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Review of *Nicholas Hawksmoor: Rebuilding Ancient Wonders*, by Vaughan Hart

David Cast

Bryn Mawr College, dcast@brynmawr.edu

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Books

English Architecture

Vaughan Hart

Nicholas Hawksmoor: Rebuilding Ancient Wonders

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002, xiv + 299 pp., 352 color and b/w illus. \$60, ISBN 0-300-09699-3

Nicholas Hawksmoor, as his son-in-law Nathaniel Blackerby wrote in 1736, was “perfectly skill’d in the History of Architecture,” or as Christine Stevenson has put it, he was obviously serious about his own book learning. And if in recent years architects like Denys Lasdun and Robert Venturi have been able to redirect attention to him by celebrating the power and complexity of his architecture, historians have chosen to set his work either more fully in the political context of its moment or within a tradition of design that stretches back over the whole history of architecture. In the latter vein, Kerry Downes suggested in 1959 a rich range of sources beyond the usual suspects, including the Palazzo Caffarelli by Raphael published in Domenico de Rossi’s *Studio d’architettura civile* (Rome, 1702–21), the Roman house reconstructed by Andea Palladio in Daniele Barbaro’s edition of Vitruvius’s *De architectura* (Venice, 1567), and the triumphal arch at Saintes illustrated in the second edition of François Blondel’s *Cours d’architecture* (Paris, 1698), texts that Hawksmoor owned. To these influences, more names have been added: the architect Jacques Androuet de Cerceau, theologians such as George Hickes and William Beveridge, and Thomas Smith who, in *An Account of the*

Greek Church (London, 1680), promulgated the idea of a primitive church that could guide the search for what was called true Protestant plainness. To support such an accounting of his work, there is a record of Hawksmoor’s reading, or at least of the many books he owned that were among his effects sold in 1740. Most important, there is the evidence of his architecture, at once deeply original, yet also clearly based on an understanding of all that classical architecture, ancient or modern, could offer anyone who approached it with such a particular and unusual sensibility.

To such accounts, replete as they are with references and associations, Vaughan Hart’s *Nicholas Hawksmoor: Rebuilding Ancient Wonders* adds yet another, coinciding with a renewed interest in the Baroque and in what the author calls “expressive forms derived from classical canonicity but moulded to express new, ‘Postmodern’ imperatives” (xi). This is a difficult phrase. But what it suggests is his hope to explain afresh how Hawksmoor’s designs came into being, why he chose to make an ancient mausoleum rise above the rooftops of London, and why, even in his most serious moments, the architect was apparently free to adopt a variety of styles for what he built—Gothic here, Grecian there. And if Hawksmoor, unlike Christopher Wren, wrote little to explain what was, as he put it, his “method architectonically,” the notes he left and the words he used—“Fancy,” “Effect,” “Decorum,” “Good Reason”—allow us to base what we say of his architecture on precise historical language. There is also, after the generation of John Summerson, Howard Colvin, and Downes, the work of more recent histo-

rians, such as Judith Loach, Timothy Rub, Pierre Ruffinière du Prey, and Giles Worsley, plus—as the book’s acknowledgments attest—Hart’s many correspondents, near and far, all equally passionate about Hawksmoor, who is perhaps to be recognized, as Joseph Rykwert has said, as the greatest of all English architects.

To find an order for this material is not easy. The book is structured in two parts—Hawksmoor’s Studies, comprising the first four chapters, followed by The Tower, the Temple, and the Tomb, six chapters devoted to Hawksmoor’s buildings—framed by an introduction and conclusion. Each chapter is defined by a quotation, some taken from the obituary written by Blackerby, others from John Vanbrugh or from the minutes of the Church Commissioners, and, finally, from Hawksmoor himself who, in speaking about the plans for Greenwich and Westminster, coined the interesting if ambiguous description of London as “the Great Emporium.” There is a great deal here, and even though he makes no claim for comprehensiveness, Hart is able to cover all Hawksmoor’s projects, those built, those left on the drawing board, and those destroyed. In the conclusion, capped by Hawksmoor’s phrase “Good Fancy,” the author attempts to offer a synopsis of his work and the place he occupied amid the architectural debates of the day, which were fueled by political changes within England, theories of French philosophers—Hawksmoor owned a copy of a work by René Descartes that he listed as *Opera Philosophyca*—and all that Wren and Lord Burlington had said about the duty of their architecture to be English, or as Wren put it, to establish a Nation. It is in

this context and in reference to the subject of the book's subtitle that Hart speaks most generally of Hawksmoor's use of history and the ancient wonders that, as they did for Wren, supplied in a new age of reason a scheme of principles to work with and designs at once useful, beautiful, and structurally sound.

Still, there was a problem, however defined, between the precepts of tradition and the new politics of England. Under such pressure, Wren seems sometimes to have wavered in his resolve. Hawksmoor, however, stuck to his architectural course by placing himself firmly between the starker neo-Palladianism of Lord Burlington and what he once referred to as the "Masquerade, the Burlesque Style of Building" of Wendell Dietterlin or the liberties of "the Modern Italians . . . especially Borromini and others" (74). At the end of his life, he was confronted with a climate of ever-growing Palladian puritanism that questioned what was done at Blenheim and with the city churches, seeing their style as too closely associated with the traditions of the Counter-Reformation or the absolutism of the continental monarchs. But, as Hart shows, Hawksmoor knew he had history on his side. There was also his temperament, or what Downes called his essential sanity—reflective, phlegmatic, grave, simple, and humble—that guaranteed that Hawksmoor was able to continue using history for what Hart refers to as a kind of affective decorum suitable in its program for each building. "Gayety of Ornament," as Vanbrugh said, might be pursued in one instance, whereas All Souls in Oxford was conceived, according to Hawksmoor, "after ye Monastick Maner" (79), and Castle Howard was fitting for "rurall, sylvan shades" (80). If the fundamental question about what English architecture should be always remained, there was the tradition of masonry enshrined in the cathedrals that, as Hart alertly suggests, encouraged the architect in his delight in those great quoins and keystones, used nobly and so often in his buildings.

This book is, as far as it goes, an interesting account. Although we will

still turn to Downes for a narrative and a full exploration of the work—a new reprinting of his publication would be welcome—what Hart writes serves as a valuable complement, documenting richly and carefully the temper of architectural thinking at that moment in England. But the text has some faults in its virtues. By the time we come to the end, we may feel that historical references and iconography, so fully sketched here, have had almost too much of the day. Something more needed to be said about the architecture itself in order to understand the designs, embedded as they are in the materiality, or what Hawksmoor perhaps once meant when he referred to the durability, of this art. How did he work, and how did he develop his designs? How was it that he used his books? We may never know the answers to these questions, although I cannot help but call up a memory of James Stirling, an ardent admirer and kindred spirit of Hawksmoor, sitting in the library at Yale University in the mid-1970s, leafing through journals, skipping pages, stopping occasionally when something caught his imagination. For Stirling it was *Architectural Record*; for Hawksmoor, the pages of the books he owned, even unusual ones like Giovanni Battista Montano's *Cinque libri di architettura* (Rome, 1636) or his 1681 edition of Francisco de los Santos's *Descripción de Real Monasterio de San Lorenzo del Escorial* (Madrid, 1657). If we think of such a form of reading, haphazard yet reasoned, searching for motifs and formal relationships, we may come to understand something of the origins of Hawksmoor's design, so strong in its presence, yet, as Lasdun said—and this is where history would have its place—filled with rigor and clarity in thinking about the fundamental nature of architecture.

One note to end. In his studies of Hawksmoor, Hart has worked with the Centre for Advanced Studies of Architecture (CASA) at Bath University to produce a number of computer-generated reconstructions, some of which, including the plans for Oxford and Cambridge Universities, are reproduced in the book.

They are fascinating and persuasive, tantalizing us with an important new way to imagine some of Hawksmoor's grandest, if never realized, projects.

DAVID CAST
Bryn Mawr College

Religious Architecture

Terryl N. Kinder

Cistercian Europe: Architecture of Contemplation

Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Cambridge, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2002, 407 pp., 116 color and 117 b/w illus. \$70, Eerdmans, ISBN 0-8028-3887-1; Cistercian Publications ISBN 0-87907-391-8

The concept of Cistercian Europe is as ambiguous as the carved, hybrid monsters famously criticized by Abbot Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153). Early texts written by Cistercians, among them Bernard's celebrated *Apologia* from the early 1120s, advocated unity, humility, and modesty as the cornerstones of Cistercian monasticism. The "statutes" of the General Chapter prohibited sculpture, painting—except for painted crucifixes—and gold in Cistercian monasteries. The surviving buildings and objects, mainly dating to the second half of the twelfth and later centuries, often reflected these textual affirmations, but at the same time they were frequently created at great expense and stylistically integrated into their regional and period context. This apparent tension between text and object has often been explained as an increasing weakening of the early ideal.

Terryl Kinder sees her book *Cistercian Europe: Architecture of Contemplation* as "an introduction to a way of life" (13) as it is reflected in Cistercian architecture, and offers at the same time a new understanding of what defines this archi-