are too.

Hogarth's chapter on "Intricacy" is perhaps the best place to begin a discussion of his analysis of beautiful forms for in a sense all the other elements of beauty may be understood in terms of this one. In this chapter, Hogarth says,

Intricacy in form...I shall define to be that peculiarity in the lines, which compose it, that leads the eye a wanton kind of chase, and from the pleasure that gives the mind, intitles it to the name of beautiful; and it may be justly said, that the cause of the idea of grace more immediately

resides in this principle; than in the other five except variety; which indeed includes this, and all the others. 26

At first, the idea that the highest aim of art is to "lead the eye a wanton kind of chase" seems extraordinarily superficial. But in fact, the enlivening core of Hogarth's entire aesthetic theory is contained in the phrase. Hogarth's is an honest art, with nature, not ideal beauty, as his model. To engage the eye in a pleasurable "dance" is to engage the observer in the dance of life itself.

Hogarth explains:

The active mind is ever bent to be employ'd. Pursuing is the business of our lives; and even abstracted from any other view, gives pleasure. Every arising difficulty, that for a while attends and interrupts the pursuit, gives a sort of spring to the mind, enhances the pleasure, and makes what else be toil and labour, become sport and recreation. 27

Here is the vitality of Hogarth's art. He makes the observing eye repeat the same bustling, milling, hurrying dance he sees all around him, especially in London's teeming business districts. The intricacy of his compositions--dozens of active figures, many scenes-within-scenes, and many levels of interest--is only an enthusiastic appreciation of eighteenth-century urban life. Ironically, as Edgar Wind points out in Art and Anarchy, it is precisely this complexity, requiring as it does a rigorous exercise of the mind as well as the eye, that the twentieth-century observer often finds too taxing. Wind sees this laxity of modern artistic intellect as producing superficial art and at the same time actually removing art from the socially influential place it should occupy:

How often have we not heard admirers of Hogarth and Constable repeat the insufferable cliché that only their bold sketches reveal their force as artists, whereas the meticulous labor they bestowed on their finished paintings was a deplorable aberration for which they paid dearly by loss of spontaneity....In Hogarth's paintings the neat and restless cunning of his brush was meant to "lead the eye a wanton kind of chase" but our visual imagination is much too solid to pursue the calculated intricacies of his finished designs. Instead we dote on the superbly sketched Shrimp Girl or the unfinished Country Dance, and regret that not all his paintings were left as sketchy, and hence as fresh as these two. 28

But for Hogarth, intricate form was more complete. The qualities of fitness, variety, and motion that complement intricacy of form all contribute to a vital movement that makes art a true image of life. For instance, that Hogarth should acknowledge fitness as "the first fundamental law in nature with regard to beauty" 29 is consistent with his method of "seeing" objectively. As the apple viewed by the hollow-shell method gave rise to an organically "whole" image instead of an anemic two-dimensional one, so

fitness of the parts to the design for which every individual thing is form'd, either by art or nature...is of the greatest consequence to the beauty of the whole. This is so evident, that even the sense of seeing, the great inlet of beauty, is itself so strongly biased by it, that if the mind, on account of this kind of value in a form, esteem it beautiful, tho' on all other considerations it be not so; the eye grows insensible especially after it has been a considerable time acquainted with it. 30

In Hogarth's aesthetic system the eye is most pleased by the integrity of the forms it perceives. A human figure performing the physical work for which it is trained is more appealing than a "posed" figure and infinitely more appealing than a figure unsuited to its situation. It is not difficult to see the social implications of this



theory of art. As Jack Lindsay explains in his biographical work on Hogarth:

Hogarth's ideas about fitness and function go much further than merely involving an adaptation for some particular purpose. They are essentially organic and are concerned with the deep formative processes which involve a highly complex and living relationship between organism and environment. The state of biology in his day prevented him from working this aspect out; he is forced to rest himself on an intuitive sense of organic form; its connections, its vital energies and systems of self-expression.<sup>31</sup>

While Hogarth's chapter entitled "Variety" is very brief, the importance of variety and its effects in composition are discussed throughout every section of the Analysis. "In a word," he says, "the art of composing well is the art of varying well."<sup>32</sup> No single quality is more enthralling to Hogarth or, in his opinion, to mankind. Natural life is not uniform; neither are men's interests. As evidence for this contention, Hogarth says,

Shakespear, who had the deepest penetration into nature, has sum'd up all the charms of beauty in two words, INFINITE VARIETY; where, speaking of Cleopatra's power over Anthony, he says,

--Nor custom stale  
Her infinite variety:--

(Act II, Sc. 3)<sup>33</sup>

The variety in composition that Hogarth prescribes is not indiscriminate, however. It is conscious, composed, rather than haphazard. For, "when the eye is glutted with a succession of variety, it finds relief in a certain degree of sameness; and even plain space becomes agreeable, and properly introduced, and contrasted with variety, adds to it more variety. I mean here and everywhere

indeed a composed variety; for variety uncomposed, and without design, is confusion and deformity." 34

The elements of composition which make up Hogarth's theory of "composed beauty" are summed up in what he considers the animating principle of all beautiful forms: the Serpentine Line. This phenomenon is a particular kind of waving line thought to express a sort of quintessential elegance by virtue of its shape and motion. Throughout the Analysis the serpentine line is again and again cited as a symbol of the aesthetic qualities Hogarth most admires--variety, intricacy, motion, grace. Its complementary curves, one concave, one convex, represent duality, contrast and balance, while they engage the eye in constant movement.

As Joseph Burke points out, the idea of this "line of beauty," as it is also called, was not original with Hogarth, being "as old as art itself" and having reached "its heyday in the seventeenth-century, with artists as different but representative as Bernini, Rubens, and Murillo." 35 The difference between Hogarth and his predecessors, however, was Hogarth's "application of the serpentine line to surface rather than outline." 36

This recalls the method of "remembering" natural forms by a system of shell-shapes and lines. To illustrate the use of the serpentine line to express elegant form, Hogarth uses the graphic example of a curved sheep's horn to show

that the whole horn acquires a beauty by its being thus gently bent two different ways;...[and] that whatever lines are drawn on its external surface become graceful, as they must all of them, from the twist that is given the horn,

partake in some degree or other, of the shape of the serpentine-line: and, lastly, when the horn is split, and the inner as well as the outward surface of its shell-like form is exposed, the eye is peculiarly entertained and relieved in the pursuit of these serpentine-lines, as in their twistings their concavities and convexities are alternately offer'd to its view. Hollow forms, therefore, composed of such lines are extremely beautiful and pleasing to the eye; in many cases more so, than those of solid bodies. 37

This description introduces a means of depicting depth, volume and shape with the serpentine line, which had before been limited to two-dimensional composition. Hogarth describes, and illustrates in the two extremely detailed engravings which accompany the Analysis, countless examples to prove his theory: the curves found in muscles clinging to and supporting bone structure, the varied curves of rococo furniture, even the curves found in women's under-stays. Consider the human frame, for instance:

There is scarce a straight bone in the whole body. Almost all of them are not only bent different ways, but have a kind of twist, which in some of them is very graceful; and the muscles annex'd to them tho' they are of various shapes, appropriated to their particular uses, generally have their component fibres running in these serpentine lines, surrounding and conforming themselves to the varied shape of the bones they belong to. 38

For Hogarth, the serpentine line is by no means an artificial construct to be applied to beautify nature. It is integral to nature, occurring within and among all natural forms. It is the artist's job to reveal the line in each of his engraved or painted images. To do so is to weave emotional and intellectual life into his two-dimensional figures. It is a guarantee against a static image. One has only to look at Hogarth's engraving, Strolling Actresses dressing



in a Barn (1738) or his wall painting, The Pool of Bethesda in St. Bartholomew's Hospital (London, 1735-7), to see the serpentine line repeated again and again, and to experience the busy, rococo energy it generates. In his Preface, Joseph Burke sums up the effects of this graceful 'line of beauty' in Hogarth's art:

To look at one of his pictures is both a visual and an intellectual adventure. The eye stops and moves, stops, turns back and starts again in a different direction. But this irregular movement synchronizes perfectly with the discoveries of the mind. Liberation follows effort. <sup>39</sup>

Hogarth's imagination is informed primarily by the senses. His nature is life as it is seen, heard, felt and breathed--without censure. In Hogarth's aesthetic system, the artist is also, literally, a scientist, one who seeks knowledge of the world by empirical proofs. In this investigative role, he remains psychologically separate from the world he studies; his interest is active, enthusiastic, even intimate, but still objective. Above all, art should be engaging to the eye; if possible it should repeat in its internal dynamics the rhythm and energy of observed life. It accomplishes this by means of composed intricacy, variety, simplicity, motion. Finally, the Serpentine Line symbolizes and expresses this rhythm by its two complementary curves which imply many directions of movement restrained by internal tension.

The artistic independence and respect for nature implicit in Hogarth's Analysis of Beauty will be emphasized by the following discussion of Sir Joshua Reynolds' much more conservative aesthetic system.

## NOTES TO SECTION I

1. William Hogarth, The Analysis of Beauty: With the Rejected Passages from the Manuscript Drafts and Autobiographical Notes, ed. by Joseph Burke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. xlvi.
2. Ibid., p. 209.
3. Samuel Johnson, in Samuel Johnson: Rasselas, Poems, and Selected Prose, ed. by R.D. Stock (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958), pp. 527-8.
4. Hogarth, Analysis, p. 23.
5. Ibid., p. 25.
6. Ibid., p. 22.
7. Ibid., pp. 81-2.
8. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1956), p. 54.
9. Hogarth, Analysis, p. 185.
10. Burke, Analysis, pp. xxxvi-ii.
11. Ibid., p. xxxvii.
12. Hogarth, Analysis, p. 185.
13. Ibid., p. 184.
14. Ibid., p. 185.
15. Burke, Analysis, p. xxxviii.
16. Hogarth, Analysis, p. 27.
17. Ibid., p. 27.
18. Ibid., pp. 28-9.
19. Ibid., p. 31.
20. Ibid., p. 203.
21. Ibid., p. 31.

22. Hogarth (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 151.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
24. Hogarth, Analysis, p. 169.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 42-3.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 41-2.
28. (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp. 44-45.
29. Hogarth, Analysis, p. 11.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
31. Hogarth: His Art and His World (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1977), p. 179.
32. Hogarth, Analysis, p. 57.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
35. Burke, Analysis, p. xlix.
36. Hogarth, Analysis, p. 1.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
39. Burke, Analysis, p. xlvi.

## II

The Grand Style of art, as it was "legislated" by Sir Joshua Reynolds in his Discourses on Art and introduced to the students of England's Royal Academy from 1769-1790, embraced the most salient Neoclassical aesthetic theories, many of which had had their first expression in the aesthetic doctrines of Plato, Aristotle, and Longinus. Ultimately, the principles epitomized by Reynolds as essential to the Grand Style of art "maintained no lasting hold upon taste outside the Academies" <sup>1</sup> probably because they failed to provide for the breadth of human interests, especially those accompanying the growth of industry and the rise of an educated middle class, and the accomodating power of the visual arts to speak for all human experience. Despite his failure to "fix" an enduring style of art, however, Reynolds' Discourses show him a conservative but thoughtful exponent of his society and a close collaborator with Johnson, Burke, and Goldsmith as arbiter of that society's established aesthetic morality.

Reynolds and Hogarth are in most respects directly antithetical. While Hogarth stood for empirical observation, variety, and a visually "entertaining" composition, Reynolds' theories were informed by universal properties, imitation of past masters, and an elevated emotional response. Hogarth sought independence from elite patronage and the confining dictates of academies; Reynolds was founder of the Royal Academy of Art in 1758 and its president from 1768 to 1790. His aesthetic system is didactic, conservative, Classical in both form and substance. All three of these qualities are apparent in the closing statement of Discourse I, in which Reynolds expresses his

hope, that this institution may answer the expectations of its Royal Founder; that the present age may vie in Art with that of Leo the Tenth; and that the dignity of the dying Art (to make use of an expression of Pliny) may be revived under the Reign of GEORGE THE THIRD. <sup>2</sup>

In his survey of Neoclassical aesthetics, Lorenz Eitner describes the limitations to be expected in any "official" academic aesthetic doctrine:

The official character of the academy, its claim to authority and desire for stability were bound to make it conservative. Academic doctrine rested ultimately on principles not open to debate. The range of academic thought therefore was narrow, and confined to a small repertory of ideas....The limitation and fixity of academic doctrine accounts for its remarkable coherence, but it also makes clear why it had to come into conflict with the more dynamic thought of the period. <sup>3</sup>

Two paradoxes become apparent in considering Reynolds' advocacy of the Grand Style of art: First, by striving to portray subjects so general that they would "please all and always," <sup>4</sup> the Grand Style, as Reynolds describes it, is so detached from real life as to please only an elite few as a mode of expression. Reynolds admits in his last Discourse that "as this great style itself is artificial in the highest degree, it presupposes in the spectator, a cultivated and prepared artificial state of mind." <sup>5</sup> Reynolds sees this state of mind as a goal to be aspired to, but it can also be seen as a hindrance to art. By attempting to transcend all particular dates, events and personalities, the painter of the Grand Style was unable to respond artistically to his own experience of the world, which is always particular. All concrete, particular, memorable experience had to be ruthlessly sublimated to the general idea.

The second paradox concerns the fact that Reynolds' Discourses dictate a whole "style" of art, including moral and philosophical as well as formal principles, as opposed to Hogarth's Analysis which treats only visual effects. One may apply Hogarth's instructions about observation and composition to any "style" of visual art; to assume Reynolds' aesthetic proposals is to accept not only the formal rules but significant substantive obligations (subjects, poses, dress, coloring, expression) as well. Hogarth says, in effect, "Here is what happens in pictures." Reynolds says, "Here is what ought to happen." The very efforts to "fix" a style of art by rules and formal criteria rendered the Grand Style as transitory as any other style of art.

The idea that the highest principles of art and taste are universal and unchanging, and therefore able to be pinned down and categorized, is unfamiliar to the twentieth century, but it was an all-pervasive tenet of Neoclassical thought. In Discourse VII Reynolds gives an example of the kind of deduction which allows this theory:

We will take it for granted, that reason is something invariable and fixed in the nature of things; and...we will conclude, that whatever goes under the name of taste, which we can fairly bring under the dominion of reason, must be considered as equally exempt from change. If therefore, in the course of this enquiry, we can shew that there are rules for the conduct of the artist which are fixed and invariable, it follows of course, that the art of the connoisseur or, in other words, taste, has likewise invariable principles. <sup>6</sup>

Reynolds' advancement of the Grand Style was in part a product of his self-perceived duty to advance and expand British art as a whole. He saw European, especially Italian, art as the model to which



the Royal Academy should aspire; accordingly, he strongly recommended that the Grand Tour of Europe's galleries be part of the English artist's education. He himself had made such a tour and had studied abroad from 1749-1752. According to Roger Fry, in his well-known Reflections on British Painting:

What, in effect, Reynolds attempted, what he inculcated with persuasive eloquence in his Discourses, was to wean British art from its isolation and provinciality and to bring it into line with the great European tradition as it had been elaborated by the Italians....He tried to check our tendency to be satisfied with a superficial and lazy pleasure in trivial anecdote and descriptive realism. In short, he was the advocate of plastic as opposed to literary art.<sup>7</sup>

Reynolds' attitude toward Nature and its use to the artist is substantially different from the infinitely various and particular Nature of Hogarth. In the seventh Discourse Reynolds gives the following definition:

My notion of nature comprehends not only the forms which nature produces, but also the nature and internal fabric of the human mind and imagination....Deformity is not nature, but an accidental deviation from her accustomed practice. This general idea therefore ought to be called Nature, and nothing else, correctly speaking, has a right to that name.<sup>8</sup>

For Hogarth, Nature was external, objective, and its value in art lay in its "otherness" from both artist and observer. It entertained by virtue of contrast, variety, intricacy, motion, and energy. For Reynolds, "nature" is essentially "human nature"; it is external nature translated by intrinsic human values and human reason. It inspires recognition and identification by its universal properties, and it is to be studied not by empirical "seeing" but by intellectual synthesis and understanding. The "object and intention of all the

Arts," says Reynolds, "is to supply the natural imperfection of things, and often to gratify the mind by realizing and embodying what never existed but in the imagination." 9

Hogarth's aim was to see Nature as completely and objectively as possible; Reynolds cautions the artist against that very aim. He says in Discourse III that "Nature herself is not to be too closely copied...a mere copier of nature can never produce anything great; can never raise and enlarge the conceptions, or warm the heart of the spectator." 10 Rather, he says, "the whole beauty and grandeur of art consists, in my opinion, in being able to get above all singular forms, local customs, particularities, and details of every kind." 11

It is by a distilling process of observation, comparison, and selection of individual forms that the artist arrives at a quintessential, "beautiful" form. In Rambler Essay No. 4, Samuel Johnson, Reynolds' friend and colleague, reinforces this mainstream Neoclassical view of art:

It is justly considered as the greatest excellency of art, to imitate nature, but it is necessary to distinguish those parts of nature, which are most proper for imitation....If the world be promiscuously described, I cannot see of what use it can be to read the account, or why it may not be as safe to turn the eye immediately upon mankind, as upon a mirror which shows all...without discrimination. 12

Reynolds is aware of the long history of this theory and, in fact, it is its universal appeal and endurance that most recommend it to him. He says in Discourse III:

Every language has adapted terms expressive of this excellence. The gusto grande of the Italians, the beau ideal of the French, and the great style, genius, and taste among



the English, are but different appellations of the same thing. It is this intellectual dignity...that ennobles the painter's art; that lays the line between him and the mere mechanick; and produces those great effects in an instant, which eloquence and poetry, by slow and repeated efforts, are scarcely able to attain. <sup>13</sup>

This ideal Nature is a Classical concept that can be traced to Aristotle's statement that "the poet, being an imitator, like a painter or any other artist, must of necessity imitate one of three objects--things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be, or things as they ought to be." <sup>14</sup>

The most detached, empirical perception produces a "thing as it is," that is, as it is generally agreed to be by disinterested observers. This is the kind of perception Hogarth strove for by close scrutiny of all of nature's diverse and imperfect forms. Empirical observation emphasizes the integrity of the object and minimizes the artist's interpretive power. It engages and challenges the eye with minute detail and variety. For Reynolds, this approach to art is inferior. In Discourse III, he dismisses empirical observation:

If deceiving the eye were the only business of the art there is no doubt, indeed, but the minute painter would be more apt to succeed; but it is not the eye, it is the mind, which the painter of genius desires to address. <sup>15</sup>

Successive degrees of artistic involvement in or interpretation of a subject, produce an increasingly humanized image. The "thing as it is thought to be" is more subjective than the "thing as it is." Likewise, the "thing as it ought to be" is the most subjective image of all, the most refined and imbued with specific human moral values. This highly refined image is the goal of the Grand Style. A painter

in the Grand Style, says Reynolds, "like the philosopher, will consider nature in the abstract, and represent in every one of his figures the character of the species." 16

In Hogarth's opinion, a beautiful form should "please and entertain the eye." For Reynolds the aim of art is deeper and more narrow. In Discourse III he instructs the Academy's students to create images which appeal to the intellect, which is superior to the senses:

Instead of endeavoring to amuse mankind with the minute neatness of his imitations, [the artist] must endeavor to improve them by the grandeur of his ideas; instead of seeking praise, by deceiving the superficial sense of the spectator, he must strive for fame by captivating the imagination. 17

In his treatise on eighteenth-century British aesthetics, Walter J. Hipple explains the intellectual center of Reynolds' aesthetics:

Since the root [of Reynolds' aesthetics] is not a supernal nature but a terrestrial, the ideal universe being a product of imagination, the faculties of the mind play a crucial role. But Reynolds' view of the faculties is neither original nor complex; sense perceives, fancy combines, reason distinguishes. Appropriately, since imagination is the combining and generalizing power, the arts depend upon it for their higher qualities, and upon sense only by a condescension to the necessities of human nature. 18

How is the artist, then, to discipline his mind, to learn to synthesize the varied forms of nature into a properly "essential" form which the highest art demands? Admitting that "could we teach taste and genius by rules, they would no longer be taste and genius," 19 Reynolds allows that "there are many beauties in our art, that seem, at first, to lie within the reach of precept, and yet may easily be reduced to practical principles....This great ideal perfection and beauty are not to be sought in the heavens, but upon the earth. 20

The idea that the artist had the power to create wholly new ideas or images was insubstantial to Reynolds. He rejected the idea that an artist was either inspired, that is, born with creative powers, or not. Rather, he considered human imaginative powers to vary among individuals as do physical and sensory abilities, and to be teachable by well-established method. In Discourse VII he elaborates this humanistic view:

The internal fabrick of our minds, as well as the external form of our bodies, being nearly uniform; it seems then to follow of course, that as the imagination is incapable of producing any thing originally of itself, and can only vary and combine those ideas with which it is furnished by means of the senses, there will be necessarily an agreement in the imaginations as in the senses of men....It is from knowing what are the general feelings and passions of mankind that we acquire a true idea of what imagination is. <sup>21</sup>

Paradoxically, the "essence" of a subject--its ideal form, which is ultimately unattainable--is best sought, according to Reynolds, in a structured and systematic way. It is in this aspect of Reynolds' advice to his students that he appears most conservative, and most contrary to theories of artistic originality and inspiration. It is also this particular attention to method which shows Reynolds most clearly a man of his age, a thorough initiate of history-conscious Neoclassicism. To discover that singular form of Nature, the grandeur and perfection of which cannot fail to arouse man's most noble sentiments, Reynolds says,

can be the work only of him, who...has extended his views to all ages and to all schools; and has acquired from that comprehensive mass...a well-digested and perfect idea of his art to which everything is referred. <sup>22</sup>

In Reynolds' aesthetic system, the path to "genius" is the study and imitation of the works of other artists, particularly the acknowledged masters of former schools. This precept, too, originated in Classical philosophy and was often defended in the eighteenth-century by reference to the first-century A.D. manuscript of Longinus, On the Sublime:

In general, consider those examples of sublimity, to be fine and genuine which please all and always. For when men of different pursuits, lives, ambitions, ages, languages, hold identical views on one and the same subject, then that verdict which results, so to speak, from a concert of discordant elements makes our faith in the object of admiration strong and unassailable. <sup>23</sup>

Perhaps the most probing discussion of Reynolds' insistence on eclectic knowledge and of the importance to his age of broad Classical knowledge is to be found in Walter Jackson Bate's From Classic to Romantic: Premises of Taste in Eighteenth-Century England. In this study, Bate identifies the psychological basis for Reynolds' theory of imitation of past works of art:

The function of the educated and disciplined taste is not to be regarded as a series of isolated and dispassionate deliberations on the basis of experience and knowledge; its action is single and immediate, and the ideas and principles which it employs are "digested," and are then retained, as it were, in potential effect. Reynolds, who gave a unified expression to so many of the English critical tendencies of his age, substantiated this conviction by one of the general conclusions of contemporary associationist psychology. The mind may be determined and molded by the character of what it contemplates; it adapts itself to that character; it takes on, as by infection, the attributes which it discerns--it expands in conceiving the sublime, contracts in noting the minute, and becomes lax in attending to the disordered. <sup>24</sup>

Thus by a conscious selection of the objects of contemplation the artist may, in a quite dogmatic way, improve and augment his understanding of great ideas and hence his ability to produce them from his own resources. Imitation of classic art can thus exercise, clarify, and refine the artist's powers of perception as well as his method of execution. Bate continues:

By the sympathetic and acute study of artists whose works have stood the test of ages, we may "catch something of their way of thinking"; ideas which before "lay in embryo, feeble, ill-shaped, and confused," may thus be developed, consolidated and directed; but at all times "we must not content ourselves with merely admiring and relishing, we must enter into the principles on which the work is wrought." <sup>25</sup>

The vitalizing force of the Grand Style of art, then, lay in the elevated emotion inspired by universal generalities. These generalities were to be deduced and extracted from imperfect natural forms and studied in the works of the great Italian and Classical artists. But how was the artist, addressing his canvas with pencil and brushes, to begin? What principles of composition could give correct embodiment to the grand image now fixed in his mind?

For Hogarth, the Serpentine Line symbolized and animated the energetic compositions he admired. Reynolds did not isolate a single graphic symbol which governs the internal dynamics of "grandeur." Since the Grand Style is produced by the absence of particular graphic detail, it is appropriately informed more by an abstract principle than by a graphic construct. This principle, as one might expect, is universality, in every aspect of composition. Discourse IV deals almost exclusively with the specific decisions involved in setting up



a picture, that is, selecting and limiting the subject, choosing postures, props, colors, lighting, expressions, which will most contribute to a noble effect. "I have formerly observed," says Reynolds, "that perfect form is produced by leaving out particularities, and retaining only general ideas: I shall now endeavor to shew that this principle...extends itself to every part of the Art; that it gives what is called the grand style, to Invention, to Composition, to Expression, and even to Colouring and Drapery." 26

Most importantly, the Grand Style requires a universal subject. The stock of subjects acceptable to the Grand Style does not allow much latitude and, in fact, says Reynolds, original

invention in Painting does not imply the invention of the subject; for that is commonly supplied by the Poet or Historian. With respect to choice, no subject can be proper that is not generally interesting. It ought to be either some eminent instance of heroick action, or heroick suffering. There must be something either in the action, or in the object in which men are universally concerned, and which powerfully strikes upon the publick sympathy. 27

Reynolds recommends lifting subjects from Greek and Roman fables and from history, "which early education, and the usual course of reading, have made familiar and interesting to all Europe, without being degraded by the vulgarism of ordinary life in any country." 28 Scripture history and general history are the other two categories which are especially suited to the ennobling Grand Style.

Art has always partaken of the rich resources of myth and history for inspiration and suggestion. Classical subjects especially were important in an age which produced An Essay on Criticism, Rasselas, and The Deserted Village, all of which borrow directly from



Classical sources, either for subject or form. But by allowing tradition to circumscribe the entire range of his subject matter, as Reynolds advises, the artist sacrifices his chance (today we might say obligation) to involve his own creative judgment in choosing new subjects, and making new and original statements by those choices. Thus, image-making, for Reynolds, is really image re-making, since myth, scripture and fable are continuous "re-visions" of pre-conceived images.

One wonders how vital these Classical, and classically-rendered, subjects could be, to either the artist or the public, outside of an elite class of connoisseurs whose own social nobility was gratified by seeing grand and noble subjects in art. John Berger, co-author of Ways of Seeing, a collection of essays on art first presented as a BBC television series, offers an interesting analysis of this exclusive use of mythological and historical subjects. Classic texts, says Berger, "whatever their intrinsic worth, supplied the higher strata of the ruling class with a system of references for the forms of their own idealized behavior....They offered examples of how the heightened moments of life...should be lived, or, at least, should be seen to be lived." 29 Berger sees the subjects of the Grand Style as promoting and reinforcing an elite cultural self-image and candidly admits that these paintings strike us today as "vacuous"--exalted, pretentious, but somehow, "empty." The reason for this, says Berger, is that

they did not need to stimulate the imagination. If they had, they would have served their purpose less well. Their purpose was not to transport their spectator-owners into new experience, but to embellish such experience as they already possessed. Before these canvases the spectator-owner hoped to see the classic face of his own passion or grief or generosity. The idealized appearances he found in the painting were an aid, a support, to his own view of himself.

In those appearances he found the guise of his own (or his wife's or his daughters') nobility.<sup>30</sup>

Reynolds would probably reply to Berger that it is not the subjects of art that should display the artist's originality, but his conception and depiction of the subjects. The fact that each man's visual conception of these universal themes is ultimately individual, says Reynolds, allows every chance for original expression. He says, "Whenever a story is related, every man forms a picture in his mind of the action and expression of the persons employed. The power of representing this mental picture on canvass is what we call Invention in a Painter."<sup>31</sup> But having acknowledged this much, Reynolds makes it the painter's obligation to subdue all evidence of that very individuality. He continues:

And as in the conception of this ideal picture, the mind does not enter into the minute peculiarities of the dress, furniture, or scene of action; so when the Painter comes to represent it, he contrives those little necessary concomitant circumstances in such a manner that they shall strike the spectator no more than they did himself in his first conception of the story.<sup>32</sup>

The unquestioned genius that produced such masterpieces as Caravaggio's Madonna del Rosario and Raphael's The Transfiguration seems difficult to reconcile with such pedantic method. In certain passages of the Discourses, Reynolds' idea of original invention seems to consist in obscuring the painter's individuality as much as his subject's. The qualities Hogarth saw as most contributing to beauty--variety, intricacy, motion--are precisely those Reynolds warns against in composing a picture of enduring grandeur. "However contradictory it may be in geometry, it is true in taste, that many little

things will not make a great one. The Sublime impresses the mind at once with one great idea; it is a single blow." 33 A second element of composition, then, is almost complete absence of particular detail of every kind: "All smaller things, however perfect in their way, are to be sacrificed without mercy to the greater." 34 This goes for coloring, lighting and shadows, as well as for arrangement of figures and props. Thus, "though to the principal group a second or third be added, and a second and third mass of light, care must be yet taken that these subordinate actions and lights...do not come into any degree of competition with the principal." 35

Coloring, likewise, is to be subdued and passive, serving only to heighten the overall effect of the central figure:

To give a general air of grandeur at first view, all trifling or artful play of little lights, or an attention to a variety of tints is to be avoided; a quietness and simplicity must reign over the whole work; to which a breadth of uniform, and simple colour, will very much contribute. 36

With respect to texture and the "tangible" elements of a composition, Reynolds says, that in the Grand Style, "Cloathing is neither woolen, nor linen, nor silk, sattin, or velvet: it is drapery; it is nothing more." 37 This theme--synthesize, subdue, generalize--is repeated for every aspect of composition. Hogarth, it may be recalled, held that "the art of composing well is the art of varying well." Reynolds might say, on the contrary, that the art of composing well is the art of transcending all apparent variations.

In sum, the imagination which produces art in the Grand Style is intellectual. Imperfect nature is consciously refined, distilled and the essence extracted which best represents the species rather than

the individual. The artist who wishes to paint in the Grand Style must carefully imitate the Classical artists and Italian masters whose works exemplify the noblest images of art. The product of such study is an image that will transcend fluctuations of taste and artistic revolution. The Grand Style is literally Neoclassical; it strives for immortality by conscientious generalization of all elements of composition: subject, action, expression, coloring and mood. The desired emotional effect is elevation of feeling and reinforcement of established ideas of nobility and moral propriety.

Hogarth and Reynolds are thus opposed in their attitudes toward all three issues being considered: perception of nature, the intended effects of art, and the primary principle of composition. In the next section William Blake will be heard as a third voice in the debate.

## NOTES ON SECTION II

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32. *Ibid.*, pp. 54-5.
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## III

William Blake's theories of imagination provide a radical counter to those of Hogarth and Reynolds. His unequivocal attitudes toward nature, imitation and composition take the process of imagination past Reynolds' subjective, intellectualized images into the realm of transcendent, mystic vision. Politically, Blake is close to Hogarth in spurning patronage and academic doctrine, and he is completely opposed to Reynolds, whose aesthetic and social conservatism represented everything he abhorred. Perhaps it is significant that Blake never formulated a systematic aesthetic theory, since it was the rigid, dogmatic "rules" of the academics and connoisseurs which he particularly reacted against.

Blake's opinions on art are to be gleaned from several sources. The best known is probably his "Annotations to Sir Joshua Reynolds' Discourses," written about 1808. These are a series of extremely candid objections and rebuttals to specific passages in the first eight Discourses. Another source of incisive and only slightly less vitriolic statements on originality and the uses of Nature is the text of a public address published in his notebook (the Rossetti MS) under the title "Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims, Being a Complete Index of Human Characters as they appear Age after Age" (1810). The other major source is the Descriptive Catalogue of Pictures which accompanied an exhibition and sale of Blake's watercolors in 1809. These documents, together with excerpts from letters and poems, provide a comprehensive description of Blake's highly independent view of artistic imagination.

Despite Blake's categorical statements about Nature and the

artistic imitation of Nature, taken singly and out of context they do not give a true picture of his complicated relation to the perceived world. For instance, in his advertisement to his Chaucer engravings, he says,

No man of Sense ever supposes that Copying from Nature is the Art of Painting; if the Art is no more than this, it is no better than any other Manual Labor; any body may do it and the fool often will do it best as it is a work of no Mind. <sup>1</sup>

What Blake condemns here is Nature-copying as art, not the value of Nature-copying itself, which is indispensable to the craft of the artist. Unlike Hogarth, for whom objective, minute and careful "seeing" was the basis of an entire, "visually pleasing" system of art, Blake saw such carefully trained, practiced sight as merely a prerequisite to art which, though far surpassing any kind of rote hand-and-eye coordination, must still have such discipline at its bidding. To Reynolds' statement that artists are incapable "of producing anything of their own, who have spent much of their time in making finish'd copies" of other works of art, as opposed to copying only their general effects, Blake replies, "Copying correctly is the only School to the Language of Art": <sup>2</sup>

No one can ever Design till he has learn'd the Language of Art by making many Finish'd Copies both of Nature and of Art and of whatever comes in his way from Earliest Childhood. The difference between a bad Artist and a Good One Is: the Bad Artist Seems to Copy a Great deal. The Good one Really Does Copy a Great Deal. <sup>3</sup>

And to Reynolds' indictment of "servile copying" of Nature or of other artists, Blake retorts, "Contemptible. Servile Copying is the Great Merit of Copying." <sup>4</sup>

A minutely disciplined graphic ability is to the visual artist what dexterity in language is to the poet. Just as precision and facility with words do not make poetry, neither do fine and precise copies make art. In his Chaucer address, Blake voices outrage at "servile" copies being advanced as works of art:

A Man sets himself down with Colours and with all the Articles of Painting; he puts a Model before him and he copies so neat as to make it a deception: now let any Man of Sense ask himself one Question: Is this Art? can it be worthy of admiration to any body of Understanding? Who could not do this? what man who has eyes and an ordinary share of patients cannot do this nearly? is this Art? Or is it glorious to a Nation to produce such contemptible Copies? Countrymen, Countrymen, do not suffer yourselves to be disgraced. <sup>5</sup>

For both Hogarth and Reynolds, imagination was dialectic between object and image. Natural form, perceived by the senses was translated into the images of art by certain conscious mental processes. For Hogarth, Nature had the stronger argument; his method of objective "seeing" and visual memory involved minimal interpretation by the artist but maximum attention to detail. His is an art of conscious nature-reporting. For Reynolds, the advantage in the nature-artist dialogue lay with the artist. The myriad forms of Nature had to be sifted, generalized, interpreted by a moral system, humanized, before being embodied in the images of art. In the Grand Style of art, the artist and social convention were clearly the arbiters and controllers of Nature. Innovation, even deviation, were all but impossible.

Blake carries the "humanizing" of Nature to its creative limit. For him there is no dichotomy between form and image; there is no "otherness" in Nature; Nature is Imagination itself. All Nature, all

life, is human, meaningful, and symbolic. In a letter to Dr. Trusler, Blake wrote in 1799:

And I know that This World Is a World of Imagination and Vision. I see Every thing I paint In This World, but Every body does not see alike. To the Eyes of a Miser a Guinea is more beautiful than the Sun, and a bag worn with the use of Money has more beautiful proportions than a Vine filled with Grapes. The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the Eyes of others only a Green thing that stands in the way. Some See Nature all Ridicule and Deformity, and by these I shall not regulate my proportions; and Some Scarce see Nature at all. But to the Eyes of the Man of Imagination, Nature is Imagination itself. As a man is, So he Sees. As the Eye is formed, such are it Powers. You certainly Mistake, when you say that the Visions of Fancy are not to be found in This World. To Me This World is all One continued Vision of Fancy or Imagination, and I feel Flatter'd when I am told so. <sup>6</sup>

The exchange of energy between perceiver and perceived object was for both Hogarth and Reynolds a linear, one-way operation between the authority of the artist and wholly "other" Nature. Meaning was transferred from man to object in something of a closed system. Hogarth's images were bound by methodic objectivity and particular formal values. Even Reynolds' grandeur of emotion was emotion defined by convention, tradition and imitation. By Blake's definition, neither of these approaches to art was truly creative because neither allowed transcendent "vision" to unite the two halves of the imaginative process. As Mark Schorer explains in William Blake: The Politics of Vision:

Blake's experience--his temperament--demanded a universe that was above all "open," a universe that was not indifferent to man but an extension of man, a universe in which all things were in organic and active relationship with all others, and which was constantly interpenetrated by these relationships. He could express his need in terms as hyperbolic as these:

A Robin Red breast in a Cage  
Puts all Heaven in a Rage. <sup>7</sup>

Blake's idea that "Vegetative and Generative Nature" is a reflection of the "Visions of Fancy" seems to echo Plato's theory that inspiration is really collective memory at work, drawing from a former age of perfection and harmony. Actually Blake's theory differs radically from Plato's; Blake's Imagination, though compassed in Nature's regenerative forms, is immediate: it is not collective or successive; it is not remembered. It is recreation rather than recollection. The best description of this idea of Imagination is to be found in notes on Visions of the Last Judgment published in the Rossetti MS of Blake's notebook:

The Nature of Visionary Fancy, or Imagination, is very little known, and the Eternal nature and permanence of its every Existent Image is consider'd as less permanent than the things of Vegetative and Generative Nature; yet the Oak dies as well as the Lettuce, but Its Eternal Image and Individuality never dies, but renews by its seed; just [as del.] so the Imaginative Image returns...by the seed of Contemplative Thought; the Writings of the Prophets illustrate these conceptions of the Visionary Fancy by their various sublime and Divine Images as seen in the Worlds of Vision. <sup>8</sup>

Only in the union of Nature and Imagination is there eternity, or immortal life. Nature provides the images which "clothe" the "Visions of Fancy." These visions in turn inspire Nature with symbolic meaning and energy. Art, then, by uniting form and vision, is the only means of partaking of the eternity glimpsed through imagination. This is vividly illustrated, as Blake shows, in the Metamorphoses of Ovid and in Biblical stories of transformations of corporeal form. The point of these stories is precisely that the "reality" of this world is illusion, that form changes while spirit,



identity, does not. Blake explains further:

In Eternity one Thing never Changes into another Thing. Each Identity is Eternal; consequently Apuleius's Golden Ass and Ovid's Metamorphosis and others of the like kind are Fable; yet they contain Vision in a sublime degree, being derived from real Vision in More ancient Writings. Lot's Wife being Changed into [a] Pillar of Salt alludes to the Mortal Body being render'd a Permanent Statue, but not Changed or Transformed into Another Identity while it retains its own Individuality. A Man can never become Ass or Horse; some are born with shapes of Men, who may be both, but Eternal Identity is one thing and Corporeal Vegetation is another thing. Changing Water into Wine by Jesus and into Blood by Moses relates to Vegetable Nature also.<sup>9</sup>

Imagination for Blake is mystical, in that there is no pause between "seeing" and "perceiving," or better perhaps, between "seeing" and "knowing." "Vision" is not sensory apprehension, followed by interpretation; it is illumination of the hidden eternity of the objects of Nature. The human mind is the medium of inspiration, but it is not merely a passive transmitter of divine meaning. Man, as the image of God, is himself the source of meaning, and the significance of Nature is human significance. Perhaps the best critical explication of the dynamics of Blake's Imagination is to be found in the chapter "A Literalist of the Imagination" in Northrop Frye's Fearful

Symmetry:

The common statement that all knowledge comes from sense experience is neither true nor false; it is simply muddled. The senses are organs of the mind, therefore all knowledge comes from mental experience. Mental experience is a union of a perceiving subject and a perceived object; it is something in which the barrier between "inside" and "outside" dissolves. But the power to unite comes from the subject. The work of art is the product of this creative perception, hence it is not an escape from reality but a systematic training in comprehending it. It is difficult to see things



that move quickly and are far away: in the world of time and space, therefore, all things are more or less blurred. Art sees its images as permanent living forms outside time and space. This is the only way in which we can stabilize the world of experience and still retain all its reality:

"All that we See is Vision, from Generated Organs gone as soon as come, Permanent in The Imagination, Consider'd as Nothing by the Natural Man." <sup>10</sup>

From this last statement of Blake's it is not difficult to understand the outrage he felt to read in Reynolds' first Discourse that all artistic genius must be founded in observing the rules of correct composition. In his notes on that discourse Blake says,

Reynolds' Opinion was that Genius May be Taught and that all Pretence to Inspiration is a Lie and a Deceit, to say the least of it. For if it is a Deceit, the whole Bible is Madness. This Opinion originates in the Greeks' Calling the Muses Daughters of Memory. <sup>11</sup>

For Blake, inspiration was the sole source of art; nothing man devised from observing nature or imitating in galleries deserved to be called art. Appended to a later discourse is the corollary statement that "Reynolds Thinks that Man Learns all that he knows. I say on the Contrary that Man Brings all he has or can have Into the World with him. Man is Born Like a Garden ready Planted and Sown. This World is too poor to produce one Seed." <sup>12</sup> The human mind is the great translator of Nature; all natural forms are empty in themselves but infinitely meaningful to the creative mind. Thus, when Reynolds defends imitation as a source of inspiration with the statement, "The mind is but a barren soil; a soil which is soon exhausted, and will produce no crop," <sup>13</sup> Blake could only conclude:

The mind that could have produced this Sentence must have been a Pitiful, a Pitiabie Imbecility. I always thought that the Human Mind was the most Prolific of All Things and Inexhaustible. I certainly do Thank God that I am not like Reynolds. <sup>14</sup>

Genius is not teachable; neither is it inherited from age to age. In this Blake dismisses a central Neoclassical aesthetic tenet-- that the artist must submit to instruction from the past before he can hope to articulate new ideas. In Rambler Essay No. 121, Samuel Johnson says that

even those to whom Providence hath allotted greater strength of understanding...must be content to follow opinions which they are not able to examine, and...can seldom add more than some small particle of knowledge to the hereditary stock devolved to them from ancient times, the collective labor of a thousand intellects. <sup>15</sup>

The idea that art as a whole could be improved by studying and reviving centuries of "hereditary stock" was meaningless to Blake, for whom immediate divine vision alone could vitalize the human imagination. "If Art was Progressive We should have had Mich. Angelos and Rafaels to Succeed and to Improve upon each other. But it is not so. Genius dies with its Possessor and comes not again till Another is Born with It." <sup>16</sup>

Blake's fury at the the lucrative practice of copying as an excuse for original invention was heightened by public neglect of his own talents and those of the struggling artists he respected. "Liberality!" he retorted to Reynolds' assumption that all artists stood to gain from the patronage of an art-loving monarch, <sup>17</sup>

We want not Liberality. We want a Fair Price and Proportionate Value and a General Demand for Art. Let not that Nation where Less than Nobility is the Reward, Pretend that Art is Encouraged by that Nation. Art is First in Intellectuals and Ought to be First in Nations. 18

Blake was acutely aware of the state of English art, and throughout his financially difficult career as poet and engraver he never ceased to encourage artistic honesty and defiance of the academic dogma which Reynolds epitomized:

...he is counted the Greatest Genius who can sell a Good-for-Nothing Commodity for a Great Price. Obedience to the Will of the Monopolist is call'd Virtue, and the really Industrious, Virtuous and Independent Barry is driven out to make room for a pack of Idle Sycophants with whitloes on their fingers....Englishmen, rouse yourselves from the fatal Slumber into which Booksellers and Trading Dealers have thrown you, Under the artfully propagated pretence that a Translation or a Copy of any kind can be as honourable to a Nation as An Original, Be-lying the English Character in that well known Saying, "Englishman Improve what others Invent." This even Hogarth's Works Prove a detestable Falshood. No Man Can Improve An Original Invention. [Since Hogarth's time we have had very few Efforts of Originality del.] Nor can an Original Invention Exist without Execution, Organized and minutely delineated and Articulated, Either by God or Man. I do not mean smooth'd up and Niggled and Poco-Pen'd, and all the beauties pick'd out [but del.] and blurr'd and blotted, but Drawn with a firm and decided hand at one [with all its Spots and Blemishes which are beauties and not faults del.], like Fuseli and Michael Angelo, Shakespeare and Milton. 19

By Blake's definition both the artist and the images of Imagination are highly individual. He shares with Hogarth a belief in the integrity and inviolateness of Nature. But for Blake this inviolateness had deeper significance than for Hogarth; it was the sacredness, the symbolic potency of imagined Nature that made obscure representation a kind of blasphemy and the sharply focused image a

form of worship. In William Blake: Poet and Painter, Jean Hagstrum surmises:

[Blake] must have agreed with Meister Eckhart that "anything known or born is an image," an image, that is, of something else. Blake's often repeated aphorism, "All that lives is holy," meant, not that everything alive is lovely or good,...but that everything has the dignity of meaning, as well as the integrity of indestructible individuality.<sup>20</sup>

The separation of perception and execution implicit in both Hogarth's and Reynolds' aesthetic theories was anathema to Blake. Because the world of the Imagination was divine, permanent, eternal, it demanded a masterful and dynamic mode of execution. In his treatise On the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful, Edmund Burke had reiterated a common eighteenth-century theory, that works of art generally fell into one of two categories--the inspired (sublime) idea imperfectly sketched, or the more mundane idea elegantly (beautifully) modelled.<sup>21</sup> Both of these options were lies to Blake, who maintained that "Mechanical Excellence is the Only Vehicle of Genius."<sup>22</sup> Composition and execution were by no means subordinate to the artist's vision. Rather, the vision could be justly described only by a vigorous and confident hand: "A Facility in Composing is the Greatest Power of Art, and Belongs to None but the Greatest Artists and the Most Minutely Discriminating and Determinate."<sup>23</sup>

Blake did not consider sloppy or indistinct depiction as merely a lapse in artisanship, nor could he excuse it on the grounds that the idea it sought to express was noble or grand. Any style of execution which obscured its images, emphasized coloring over outline, shadows over clarity, or feeling over form was heresy to Blake. In his

descriptions of his own work he repeatedly and deliberately drew attention to his sharply-executed forms, defying comparison or improvement. The first entry in the Descriptive Catalogue (1809) describing a picture typically titled "The spiritual form of Nelson guiding Leviathan, in whose wreathing are infolded the Nations of the Earth," introduces the whole exhibition with a defense of the clarity of his water-based colors and definite forms:

Clearness and precision have been the chief objects in painting these Pictures. Clear colours unclouded by oil, and firm and determinate lineaments unbroken by shadows, which ought to display and not to hide form, as is the practice of the latter school of Italy and Flanders. <sup>24</sup>

Again, in describing his pictures to accompany "A Vision of the Last Judgment" (1810), he invites minute scrutiny of his work:

I intreat, then, that the Spectator will attend to the Hands and Feet, to the Lineament of the Countenances; they are all descriptive of Character, and not a line is drawn without intention, and that most discriminate and particular. As Poetry admits not a Letter that is Insignificant, so Painting admits not a Grain of Sand or a Blade of Grass Insignificant--much less an Insignificant Blur or Mark. <sup>25</sup>

Hogarth's theory of composed beauty is symbolized by the serpentine line and Reynolds' grand manner by pervasive universals. Blake's statements on proper execution in art consistently propound the "bounding outline" as the single most vital element of composition. This is not surprising, but it is very important in understanding Blake's art: What more definite tool can the artist command than the line. In his textbook, The Elements of Design, Donald M. Anderson calls line "a go-or-no-go graphic element--it is either there or it isn't there. It has no vague properties and is therefore decisive and



purposeful." 26 It is interesting to see that in his most comprehensive description of his theory of outline, found in the Descriptive Catalogue, Blake defines this principle as central to life as well as to art:

The great and golden rule of art, as well as of life, is this: That the more distinct, sharp, and wirey the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art; and the less keen and sharp, the greater is the evidence of weak imitation, plagiarism, and bungling. Great inventors, in all ages, knew this: Proteogenes and Apelles knew each other by this line. Rafael and Michael Angelo and Albert Durer are known by this and this alone. The want of this determinate and bounding form evidences the want of idea in the artist's mind, and the pretence of the plagiary in all its branches. How do we distinguish the oak from the beech, the horse from the ox, but by the bounding outline? How do we distinguish one face or countenance from another, but by the bounding line and its infinite inflexions and movements? What is it that builds a house and plants a garden, but the definite and determinate? What is it that distinguishes honesty from knavery, but the hard and wirey line of rectitude and certainty in the actions and intentions? Leave out this line, and you leave out life itself; all is chaos again, and the line of the almighty must be drawn out upon it before man or beast can exist. 27

This paragraph is perhaps the consummate description of Blake's aesthetic theory and of its integrity in every aspect of life. "Line was, for Blake," says Kathleen Raine, a prolific critic of Blake's visual art, "above all an expression of energy. Every solid form can be seen as the imprint and the product of a flow of energy, and it is certain that Blake saw line as energy, as the signature of life." 28

Only a line can divide a plane; only a line can draw a form that is free of its background, i.e., chaotic, blank space. Only the outline lets form be in control of its medium instead of controlled by it--free and godlike instead of enslaved and confused. To draw a clean line was, for Blake, to draw with the hand of God, actually to



create living form. But only the swift, sure outline could do this. To blend, to obscure, to shade was not just a muddled attempt to draw; it was actually to create monsters--Caliban-like forms still part of chaos--not fully finished and not free, because not deftly delineated. In Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye, an exhaustive work on visual imagination according to psychological laws, Rudolph Arnheim explains the potential energy of any conceived line:

The handling of a line is full of adventure. It soon reveals its double character. A line may be a self-contained visual object, which is seen as lying on top of a homogeneous ground....But as soon as a line or a combination of lines embraces an area, its character changes radically and it becomes an outline or contour. It is now the boundary of a two-dimensional surface that lies on top of a throughgoing ground. The line's relationship to the neighboring surfaces has ceased to be symmetrical. It now belongs to the inner surface but is still independent of the outer. <sup>29</sup>

This is actually, or at least by Blake's definition, life taking shape before one's eyes. Such dynamic capacity of line recalls the vigorous, incisive lines of Zen art in which the artist, his medium and his tools fuse in explosive bursts of energy. In praising the precision of Albrecht Durer's engravings, which exhibit equal but more sustained energy, Arnheim explains that

There is a rule that the expression conveyed by any visual form will be only as clear-cut as the perceptual features that carry it. A clearly curved line will express the corresponding swing or gentleness with equal clarity; but a line whose over-all structure is confusing to the eye cannot carry any meaning. An artist may paint a picture in which a ferocious tiger is easily recognizable; but unless there is ferocity in the colors and lines the tiger will look taxidermic, and there can be no ferocity in the colors and lines unless the pertinent perceptual qualities are brought out with precision. <sup>30</sup>

For Blake, outline arbitrates between free, life-affirming art and static, decadent, ungenerative art. As Northrop Frye suggests, symmetry for Blake is not the suspended, mathematical balance of Classical art; it is rather the exuberant, transcendent, organic symmetry of Gothic cathedrals and text illuminations to which Blake aspires:

To Blake it is the life in things, the holy man in the cloud and the greybeard in the thistle, that the painter should evoke. Hence there are two kinds of symmetry, the living symmetry of the organism and the dead symmetry of the diagram. Art should be an organic unit of living symmetries, and to the vivid or lively imagination trees become nymphs and the sun an Apollo....Even in Classical art, notably architecture, symmetry seems to exist for its own sake. The Gothic cathedral, on the other hand, is a huge reservoir of life: the springing spires and the grinning monsters bursting out of waterspouts, corbels, misericordias and archways quiver with the exuberance which is beauty to Blake. Apparently medieval artists were not sophisticated enough to think that the dead is more solid and permanent than the alive. 31

Imagination for Blake is thus the uniting of finite natural form with eternal, infinite vision. The perceived world is sacred because it is the language of this eternal reality. "Vegetative" or transitory nature receives meaning through human inspiration; in turn it lends its shapes and patterns to symbolize divine meaning. Because art alone can embody the dynamic co-existence of Nature and Vision, only the most precise artistic execution is sufficient. Accordingly, the outline is the artist's supreme tool in defining, freeing, the living image.

## NOTES TO SECTION III

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## CONCLUSIONS

Hogarth, Reynolds and Blake represent three distinct, rudimentary ways of seeing the world imaginatively. While every artist's, in fact every person's, perception and interpretation of the world is ultimately unique, most imaginative ideas partake significantly of the ideas of one of these three. To understand them as three independent artistic forces--all products of the eighteenth-century British artistic milieu, yet radically different in their views of art--is to understand three main avenues of artistic response to the world.

For all three the process of imagination begins with immediate visual perception which is then modified and in a sense distorted by varying degrees of subjective evaluation. Complete objectivity is of course impossible and even Hogarth, who valued empirical observation above all, was far from advocating an indiscriminate mirror-of-nature approach to art. Every post-perception decision the artist makes--whether to use a vertical or horizontal canvas; whether to portray a subject larger or smaller than life; whether to let the subject appear to dominate, or be dominated by, his surroundings--is like an additional thin layer of paint--altering, modeling, distorting, obscuring the natural image, before paint ever touches the canvas.

Every such decision can be thought of as moving the work of art back or forth along a linear scale of subjective/objective reality, with complete objectivity and complete subjectivity as the terminal points. Both of these absolute qualities are of course imaginary since objectivity is always modified by the perceiving mind (the subject), and subjectivity is always modified by perception of an

outer, other, objective reality. If this linear scale is divided into three roughly equal segments, we can place Hogarth's view of nature somewhere in the "objective third," Blake's in the "subjective third," and Reynolds' in the middle. Having explored some of the artistic consequences of each of their ways of image-making, we now have a graphic means of comparing and thus better understanding their own images and those of other eighteenth-century artists. Hogarth, Reynolds and Blake may thus serve as three reference points for determining the degree of the artist's subjective involvement in his observations. It is not necessary, to make use of this scale, that a painter under consideration resemble one of the three here studied, in subject matter or style, or even that he be of the same century or artistic tradition. Even a single artist may in the course of a painting career, move from one mode of "seeing" to another.

To test this scheme, we may take first the example of another prominent eighteenth-century painter, John Constable. Constable is famous for his English landscapes--first "realistic" and later sketchy and "atmospheric"--which usually fall under the heading of "picturesque" art. To look at his later, ethereal cloud studies or the moody Hadleigh Castle (1829) one might be tempted to say that he is taking much liberty with nature, interpreting more than reporting, translating nature into his own language. A closer study, however, will show these images to be extremely detailed and close to nature, scenes which only an objective, in fact scientific, imagination could produce. Despite his unconventional execution, Constable could undoubtedly be placed near Hogarth on our subjective/objective scale



because of his fidelity to nature and the importance he placed on specific detail in coloring and mood. In The Englishness of English Art, Nikolaus Pevsner illustrates the similarities between Constable and Hogarth in an amusing juxtaposition of their comments on art:

"Nature is simple, plain, and true in all her works." Constable could have said that, but Hogarth did. "By a close observation of nature [the artist] discovers qualities... which have never been portrayed before." Hogarth could have said that but Constable did. And one of Constable's most famous sayings, as a rule misquoted, is: "There is room enough for a natural peinture." This is just what Hogarth must have felt, when he revolted against "this grand business." Constable's revolt was couched in almost the same words. He wrote: "I have heard so much of the higher walks of art, that I am quite sick."

Another famous landscape painter, J.M.W. Turner, can be seen to move up the scale from rigorously faithful, "Hogarthian" observation and detail in his early pictures, to later scenes of purely subjective vision (Norham Castle, 1835-40; The Slave Ship, 1839).

Alexander Cozens (c. 1717-86) was a revolutionary painter of the Neoclassical period whose stark, unconventional "ink-blot" compositions do not immediately seem to resemble the work of any other artist. (See the illustrations to A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape, 1784-86.) But in studying his innovative method and rationale, one sees him surprisingly close in image-making to Blake in the dynamic fusion of medium and vision which he strove to introduce to English art. Joseph Burke, in English Art 1714-1800, briefly describes this technique:

Where Leonardo took his ideas from nature, Cozens enlisted the medium itself. By using blobs of ink and wash, not to start but to stimulate the inventive process, he anticipated

the well-known "material" methods of some modern teachers from Klee onwards....he instructed his readers, "possess your mind strongly with a subject...and with the swiftest hand make all possible variety of shapes and strokes upon your paper."

Cozens here says "paper" instead of canvas because he, like Blake, preferred the spontaneity and clarity of water-based colors to the heaviness and long drying time of oils.

Many eighteenth-century painters, notably Allan Ramsay and Richard Wilson, subscribed in varying degrees to the Grand Style of art, a stage of subjectivity which required rational synthesis of the observed form but retained contemplative distance from it. This distance dissolves as one moves up the scale toward Blake, in whom it disappears in the experience of mystic vision.

Perhaps the best known and most interesting eighteenth-century painter who would fall close to Reynolds on our scale, but slightly on the Hogarthian side, is Thomas Gainsborough, who borrowed from the Grand Style to give weight and dignity to his portraits but who nevertheless retained a good deal more of the individual character and spontaneity of his subjects than did Reynolds. A convenient comparison can be made between Reynolds' and Gainsborough's portraits of the great English actress, Sarah Siddons. Reynolds painted her as the Tragic Muse, dramatically seated on a throne, enrobed in Classical drapery; Gainsborough painted her with great elegance, but as an intelligent, fashionable lady of society. Both pictures contain stylized, sophisticated images, but Reynolds' is decidedly more "translated"--from woman to ideal--than Gainsborough's.

By understanding the imaginative efforts which produced the art of William Hogarth, Sir Joshua Reynolds and William Blake we are better able to evaluate the image-making of other visual artists. In addition, the three different modes of viewing nature and creating images presented here suggest parallels with certain other conceptual triads noted by psychologists, philosophers and social scientists. For example, it would be interesting to compare these three modes of image-making with Freud's concepts of id, ego, and superego; or with the distinction often made in Anglican church liturgy between "high church" (emphasizing ritual and tradition), "low church" (emphasizing scripture and personal salvation), and "broad church" (emphasizing teaching and information). Another comparison could possibly be made tying Hogarth's, Reynolds' and Blake's theories with urban, imperial, and universal (Blake here, not Reynolds) world views; or between democratic, oligarchic and socialist political views. Many other possibilities exist. It is clear that the process of image-making is not limited to art, but informs our ideas of social, political, and interpersonal realities as well. Perhaps no other intellectual act is more revealing of an artist's own view of the world and, by extension, his impact on the present and future social importance of art.

## NOTES TO CONCLUSIONS

1. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1956), p. 158.
2. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 397.

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