

E. H. Gombrich, Review of Draper Hill, Mr Gillray the Caricaturist and John Physick, The Duke of Wellington in Caricature, Burlington Magazine, Vol. 108, 1966, pp.206-7 [Trapp no.1966K.1]

Mr Gillray, the Caricaturist. By Draper Hill. vi +170 pp. +frontispiece +146 ill. (Phaidon), £2. *The Duke of Wellington in caricature.* By John Physick. Victoria and Albert Museum (H.M.S.O., London 1965), 12s. 6d.

Mr Draper Hill's book is exactly described by its title. It is a biography, not a monograph. As such it is an admirable achievement. The author has spared no trouble to go to the sources and he found them flowing more abundantly than anyone seems to have expected. True, his results do not materially change the outline of the story which had been told and retold for more than a century in almost identical words in books on caricature and in reference works; we knew that Gillray was the son of a war invalid who had become sexton to the Moravian brothers in London, that he was apprenticed to an engraver, attended the Royal Academy and that his power as a satirist attracted the attention of Pitt's administration who paid him a pension. We also knew of his liaison with his publisher, Miss Humphreys, over whose print shop he lived, and of his decline into madness after 1811. But Mr Draper Hill has not taken any part of the story on trust. Wherever possible he has tracked down traditions to their origin and has checked and expanded them through the use of documents. Two episodes now stand out with particular vividness. The first is the account of Gillray's origins and of the background of his childhood. There is an unexpected wealth of documentation not only about the life of the Moravian brothers in London, but also about the school to which Gillray was sent. For the twentieth-century reader these are harrowing documents. The purpose of education was to impress on the children the wretchedness of human existence and the desirability of leaving this vale of tears as rapidly as possible. Given the infant mortality of these years it may have been an excusable attitude. Mr Hill prints an account, preserved among Gillray's papers in the British Museum, of the death of his elder brother at school at the age of 7 who kept repeating 'how pretty it wo'd be if our Saviour wo'de soon fetch me'. The contrast between this atmosphere and the mood one generally associates with Gillray's coarse and robust satire is startling. Yet there is no evidence that Gillray ever broke with his background. We know that he kept in touch with his father to the end. To our hindsight this need not look paradoxical. There is no reason to assume that Gillray ever abandoned the outlook of *mondo cane* or that he ever denied the bliss of heaven.

The central episode in Mr Hill's biography unravels the complex relationship that was known to have existed between the caricaturist and George Canning. Mrs Dorothy George (to whom this book is dedicated) has drawn attention to the material first published in 1909 by Josceline Bagot in *George Canning and his Friends*. She referred to the incident of the pension in her invaluable Introductions to the *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires of the British Museum*, Vols. VII and VIII. But only now can we savour the full irony of the story and its significance for the social role of caricature. It appears that Canning as a rising politician was at first mainly anxious for his portrait to be included in one of Gillray's cartoons. Publicity seems to have mattered more to him than praise. We must not forget this background when reading about the frantic efforts Canning and his friends made a few years later to prevent Gillray from publishing illustrations of some of their own satires from the *Anti Jacobin*. These satires attacked the ideas of the French Revolution and of its champions nearer home. Gillray, it was feared (and rightly so), would not confine himself to ideas and to types but would insert the portraits of politicians he identified with the French camp. How undesirable this was for a minister in office who had to meet these men in the House and how gratuitous to help one's opponents to gain publicity! The threat, conveyed by intermediaries, that Gillray's pension would be stopped if he did not destroy

these plates did the trick. We can only gain a shadowy idea of what we may have lost from two interesting oil sketches now at the New York Public Library and reproduced by Mr Hill.

It is perhaps inevitable that a story so entangled with the political history of the times compels the author to chronicle the political events on which Gillray commented and occasionally to lose sight of his central figure in all this bustle of persons and issues. It is a pitfall which few historians of the genre have managed to avoid. Only in the last chapters concerned with the artist's decline into madness does the author again fully focus on his hero. Here, unfortunately, the evidence proves very elusive. Tradition attributed Gill-ray's breakdown to drink, but the author thinks that he may always have been a manic-depressive type. Like many artists he seems to have worried about his failing eyesight and Mr Hill makes a case for some kind of obsession with eyes and with blindness. Be that as it may, the drawings which Mr Hill reproduces from Gillray's last period are bound to attract most attention. 'Pray Pity for the Sorrows of a Poor Blind Man' is a moving masterpiece, whether or not we refer it to the artist's own plight.

In tracking down these and other drawings Mr Hill has, indeed, performed the most important service. An eager collector himself, he has acquired a good many in the process. It is on this material that a future monograph of Gillray will have to be based. If we still have no such monograph this may be due to the fact, as the author remarks in his Epilogue, that the artist's reputation 'has been hampered by an apparent lack of humanity, by an insistence on physical ugliness and by the disproportionate stress which has been laid on the caricaturist's vulgarities'. No assessment of Gillray's art can succeed that does not face these issues squarely. It is here that even Mr Hill's book slightly disappoints. His tone is sometimes apologetic. He draws attention to Gillray's magnificent 'line' and, in particular to his importance in the history of cartooning. But to understand this history we may have to understand that this was (to use an anachronism) an anti-art. If Art according to the ideals which Gillray must have imbibed at the Academy was noble, beautiful and inspired by the highest feelings of humanity it was for the satirist to explore the anti-ideal and to go to the extremes of the vulgar, the ugly and the inhuman. It is the reluctance of art historians to operate with the concepts of Beauty and Nobility as they were conceived in the academic tradition, which makes it so hard to write a history of caricature rather than of caricatures and caricaturists. Caricature started with a search, attributed to Annibale Carracci, for the *perfetta deformità*. In the hands of Hogarth, the empiricist, the investigation of the laws of beauty was closely linked with experiments about ugliness. Gillray's style can only be understood against this background. He obviously shared the ideals of beauty and the ideas of prettiness current in his time. The slightly insipid formula of classical beauty which became so popular in England and the continent of Europe through the work of Angelica Kauffmann, Cipriani or Thomas Stothard almost cried out for a counter type of deformity. The smile that sweetly hovers around the small lips of the ideal is turned into the opposite stereotype of the grimace with its huge beak-like mouth of which the corners are almost invariably pulled down. Such matters were discussed in Gillray's time and surroundings, witness the experiments of Alexander Cozens and the *Rules for Drawing Caricatures* published by Francis Grose. He would not have been the artist he was, if his reaction to this challenge had not been individual and original. But his interest in academic categories is testified by his reference to Fuseli's 'Mock Sublime Mad Taste'.

Maybe it is this frame of reference that both accounts for the explosive force of caricature in the late eighteenth century and for its flagging in the first decades of the nineteenth. By then other issues had arisen even in the academic world and the problem of beauty no longer stood in the centre. Caricatures lost the edge of ugliness and vulgarity without, on the whole, any corresponding gain. Artistically the plates of the picture book published by the Victoria and Albert Museum showing the Duke of Wellington in caricature are not very rewarding. The large majority of the 44 plates belong to

William Heath, the remainder mainly to John Doyle. Understandably the introduction and commentary by Mr John Physick is little concerned with the style of these products and concentrates on the interpretation of the content. It is a pity, though, that this conventional preoccupation has prevented him from drawing attention to such artistic values as can at least be found in his last plate, designed by John Doyle and entitled 'A Walk by the Sea Shore'. It shows the Duke of Wellington outside the grounds of Walmer Castle, Kent. We are told in the commentary when the castle was built and when Mrs Arbuthnot visited the Duke there. No exaggerated claims need be made for this naive popular print, but there is something genuinely moving in this anti-heroic factual portrayal of the lonely Duke on his country walk. It certainly is neither a caricature nor a satire in the traditional sense of the term. But it derives from this genre the disregard of conventional 'decorum' that shows that the age of the common man had arrived.