

Liam Lenihan, *The Writings of James Barry and the Genre of History Painting, 1775-1809*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014. Pp. 158. £95. ISBN 9781409467526.

Liam Lenihan's is the first full-length study of James Barry's writings, a fact amazing to consider, given how significant Barry was in his own time. As an artist and writer Barry combines the intellectual resentment and the grandiosity of a Blake (whom he greatly influenced) with the intellectual chops and the professional prestige of a Reynolds (alongside whom he is buried in St. Paul's). And yet students of late eighteenth-century literature can easily go an entire lifetime without reading Barry. He is, no doubt, easy to dismiss: his ideas about painting are outsized, put forth with moral righteousness and a smattering of resentment that invites caricature. His obsession with history painting and with the enervated tastes of the British public can make him sound simplistically elitist, an impression only reinforced by the tendency of his words to circulate in striking snippets of quotation. Yet Barry is also more complex than is typically acknowledged, as Lenihan's book admirably and vigorously reveals.

Barry viewed the British public as 'fallen' but sought to ennoble them through his championing of prestigious history painting, a genre closely affiliated with the cultivation of civic virtue. Lenihan nicely qualifies: 'Barry's dedication to history painting as a 'national' art was complicated by his desire to expand the means by which history painting communicated with its audience' (184). Barry is one of the clearest voices of his day in contrasting the mechanical arts with the liberal arts – copyists (such as portrait-painters) with, to use Emma Woodhouse's term, imaginists (such as history painters). His manner, however, is not always gentle. He complains about the deluge of vulgar dealers importing the dregs of Continental art into England, and he likens these dealers to his fellow British artists. Lenihan's measured and strenuous readings persuasively recuperate Barry from a neglect that the artist's own verbal extremism precipitated.

Lenihan's Barry is, to be sure, a heap of illuminating contradictions, be they aesthetic (between the neoclassical and the romantic; between the contemporary and the classical) or political (he advocated for the most elite genre of painting but with an eye to cultivating the nation's taste). He was Irish and Catholic but spent most of his adult life in London. Like so many of his generation he went on the Grand Tour of Italy, and he stayed in Rome studying classical Greek art for three productive years, yet he promoted the potential greatness of British art by posing Shakespeare and Milton as exemplary instances of native British genius. As a painter Barry is most famous for *The Progress of Human Knowledge and Culture*, sometimes referred to as London's answer to the Sistine Chapel: a six-panel work in the Great Room of the present-day Royal Society for the Arts where, ironically enough, it is rarely seen by the British public.

As Lenihan observes, Barry's collected writings, published by Cadell and Davies soon after he died, do not exist in a scholarly edition and have only been occasionally reproduced in facsimile form. One result is that Barry is more often quoted than read, thus leaving his loud preference for historical composition over portraiture (the genre of mere copyists, lucrative because popular) to speak for itself without questioning. But Lenihan provides here a fruitful counterpressure. Many of Barry's best painted works, he writes, were themselves mixtures of various genres, and his late print, *Passive Obedience* (c. 1802–5), depicts 'the disintegration of a genre of art,' and is more in keeping with 'the new post-revolutionary world' than the more prestigious artistic type it was supplanting (184). Barry's writings similarly reveal deep and complex ambivalences: 'Barry's dedication to history painting as a 'national' art,' cautions

Lenihan, ‘was complicated by his desire to expand the means by which history painting communicated with its audience’ (184). A claim such as this serves as a wise caution in approaching the deceptively broad strokes of Barry’s thought, and Lenihan accordingly locates the fascination of Barry’s prose in a simple and profound contradiction at its heart: ‘From a relatively unimportant position in the London art world he articulated the view that he, as a history painter, should occupy a central role in the public sphere’ (50). Barry, in construing his own art ‘as integral to the moral, as well as artistic, well-being of the nation,’ makes a compelling, late-neoclassical case for the cultural centrality of high culture, which also places him – somewhat against expectation – among the Romantics.

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