CHAPTER V
The English Artist as Social or Political Critic:
From Hogarth to Cruikshank

Within her borders—though not in her colonies—England had had relative freedom from destructive violence and oppressive stagnation. And a combination of historical forces made it possible for socially critical art to reach its full flowering in eighteenth-century England. As early as 1724 there appeared a remarkably blunt attack on the Establishment by a young English engraver, William Hogarth (1697–1764). This print could not conceivably have been published except in relatively democratic England. “Royalty, Episopacy, and the Law” (technically, “Some of the Principal Inhabitants of ye Moon”) is a devastating satire that bares the disillusionment following the collapse of a wild speculative fever that had gripped England. The king’s face is a coin; he wears a collar of bubbles and is subordinated to other figures. The bishop has the face of a Jew’s harp—possibly an implication that sermons were all noise; he is attached to a pump handle which pumps coins into the episcopal coffer. A blind, faceless judge sits armless and in chains. The figures of fashion at their feet are as faceless as the king and bishop.

The sharp barbs of the Hogarth print went far beyond any previous graphic criticism. Despite moments of stress and violence, the struggle for religious tolerance and constitutional government and the development of parliamentary tradition had evolved in relative peace—a condition conducive to freedom of expression. The religious, military, economic, and political contests which were eventually resolved in the compromise known as the British Way of Life were all reflected in the free-swinging, vigorously polemical—if inartistic—prints of seventeenth-century England. Although English printmaking in that period, lacking a Bruegel, Callot, or Dürer, was without distinction and originality, it did have topical pertinence and a relatively democratic impertinence. Its importance lies in the fact that it existed and even flourished at a time when full expression was disappearing in most other countries.

These early prints were often crude, amateurish, anonymous, emblematical, and not far removed from the symbolism of the Middle Ages and Reformation. English counterparts to the European broadsides and medallions were common.

In the 1640’s, with the opening of the Long Parliament, the attack on monopolies, and the outbreak of the Civil War, English prints began to appear more frequently. As always, the attackers had the advantage over the Royalists, just as the
pro-Lutheran prints had effectively denounced the abuses of the Church a century earlier.

A prominent theme in the 1640s, resentment against monopolies, was exploited effectively by Wenceslaus Hollar (1607–77), Czech-born chronicler of English life. In “The Patency,” Hollar uses the ancient folk device of constructing a character out of the objects of his vocation. In this case, the patency or monopolist, his claws hooked to money bags, is composed of wine, coals, soap, and pins—all the monopolies which were causing the people to suffer from high prices and shortages. Hollar made several thousand delicate etchings, an invaluable record of seventeenth-century England, for which he was paid four pence an hour or six pence a print to produce. In many of his prints he furtively included the bitter symbol of an hourglass.

In sixteenth-century Germany and seventeenth-century France, religion and state were so intertwined that any print on religious themes almost invariably had political overtones. As M. Dorothy George...
pointed out in her classic *English Political Caricature*, “From 1640 to 1710 (roughly speaking) a majority of prints attacked the Anglican Church, or the Presbyterian, or the Independents, or dissent in general, each being associated with Rome.” The Pope was the tool used to harass the government or the opposing religion. In “Time and the Pope,” Hollar has Time carrying the Pope—“This load of vanity”—back to Rome.

Archbishop Laud, Cromwell, or whoever occupied the center of the stage soon found himself deluged with insults hurled by the printmakers in a boisterous English tradition that was to reach its pinnacle during

the eighteenth century. It reflected a period of remarkable growth, with its attendant stresses and conflicts.

In spite of such disastrous speculations as that of the South Sea Company, England burgeoned in the eighteenth century. Her population doubled, her colonial empire spread throughout the world, her industries prospered. Factories sprouted throughout the land, employing hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children who had previously tilled the soil. It was a vigorous, individualistic age, with fortunes made overnight. It was an age of great refinement, of gracious living, of flourishing and creative literature, music, art, and architecture. And it was also a period of brutality, of dirt, disease, starvation, and hardship, of bare subsistence for most people, who were ill-fed (malnutrition was ubiquitous, and when food prices rose, semistarvation prevailed), ill-clothed (usually one set of clothing was the complete wardrobe, washed annually, if at all), and ill-housed (often many families occupied one room).

From birth to an early death, the average urban or rural laborer ran a losing race against poverty and debt. It is not surprising that those who worked so hard played hard, with the violence of desperation in the little time allotted for relaxation. There was gambling, drinking (the consumption of gin was enormous), cockfighting, bull baiting and, for a really festive occasion, a public hanging. The disorder, the noise, the uncertainty of life drove most people to seek some form of escape.

Some found solace and emotional relief in the fundamentalist preaching of John Wesley. Most found an outlet in sporadic rioting and occasional rebellion. In fact, during the Gordon Riots of 1780, working-class mobs controlled London for several days. But such outbreaks, in London at least, were neither class-conscious nor revolutionary in intent. For the most part they were aimless mob action. In the rural areas, where even worse conditions existed, a few more socially activated outbreaks occurred which were put down by force.

Throughout the century there was a growing awareness of the need to improve municipal conditions. Street paving and lighting were undertaken in London, and sewage disposal and sanitation were improved. Some of the new middle class and religious groups felt stirrings of humanitarianism. Prison reforms were initiated, and some hospitals were founded. At the beginning of the century only one London child out of four survived; by the end of the century the population of England had doubled.

All this feverish growth, change, and exuberant vitality were reflected in the popular prints of the time. The eighteenth century was a golden age of English satirical printmaking. *The British Museum Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires* has 8,082 entries for the period from 1720 to 1800. Let alone the thousands that have disappeared.

Leafing through this tremendous mass, one cannot but be impressed by the pro-
lificness, the zest, and the vigor with which the satirists attacked the leading figures of the day and many of the pet foibles of the upper classes. At a time when censorship prevailed in France and Germany (graphic satire hardly ever existed in Italy and Spain), it is refreshing to behold the vitality of political expression in eighteenth-century England.

There were objectionable features, of course. Only a fraction of the population—the landed aristocracy—actually had the right to vote. Despite attacks on royalty, ministers, and their policies, fundamentals were rarely questioned or basic social problems defined. Most of the political prints were concerned with the intense parliamentary maneuverings. Many of the prints are topical, almost arcane in their references and consequently of limited interest today. Unfortunately, the élan is not matched by quality. Poorly conceived and amateurishly executed, the prints resort to balloons and streamers and verbal devices to compensate for lack of inspiration. The work as a whole is more impressive than the individual prints, with a few exceptions. The vitality is exciting; the artistic inspiration, rare.

The printmakers themselves in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were a mixture of such professionals as William Hogarth, Thomas Rowlandson, James Gillray, the Cruikshanks, the youthful Richard Newton, William Heath, and prolific amateurs including George Townshend, Henry Bunbury, James Sayers, William Dent, and Matthew Darly. The first artist to bring genuine significance and a high satirical level to this vast output was William Hogarth.

It was at the dawn of the century that Hogarth (1697–1764) grew up in London—stinking, brawling, overflowing, noisy, vibrant, aristocratic, democratic, gracious, filthy, intellectual, vulgar London. Hogarth’s engravings and etchings bring eighteenth-century London spiritedly to life—the crowded streets, the boisterous taverns, the riotous boxing matches and theaters, the bleak prisons and the aristocratic drawing rooms, the jaded rich and the precarious poor.

Son of a schoolmaster, Hogarth showed an early bent for drawing and at fifteen was apprenticed to a silversmith. He studied drawing at a small academy and later with Sir James Thornhill, the painter and decorator, whose daughter he married. Hogarth engraved many bookplates, show cards, and illustrations, notably for Butler’s Hudibras, but he made his reputation with “conversation pieces”—small portraits and portrait groups. His real success came when he decided to paint and engrave “modern moral subjects . . . pictures on canvas, similar to representations on the stage.” The first of these morality plays was “The Harlot’s Progress,” first painted, then engraved. The engravings sold very successfully by subscription. His later series, “The Rake’s Progress” and “Marriage à la mode,” were equally successful, but Hogarth’s ambition to be highly regarded as a painter.
was constantly frustrated. Even his essay, *The Analysis of Beauty*, was not taken seriously by the art critics of his day. His reputation was based, quite justifiably, on his magnificent satirical prints. Ironically, the very fact that his prints were so popular militated against his paintings being taken seriously. His contemporaries never recognized his great contributions to English painting, notably his superb “Shrimp Girl” and “Captain Coram.”

Hogarth was primarily a story teller in the tradition of the medieval moralists. He regarded himself as a painter-engraver, a dramatic writer, with subjects more important than their execution. There are infrequent grace and little subtlety in theme in his drawing. As he saw it, “The passion may be more forcibly expressed by a strong, bold stroke than by the most delicate engraving.” He brought to his art an exuberant, baroque gusto in which detail was piled upon detail in the Dürer tradition with sledgehammer effect. There is so much detail, in fact, that many of Hogarth’s engravings have to be “read.” To make the meanings clear, even to the unlettered, Hogarth often resorted to burlesque and parody.

A self-made man, Hogarth was beset with human contradictions. He was a pugnacious battler against unhealthy social conditions but was sycophantic to the rich, anxious for commissions from the nobility and the wealthy. Indifferent to the graceful line, he was the author of *The Aesthetics of Beauty*. He was witty but moralistic, and his engravings were often didactic sermons—yet brimming with teeming life. His profound sense of tragedy was matched by his feeling for comedy. He frowned upon low life and debauchery, but he portrayed them with zest. He fought with verve and satire against cruelty and stupidity, yet he mirrored the Englishman’s prejudices against foreigners, Catholics, and Jews.

Hogarth was the epitome of middle-class morality. In his view, industry was always rewarded by material success, while laziness and vice led to the gallows. It is interesting that the last letter Hogarth received was from Benjamin Franklin, who admired him. Although he was not at all religious, his middle-class sense of propriety was shocked by the extravagant vice and extremes of corruption prevalent at the time, and he often tried to appeal to the latent puritanism of his fellow Englishmen. In many respects his morality was akin to that of Bosch and Bruegel. Of course, Hogarth’s appeal today rests not on his morality plays, but on his superb reportage, his remarkably alive vignettes of high and low London life.

Hogarth’s efforts to reform his fellow Londoners had an early beginning. He was only twenty-four when he etched “The South Sea Scheme,” a satire on all forms of speculation. The victims can’t wait to get on the South Sea merry-go-round that will give them a quick ride but nothing else for their money. At the lower left, Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant men of God are playing pitch-and-toss. In the upper left,
husbands are being raffled to eager wives in a building adorned by horns. And "Honour" and "honesty" are being flogged and broken on the wheel. Although the composition is loose, the engraving indicates Hogarth's already fertile imagination.

His most famous subjects were moral in tone and purpose, often done as tableaux,
as a play would unfold. The ethos, as distinct from the artistic merit, of "The Rake's Progress," "A Harlot's Progress," and "Marriage à la mode," has often been downgraded, and they have been regarded simply as moralizing picture-stories reflecting

Hogarth's middle-class bias: the wages of sin, or the penalties for attempting to rise above one's station. This appraisal has some validity, but Hogarth was also condemning a corrupt society and a way of life. "The Unhappy Pair at Home," Plate No. 2 of "Marriage à la mode," is a classic picture of the boredom, emptiness, frivolity, and pointlessness of a society life without values.

In one of his series, "Industry and Idle-ness," he contrasts the life of the industrious apprentice who becomes mayor of London with that of the idle apprentice whose destiny is an evil end with a gang of thieves. It seems—and is—platitudeous. But, as Marjorie Bowen has pointed out, the stuffy atmosphere when the industrious lad is married or when the city banquet is held is "as repulsive as the horrors of the vagabond's garret." Hogarth, then, frequently has to be read on two levels; there are often overtones unnoticed the first few times a Hogarth print is studied.

Hogarth actually had some success as an artist-reformer seeking concrete results. Magdalen Hospital, the oldest home for prostitutes in England, was founded in 1758 as a direct result of "A Harlot's Progress." Hogarth's "Gin Lane" helped back up the pamphleteering efforts of novelist Henry Fielding to curb the disastrous effects of demon gin on the poor. Their joint efforts, with those of Defoe and others, brought about the Tippling Act against the sale of cheap gin.

In "The Four Stages of Cruelty," a boy who maltreats animals eventually—and inexorably—winds up as a murderer. "The prints were engraved," Hogarth wrote, "with the hope of in some degree correcting that barbarous treatment of animals, the very sight of which renders the streets of our Metropolis so distressing to every feeling mind." In the "First Stage," our hero sports the badge of St. Giles' Charity School. Here Hogarth may well be attacking the charity school-apprenticeship system, which was intended to lead abandoned children to a life of virtue but in reality prepared them for the cesspool. Hogarth is always concerned with the consequences of men's actions. In the "First Stage," Tom Nero is savagely maltreating a dog. In the fourth and final plate, "The Reward of Cruelty," surgeons are dissecting the corpse of Nero (hanged at the gallows) with just as much savage glee, while a dog licks Nero's heart.

In several of Hogarth's paintings and engravings he drew attention to the horrendous conditions in prisons—conditions which Fielding attacked in his novels. Hogarth was also an active governor of the Foundling Hospital, the first home in London for abandoned children, and made paintings for the institution.

In a day when politics was synonymous with corruption, when the major difference between the parties was that the outs wanted in, Hogarth distrusted all politicians. His "Election" cycle, one of his few efforts at political satire, was executed after


the particularly seamy election of 1754. It includes two scenes represented here. In "An Election Entertainment," the candidate's lavish party for his constituents hints at the prize at stake. Among many other fascinating details, note that Hogarth is parodying "The Last Supper" with thirteen at the table and the candidate at the left having his ring lifted as he receives a Judas kiss. In "The Polling," the feebleminded and the dying are let out of workhouse, jail, or hospital for a fee, to vote. In the background Britannia's coach has veered off the road as the coachmen become absorbed in their cards.

Hogarth's targets were a potpourri of
human frailty: idlers, gamblers, corrupt politicians, indifferent magistrates, unfeeling and ignorant physicians, lazy artists, insincere clergy, rapacious soldiers. All were grist for the mill that ground out his satirical prints by the hundreds, protected.

by the copyright law of 1735 which he was instrumental in getting passed in order to protect his work from pirates. Hogarth prints embodying these themes decorated thousands of middle-class English drawing rooms.

A generation later, the colored prints of Thomas Rowlandson (1756–1827) were also titillating Englishmen (and English women) in London and the provinces, but with a vast difference. No puritan, “Rowly” was a full-blooded, hard-drinking, beef-devouring giant, a towering bon vivant, enamored of the tavern and the gambling table, more a bold and eager participant in than a critic of his brawling eighteenth-century England.

Rowlandson differed from Hogarth in artistic as well as moral approach. Graceful, flowing line distinguished many of Rowlandson’s drawings and colored aquatints. He was a fine colorist and landscape artist, with a sure feeling for architectural form. Hogarth brought life to London’s swarming streets by massive detail; Rowlandson achieved it by creating a naturalistic atmosphere. Rowlandson’s prints are alive with the movement of bustling crowds, flowing with curves so suitable to express his grotesqueries.