‘Imitators of One Another’: a source for George Barret

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Edmund Burke (1729-1797) described his friend George Barret (1732-1784) as a ‘wonderful observer of the accidents of nature’, continuing that he did ‘not even look at the pictures of any of the great masters, either Italian or Dutch’.[1] This comment, while to a modern ear suggestive of Barret’s originality in studying nature directly rather than as mediated through the art of the past, was actually intended as a criticism in an otherwise very favourable assessment. Burke suggests that Barret’s failure to study the great masters is why he did not ‘[get] forward as much as his genius would entitle him to’.[2] This assessment of his singularity in this regard is given added weight in that it makes an exception for Barret to Burke’s earlier view that artists have ‘rather been imitators of one another than of nature’.[3] However, like many theorists, here Burke fundamentally misunderstood how art is made and, specifically, seems unaware of Barret’s frequent referral to the work of past artists – rather than to ‘nature’ – for inspiration. Borrowings – on the level of a motif or a whole composition – from Claude, Piranesi and Giovanni Battista Busiri have been detected in his landscapes.[4] This should not surprise. Unlike his principal rival Richard Wilson, Barret never travelled to Italy, so borrowing a view of the Tempietto at Clitunno, say, from an engraving by Piranesi (Plate 2) was a quite reasonable artistic stratagem, even if it contradicts Burke’s direct assertion that he did not look at Italian art. This paper looks at a rather more surprising appropriation.

THE HARE HUNT

Among the treasures of Clandon Park in Surrey before the tragic fire of April 2015 was a notable set of four English (Soho) tapestries produced by the leading upholsterer William Bradshaw (1700-1770), *The Hare Hunt*, which hung

1 – George Barret (1732-1784), The Chase (detail)
c.1762, oil on canvas, 109 x 97 cm (courtesy Irish Heritage Trust: Fota House, county Cork)

2 – George Barret (1732-1784), Landscape with the Tempietto at Clitunno
c.1762, oil on canvas, 58 x 91 cm (private collection)

3 – Bernard Baron (1696-1762), after John Wooton (c.1682-1764), The Chase
1727, engraving, 31 x 44 cm

in a dedicated Hunting Room.[5] The tapestries date from between 1730 and 1733, and, indeed, were exactly contemporaneous with the building of Clandon itself. Evidence from a further, signed, set from the same series shows that Bradshaw worked here in partnership with the *émigré* Hungarian flower-painter Tobias Stranover (1684-1756), with whom, by 1730, he was sharing a premises on Frith Street in Soho.[6] The designs for the tapestries derive from a set of four engravings after John Wooton (*c*.1682-1764) – 'The Going Out in the Morning', 'The Hounds at Fault', 'The Chase' (Plate 3) and 'The Death of the Hare' – which were published in London just a few years earlier in 1727. The oil paintings from which the engravings, and hence the Clandon tapestries, derive were recorded in the sale of Wooton's collection: 'Four Original Paintings of Huntings ... from whence the Prints were engraved'.[7] These have not survived, but in his only sortie into the world of publishing Wooton commissioned the engravings from the French-born printmaker Bernard Baron (1696-1762), paying him £50 for each plate.[8]

Although Vertue records that Wooton 'had a generous Subscription from a great number of Nobles & Gentlemen', the prints are today exceedingly rare, and the only extant copy of 'The Chase' in a public collection was at Clandon before the fire. In fact, the survival rate of the prints is in inverse relation to their influence, for not only were the images copied in the Clandon tapestries, but they feature on a needlework screen in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and as transfers on ceramics, as, for example, on a mug made in Liverpool in about 1765 (Plate 4).[9] In his tapestries, Bradshaw used Wooton's images very freely, taking from them only what suited his purposes. While one of the series replicates *The Hounds at Fault* quite closely, the other three derive from different sections of *The Chase*, which, by definition, is the most dramatic of the four scenes. As is to be expected, the tapestries were woven in the opposite direction to the prints.

Writing of the Clandon tapestries, Helen Wyld notes that the creative milieu of Soho in the 1730s, where 'artists and craftsmen involved in [tapestry] production lived and worked in close proximity', saw a processes of redefinition of 'questions of authorship and the ownership of design'.[10] However, this artisanal fluidity of authorship was not uncontested, and a few years after he produced the prints after Wooton, Baron was called to the House of Commons to give evidence in support of William Hogarth's successful attempt to protect engravers' intellectual property through the Copyright Act which was to bear his name (and which passed into law on 25th June 1735). Baron (who would later work for Hogarth on his *Marriage à-la-mode* series), testified that he had 'engraved Four Copper – plates of Hunting – pieces for Mr Wooton, which, in Two or Three Months time, were copied by another Person; and that the Copies were sold at a very Low Rate, which

4 – A mug with THE CHASE, *after John Wooton*
Philip Christian's Manufactory, Liverpool c.1765 (courtesy Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

hindered the Sale of Mr Wooton's Originals'.[11] The choice of language is interesting and is an assertion of ownership as much as of authorship. Here 'original' means a reproductive engraving by Baron after Wooton, which is certainly not how Hogarth would have defined it, and there is some irony in the fact that Baron would not have been protected by the Hogarth Act which covered invention not reproduction.

It was not just applied artists who took inspiration from Wooton's series. Arline Meyer notes that Baron's engravings 'are undoubtedly the source of many unattributable paintings executed in Wooton's style'.[12] What does surprise, however, is that among the artists who looked to Wooton as a source from which to borrow was the founding member of the Royal Academy, George Barret. In a particularly accomplished and typically lush landscape (Plates 1, 5), which seems to date from towards the end of his time in Ireland in the early 1760s, Barret borrows the three principal huntsmen of *The Chase*, though rather improving on the composition by closing the gap between the two central figures and the horseman riding from left to right and giving a greater sense of the progress of the hunt as riders and dogs descend into the picture. Barret disregards some of Wooton's figures altogether, such as the beater on foot, and adds others – notably, the well-judged huntsman in red on a white horse in the act of jumping a stone wall. He repeats small details which catch his eye, such as the horses' white fetlocks, but completely recasts, as one would expect, the landscape background.

'SILCOCK WANTS AN APPRENTICE'

Copying engravings would have come naturally to the young Barret. It was the foundation of his training at the Dublin Society School under Robert West (active 1740-d.1770), and Strickland records that while still studying there, Barret worked for Thomas Silcock, the 'eminent print seller' in Nicholas Street.[13] Barret's apprenticeship at 'the 'Fan and Crown opposite the Tholsel' may have commenced, or, given the date, perhaps more likely concluded, in early summer 1751 when a newspaper advertisement alerted Dublin: 'N.B. Silcock wants an apprentice, who has a genius for drawing. For particulars enquire, at his shop'.[14]

Silcock ran a highly diversified business with a sideline in patent drugs such as 'Walker's Genuine Jesuit Drops', and also acted as a builders' suppliers.[15] In the same newspaper in which he advertised for an apprentice, he offered for sale 'sashes of seasoned deal ... glazed with the best London Crown glass puttied on both sides' and even 'superfine mustard ... in pickled pots', but it is noteworthy that one area in which he specialised was the import of prints from England. In 1749 he advertised the arrival of Hogarth's engravings 'The Gate of Calais' and 'The Roast Beef of Old England'.[16] He also stocked the work of the Dublin Group of mezzotint artists such as James McArdell (1729-1764). In June 1750, when Barret was very likely working for him, he advertised 'a great assortment of Italian, French and English prints and the newest mezzotints, with fans,

5 – George Barret (1732-1784), THE CHASE
c.1762, oil on canvas, 109 x 97 cm (courtesy Irish Heritage Trust: Fota House, county Cork)

fan mounts ... [and] Fine French paper, just imported'.[17] So, in addition to the prints that were available for study in Robert West's academy, Barret had access to a wide array of graphic material in his part-time job with Silcock – quite possibly including Baron's engravings after Wooton. Indeed, it is specifically recorded that he was employed to add colour to monochrome prints.[18] Barret's time at the 'Fan and Crown' has drawn little comment from writers on the artist, but the little we can glean of Silcock's shop is of interest for the picture it offers of the young artist from the Liberties learning his trade in a busy artisanal practice, a world away from the learned Burke who was, almost simultaneously, beginning to theorise about the Sublime in the hallowed halls of Trinity College.

In January 1753, Silcock advertised that he had 'set up a Compleat Rolling Press for the Printing off his own Plates, taking in all Manner of Copper Plate Printing at the lowest Rates').[19] He moved his business to the Royal Fan on Skinner Row in 1759, married Mary King in December 1762, and after her death in February 1763 married in

August that year 'Miss Christian of London, with a handsome fortune'.[20] Silcock died less than two years later in February 1765, though his widow, Ann, noted that she was 'intent on carrying on the business of her late husband'. When she gave up the business three years later in April 1768 it had diversified still further, and was now described as 'the Print and Perfume shop of the late Thomas Silcock deceased'.[21] While the Silcocks' fortune was on the wane, that of their former employee was in the ascendant, and just a few months later, in December of the same year, Barret was named as one of the founding members of the Royal Academy. His 'genius for drawing' had taken him a long way from the Fan and Crown.

'IMITATIO'

THE ISSUE – THE PERMISSIBILITY – OF IMITATING, OR BORROWING FROM, THE ARTISTS of the past was the subject of great debate in eighteenth century England with different positions developing from Soho artisans freely borrowing motifs and Hogarth trying to protect his designs to Burke hinting at what would become the academic orthodoxy, recommending a *via media*, the study of nature through an informed knowledge of the great old masters. This position was given a theoretical foundation, if not quite coherence, by Burke's friend Sir Joshua Reynolds who addressed the issue in his sixth Discourse 'To the Students of the Royal Academy on the Distribution of the Prizes on 10 December 1774'. Reynolds argued that the source of the borrowing was crucial:

> There is some difference…whether it is upon the antients [*sic*] or the moderns that these depredations are made. It is generally allowable, that no man need be ashamed of copying the antients: their works are considered as a magazine of common property, always open to the publick, whence everyman has a right to take what materials he pleases.[22]

Reynolds cites Raphael's reuse of classical sources as impeccable precedent for borrowing from the ancients before acknowledging 'that the works of the moderns are more the property of their authors'.[23] In the next breath, however, Reynolds, perhaps thinking of his own practice, qualifies this and suggests that borrowings, even from more recent artists, are justifiable if they are appropriated in such a way as to disguise their origins: 'he, who borrows an idea from an antient [*sic*] or from a modern artist not his contemporary, and so accommodates it to his own work, that it makes a part of it, with no seam or joining appearing, can hardly be charged with plagiarism.'[24] If this gave comfort to Barret, who was presumably in the audience, it did not excuse him entirely, as Reynolds is clear that he does not allow such borrowings from contemporaries, and Wooton, who died in 1764, was probably still alive when Barret purloined his designs (as indeed were Piranesi and Busiri when he copied theirs). Nevertheless, it is certainly the case that the

Hare Hunt is distinctly in Barret's own style and that he accommodated the borrowing to his own art so successfully ('with no seam or joining appearing') that the picture was used, as one of just three representative works, to illustrate Barret's art in the recently published *Art and Architecture of Ireland* (2014).[25]

ART OR NATURE

By the 1760s, when Barret borrowed his figures, Wooton was a distinctly retardataire source to which to turn. At this date George Stubbs was revitalising the study of equine anatomy, and artists like Thomas Gainsborough were beginning to study nature directly. At a time when Burke was praising his friend for ignoring 'pictures of any of the great masters' and looking only at nature, Barret was instead ransacking an old-fashioned painter like Wooton, an artist whose own imitation of his predecessors would later be ridiculed by John Constable: 'The absurdity of imitation is nowhere so striking as in the landscapes of the English Wooton, who painted country gentlemen in their wigs and jockey caps, and placed them in Italian landscapes resembling Gaspar Poussin, except in truth and force'.[26]

The concepts of originality, imitation and indeed of 'nature' changed dramatically in the years between Burke and Constable. Academic landscape theory prior to Constable awarded importance both to the study of nature and the art of the past, and different artists emphasised each in different measure. As recalled by one of Richard Wilson's pupils, 'it was to nature he principally referred. His admiration of the pictures of Claude could not be exceeded, but he contemplated those excellent works and compared them with what he saw in nature to refine his feeling and make his observations more exact.'[27] Barret's friendship with Burke has invited a reading of the artist in light of his compatriot's aesthetics, although there is very little echo of the Burkean sublime in Barret's generally sunlit, verdant landscapes.[28] Nevertheless, there may well be some truth in the often-repeated assertion that Burke encouraged the young Barret 'to study from nature'.[29] Indeed, a small oil sketch by Barret may even be the result of an experiment in *plein air* painting and, while he was still active in Dublin, his work was being marketed in such terms.[30] In June 1759, for example, George Spring, upholster and auctioneer ('almost opposite the Statue of King William on Horse back') offered for sale 'a number of landscapes, painted by Mr. Barret; the designs of which have been chiefly studied after nature'.[31] It is, however, noteworthy that in the quote which began this article, Burke found fault in Barret for paying too much attention to 'nature' and insufficient to the masters of the past, and that, as here, Barret was content to reuse pre-existing figures from an older contemporary rather than to sketch horsemen from life.

Barret was astute enough not to recommend this procedure publicly, and he towed the Academy's party line on the relative merits of the study of nature or art. In a letter of advice to a young artist, he recommends studying Rubens, Hobbema and Claude, but adds:

> paint from nature not forgetting art at the same time ... Do not be engrossed by any one master so as to become a mimic but think of all who have been excellent and endeavour to see nature with [their] eyes. This was the practice of Sir Joshua, Gainsborough and Wilson – this is all the advice I can give you.[32]

Barret is correct here in citing Reynolds, as the passage closely echoes the advice in the peroration of his sixth Discourse:

> Study therefore the great works of the great masters, for ever. Study as nearly as you can, in the order, in the manner, and on the principles on which they studied. Study nature attentively, but always with those masters in your company; consider them as models which you are to imitate, and at the same time as rivals with which you are to contend.[33]

If Barret has learnt the language of academic theory from Reynolds, the suspicion lingers that the Renaissance concept of *imitatio* is perhaps too lofty a phrase for his borrowing from John Wooton, who, not surprisingly, is omitted from the pantheon of Claude, Hobbema and Rubens whose works should be studied, and for all this academic theorising, his reusing the figures from the Wooton engraving was simply an expedient short cut – an extension into his mature art of the colouring in that he had practised on prints at Silcock's. Perhaps Burke was right the first time when he noted in his treatise that artists have always been imitators of one other rather than of nature, and perhaps Barret's time at Silcock's shop should be seen as being as influential on his artistic formation as his friendship with Edmund Burke.

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ENDNOTES

1 James Barry (ed. E. Freyer), *The Works of James Barry...*, 2 vols (London, 1809) 1, 89.

2 *ibid*.

3 Edmund Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* ([1757] Oxford, 1990) 49.

4 Michael Wynne, 'Continental European Sources for George Barret', *Irish Arts Review Yearbook*, 1994, 136-39; William Laffan and Kevin V. Mulligan, *Russborough: a great Irish house, its families and collections* (Dublin, 2014) 109-11; Rachel Finnegan, 'George Barret, R.A., Tempietto del Clitunno', *An Exhibition of 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th century Irish paintings*, exhibition catalogue, Gorry Gallery (Dublin, 2006) 5-6.

5 The year before the fire the tapestries were given their first extensive scholarly appraisal; Helen Wyld, 'Bradshaw and Stranover's Hare Hunt Tapestries', *National Trust Historic Houses and Collections Annual*, 2014, 1-9.

6 *ibid*., 6.

7 Quoted in Arline Meyer, *John Wootton, 1682-1764: Landscapes and Sporting Art in early Georgian England*, exhibition catalogue, Kenwood House (London, 1984) 77.

[8] *ibid*.

[9] *ibid*., 78; Wyld, 'Bradshaw and Stranover's Hare Hunt Tapestries', 8; *Highlights of the Untermyer Collection of English and Continental Decorative Arts* (New York, 1977) 207.

[10] Wyld, 'Bradshaw and Stranover's Hare Hunt Tapestries', 5.

[11] Meyer, *John Wooton*, 77.

[12] *ibid*.

[13] *Pue's Occurrences*, 27th-30th August 1763, and Walter Strickland, *A Dictionary of Irish Artists*, 2 vols (Dublin and London, 1913) I, 29.

[14] *Esdall's New-Letter*, 3rd June 1751. A decade earlier, Michael Jackson was apprenticed to Silcock after leaving the Blue Coat School. Jackson went on to a modest career as a mezzotint engraver in Dublin and London. See Strickland, *Dictionary*, I, 543.

[15] *Sleator's Public Gazetteer*, 23rd October 1758; Robert Munter, *A Dictionary of the Print Trade in Ireland, 1550-1775* (New York, 1988) 248.

[16] *Esdall's New-Letter,* 1st-3rd June 1751.

[17] *ibid*., 13th June 1750.

[18] Strickland, *Dictionary*, I, 29.

[19] *Dublin Journal*, 16th January 1753. See Munter, *Dictionary*, 248.

[20] For his first marriage, see Strickland, *Dictionary*, I, 29; for the second, see *Pue's Occurrences*, 27th-30th August 1763.

[21] *Faulkner's Dublin Journal*, 9th-12th April 1768.

[22] Sir Joshua Reynolds (ed. Roger R. Wark), *Discourses on Art* (New Haven and London, 1997) 106-07.

[23] *ibid*., 107.

[24] *ibid*. For a further discussion of this passage of the Discourse and a response to it by the other Irish foundation member of the Royal Academy, see William Laffan, 'Theft, Concealment and Exposure: Nathaniel Hone's The Spartan Boy', in Jane Fenlon, Ruth Kenny, Caroline Pegum, Brendan Rooney (eds), *Irish Fine Art in the Early Modern Period: new perspectives on artistic practice 1620-1820* (forthcoming, Dublin, 2016).

[25] Nicola Figgis (ed.), *Art and Architecture of Ireland, Volume II – Painting 1600-1900* (Dublin, New Haven, London, 2014) fig. 176.

[26] Meyer, *John Wooton*, 9.

[27] Quoted in Martin Postle and Robin Simon (eds), *Richard Wilson and the Transformation of European Landscape Painting* (New Haven and London, 2014) 67.

[28] See William Laffan, '"All the Terrors of the Storm": The FitzWilliam Forresters and the Beginnings of the Romantic Sublime', in Peter Murray (ed.), *Terror and the Sublime: art in an age of anxiety*, exhibition catalogue, Crawford Art Gallery (Cork, 2009) 111; William Laffan and Brendan Rooney, *Thomas Roberts, Landscape and Patronage in Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Tralee, 2009) 32-33.

[29] Strickland, *Dictionary*, I, 29; Nicola Figgis, 'George Barret', in Figgis (ed.), *Painting 1600-1900*, 165.

[30] William Laffan, '"Capturing the Beautiful Face of the Country": the origins of Irish plein-air painting', *Apollo*, September 2007, 60-66, and fig. 7.

[31] *Public Gazetteer*, 9th-12th June 1759.

[32] Letter in Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, quoted in Anne Crookshank and Desmond FitzGerald, Knight of Glin, *Ireland's Painters* (New Haven and London, 2002) 51.

[33] Reynolds, *Discourses*, 113.

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