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Joseph Clarke, *Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France: Revolution and Remembrance, 1789-1799*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. x + 306 pp. List of Illustrations, index, bibliography. \$99.00 US (hb). ISBN 978-0-521-87850-0.

Review essay by David O'Brien, University of Illinois.

Memory and the French Revolution might seem like an inauspicious site for new research almost twenty-five years after the first volume of Pierre Nora's *Les Lieux de mémoire* appeared and in the wake of the studies that surrounded and followed it, many of which saw the Revolution as pivotal to the place of collective memory in modern France.[1] Yet Joseph Clarke's *Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France: Revolution and Remembrance, 1789-1799* reveals that our understanding of collective memory in this period is ripe for revision.

Clarke makes the terms of his revision clear: the emphasis of past studies "has been almost exclusively political" (p. 4), focusing on the role of commemoration in the making of the modern nation-state and the sacralization of the nascent Republic. This scholarship privileged the public sphere over private experience and centered on the values and discourse of elite society. Clarke, in contrast, seeks to understand what commemoration meant on a personal level to a broad range of the French populace, both in Paris and in the provinces. Like Richard Cobb, whom he offers as a model, Clarke wants "to put individuals, their passions and their private lives, back into Revolutionary politics" (p. 6). In doing so, he argues that traditional religious culture, however routine and unthinking it may have been, held a central place in the Revolutionary commemorations of the dead until its proscription by the Jacobin regime, and even after this date he emphasizes its influence on Revolutionary remembrance as well as the effects of its absence.

The book begins with an examination of aspects of commemoration in the Old Regime. We learn that such elite modes of remembrance as the *éloge* and sentimental visits to pastoral tombs (specifically, that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau at Ermenonville) were highly susceptible to self-promotion and the vagaries of fashion. The church, in contrast, continued to provide forms of commemoration that were more popular and more adequate to most people's emotional needs in the face of death. Clarke argues for the continued importance of religion and its rites of memory across the eighteenth century.

At the outset of the Revolution, religion continued to be central: "the medium of Revolutionary memory in 1789 was overwhelmingly sacred. In churches lit by votive candles and echoing with the sound of the *De Profundis*, the smell of incense was scarcely diluted by a smattering of 'discours philosophique et patriotique'" (p. 86). This was especially true for the memory of the ordinary men who died in the Revolution—in particular the fallen *vainqueurs* of the Bastille. Revolutionary authorities almost invariably turned attention away from the spectacle of the people in arms in favor of Nation, Law, and the King, as did artists in general when they depicted recent events. It was primarily priests sympathetic to the Revolution, notably the

Abbé Claude Fauchet, who commemorated its humbler actors and answered to the personal needs of relatives of the fallen.

In the midst of the growing tension between religion and revolution, government officials appropriated the rites of memory to serve their own ends, which were often completely caught up in the circumstances of the moment. If Mirabeau's pantheonization in April 1791 allowed for a temporary rapprochement between Revolutionary and clerical authority, that of Voltaire in July accelerated their rupture and highlighted the political chaos in France. The key site of these commemorations, the Pantheon, itself became as much a *lieu de conflit* as a *lieu de mémoire*. Thus, "In the spring of 1792, most Revolutionaries still looked to the Church to consecrate the memory of their dead" (pp. 154-5). As the Revolution's settlement with Catholicism completely disintegrated, the government assumed responsibility for commemorative ceremonies and turned them increasingly away from mourning and towards narrow political ends. During *l'an II*, the government proposed a series of ever more insignificant and uninspiring "martyrs." The ceremonies devoted to them were confused, factional, mechanical, dissembling, and exploitative, anything but a sincere expression of collective memory.

Memory continued to serve narrow political purposes after the fall of Robespierre, as "the Thermidorians used commemoration to repudiate the past rather than remember its dead" (p. 223). Rousseau's pantheonization in Vendémiaire *an III* provided a moment of consensual commemoration more or less above politics, but it proved to be short-lived and unrepeatable. Instead, the Directory saw a militarization of memory. In small towns, cenotaphs and ceremonies recognizing simple soldiers might express "a sense of loss as well as an urge to inspire" (p. 250), but on the national level it became "a purely propagandistic affair" (p. 253), with manipulative rhetoric addressed to the citizen-soldier and civic ceremonies reserved primarily for a few select generals. The sympathy the Revolution professed for its war dead is belied, for Clarke, by its miserly treatment of war widows. His verdict on the Directory is scathing:

The Directory's military funerals furnish somber ceremonies and heart-rending speeches aplenty—ample material for historians inclined towards the cultural turn—but beneath the façade, there was no concern for the dead and precious little consideration for the bereaved, just a desperate attempt to shore up the authority of an increasingly unloved Republic with the corpses of fallen heroes. Like the architects who consigned the names of the fallen to the most inconspicuous extremities of their triumphal arches, and the eulogies that recalled the dead merely to summon vengeance down upon the heads of Europe, the Directory's rites of memory were grimly opportunistic affairs (pp. 265-66).

The book ends with a brief consideration of the individual experience of death through funerals, burials, and cemeteries. The Republic's intrusion into this domain, which appears as inadequate here as elsewhere, is especially damning because Clarke delivers it through the eyes of the bereaved who found no solace in the new Revolutionary rites.

Three aspects of Clarke's book seem certain to inspire debate: his reevaluation of the importance of religion, his suggestion that an overemphasis on the nation-state has distorted our picture of the place of collective memory in the Revolution, and his almost entirely negative assessment of Revolutionary authorities' treatment of memory as, by turns, cynical, self-serving, elitist, or shabby. I will leave the first issue to specialists. On the second, I would agree that the focus on Nation and Republic has been exclusive, especially in French historiography, and therefore the perspective opened up here is to be welcomed. Clark offers compelling evidence that Revolutionary commemorations did not achieve the "transfer of sacrality" of Mona Ozouf's

Revolutionary festival. Revolutionary commemorations were far more varied and linked to immediate political agendas and far less efficient in inculcating the principles of the new order than Ozouf's festival. And they were far less successful in nationalizing and laicizing memory than Jean-Claude Bonnet's Pantheon. It remains unclear to me, however, if he would nonetheless accept that the Republic's rites of memory went some (or a great) distance in eroding older forms of commemoration and establishing Nation and Republic as central symbolic entities in the imaginations of ordinary French men and women.

As for the third, my feeling is that Clarke overemphasizes the failures of Revolutionary authorities. There is little recognition of how unprecedented and enormous the challenges confronting Revolutionary authorities were; nor do the democratic innovations of the Republic get their due. For example, we only really hear about the Jacobin regime's efforts to honor the citizen-soldiers and care for their families (however cynical these may have been) when we learn the Directory's own endeavors in this regard were sadly inferior. Or again, the incomplete, improvised, or ramshackled state of many Revolutionary monuments to the dead was as much the result of the lack of funds, rapid pace of politics, and bewilderment of artists faced with completely unorthodox demands as it was the result of anything else.

But, as an art historian, it is primarily Clarke's use of formal culture as evidence—and more specifically his use of the plastic arts—that I want to address here. Clarke finds some of his key sources in the works of painters and architects, and he interprets them in sophisticated and original ways. For instance, he turns to a sculptural project by Jean-Joseph Mounier and a projected painting by Gabriel-François Doyen, as well as related works, to illuminate the reluctance early on in the Revolution to acknowledge the contributions of ordinary people. He offers a new explanation of the failure of Jacobin clubs to finance Jacques-Louis David's *Tennis Court Oath*: its republicanism was still too radical in 1791. Most impressive is his analysis of Antoine-Chrysostôme Quatremère de Quincy's work on the Pantheon. Using an idealized, allegorical sculptural language, Quatremère attempted to transform the unfinished and unconsecrated church of St. Geneviève into a secular temple of remembrance above faction and the Revolutionary cult of personality. Clarke argues that his decorations were both obscure and out of step with the increasingly violent and acrimonious language of Revolutionary politics. Though his analysis, here as elsewhere, relies less on visual evidence than on verbal accounts of the art work, Clarke sensitively captures the elitist, moderate, and generalizing tone that separated Quatremère's brand of classicism from David's in 1792.

It is of course impossible for a study with as broad a subject as Revolutionary commemoration to include even a fraction of the relevant works of art and architecture, much less to enter into the sort of detailed visual analysis that is the bread and butter of art history. Every reader will have his or her own favorite work of art that does not figure in this account. My own is Jean-Jacques Lebarbier's *The Heroic Courage of Young Désille* (Nancy, Musée des Beaux-Arts), an early, understudied painting of a Revolutionary martyr and the first completed large-scale painting of a Revolutionary event. The fate of the painting over the course of its long genesis reveals much about the memory of the soldiers of Châteaueux, to whom Clarke devotes special attention.

There are some omissions, however, that help to delineate the contours of Clarke's study. Clarke's account of the Terror includes a fascinating discussion of the use of sacred imagery to commemorate Marat. In part he wishes to emphasize the survival of customary sacred forms in even the most radical phase of the Revolution, for this renders problematic efforts to see a complete republicanism of memory and to separate neatly the civic from the religious. But he also explores Revolutionary leaders' fascination with and fear of language's polyvalence and inevitable reliance on past conventions to express new ideas. On the one hand, many

Revolutionaries had doubts about the ability of language to capture the significance of the unprecedented. On the other hand, signs could be manipulated to dissemble and deceive, and Clarke emphasizes the cynical willingness of Marat's eulogists to exploit the credulity of the lower orders with sacred imagery.

Understanding the attitudes of Revolutionaries towards signs—in writing, art, architecture, or any other medium—seems like the occasion for a detailed examination of the genesis and reception of texts, images, and other cultural artifacts, for it is precisely by studying an artist grappling with a subject, or by studying a viewer coming to terms with an image, that we can appreciate the semiotic specificities of the period on a personal level. And, indeed, art historical studies exist, especially of David's martyr portraits, that address exactly these questions.[2] The best of these argue that David, like the Jacobins in Clarke's account, represented Marat in ways that sought to neutralize the *sans-culottes* as a political force and freeze the Revolution and represented Bara in ways that emptied him of any active heroic attributes, as could only be the case for a martyr manufactured by the Terror as it was reaching its own dead end. They have explored David's ambivalent adoption of religious imagery in ways that overlap greatly with Clarke's discussion of sacred language. At the same time, they would hardly make David, who was of course both a politician and an artist, out to be as insincere and cynical as the politicians described by Clarke (for whom intentions are surprisingly important). On the contrary, David struggled mightily to find some truths on which to hold. Moreover, David's political motivations were complexly intertwined with other, very personal determinations such as artistic affiliations and rivalries, and the consumption of his *Marat* in 1793 appears to have been a complex mixture of manipulation from above and enthusiasm from below.

These art historical studies rely on extended visual and textual analyses that are perhaps impossible to integrate into a broader account of Revolutionary commemoration, but nonetheless I am struck by their almost complete absence from Clarke's account. At a minimum, they suggest how difficult it is to incorporate an artist's or viewer's personal experience of a monument into a general account and how different the priorities of historians and art historians remain. For Clarke, individual works of art can only be included to the extent that they fit within the larger cultural history he is tracing, and attention to the larger context inevitably subtracts from the attention paid to individual works, while for art historians it is often the work of art itself, both in its conformity and nonconformity to larger historical trends, that constitutes the scholar's main interest.

Another omission is the result of Clarke's tendency to focus his attention on cultural production sponsored by the state or immediately in its orbit. To a large extent this makes sense because one of his major themes is the Revolutionary government's failure to provide adequate means of commemorating its dead, particularly after it had eliminated traditional religious means of doing so. On the other hand, the attention devoted to the shortcomings of the government with regard to memory threatens to upstage the actual experience of memory on a personal level. Collective memory (whatever we may take it to be) and commemoration existed, as Clarke points out in places, in forms that exceeded the control of the church and the state. Mourning, too, surely went on regardless of whether or not it was guided by the church or officialdom. In order to gauge how badly the Republic failed its citizens, we need a better understanding of the place of memory, commemoration, and mourning in private life and of the memories that were emerging at a distance from the church and the state. There are places in the book where Clarke surveys such material, but overall he is forced to extrapolate personal responses from indirect sources, and these responses are almost always to official commemorations. The impression is of a people at the mercy of what the church, the government, or elite society had to offer.

In the spirit of this forum I have focused on the questions that Clarke's narrative raises for me, so let me close by emphasizing what an achievement this book is. The range of sources incorporated into the book and Clarke's ability to tease meaning out of such disparate materials are truly impressive. There are passages of interpretation—for example, the analysis of provincial responses to demands from Paris to commemorate Marat—where Clarke is able to recover convincingly individual motivations and intentions out of scant documentation. For him, there is often an important gap between what people said and why they said it. Most impressive, however, is his ability to think freshly about such familiar themes. This is an important book because it demands so forcefully that we reexamine basic assumptions about the Revolution.

NOTES

[1] Pierre Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 7 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-93). Other studies with which Clarke's account is explicitly engaged include: Jean-Claude Bonnet, *La Naissance du Panthéon: Essai sur le culte des grands homes* (Paris: Fayard, 1998); Mona Ozouf, *La Fête révolutionnaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976); Maurice Agulhon, « La 'statuomanie' et l'histoire, » reprinted in Agulhon, *L'Histoire vagabonde*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), vol. 1, pp. 135-85; Robert Gildea, *The Past in French History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); and Avner Ben-Amos, *Funerals, Politics and Memory in Modern France, 1789-1996* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[2] Clarke cites T.J. Clark's study of David's *Marat* and refers to it as the "most stimulating," but refrains from a detailed study of the painting as it has been "exhaustively analysed" (p. 180). See T.J. Clark, "Painting in the Year Two," *Representations* 47 (Summer, 1994): 13-63. Other studies include Thomas Crow, *Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Régis Michel, "Bara: du martyr à l'éphèbe," in *La Mort de Bara: de l'événement au mythe, autour du tableau de Jacques-Louis David*, ed. Marie-Pierre Foissy-Aufrère (Avignon, 1989), pp. 42-77; Robert Simon, "David's Martyr-portrait of Le Peletier de Saint-Fargeau and the Conundrums of Revolutionary Representation," *Art History* 14 (Dec, 1991): 459-487; Jorg Traeger, *Der Tod des Marat. Revolution des Menschenbildes* (Munich: Prestel, 1986); "Donna Hunter, "Swordplay: Jacques-Louis David's Portrait of Le Pelletier de Saint-Fargeau on his Deathbed," in J. Heffernan, ed., *Representing the French Revolution* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1991), pp. 169-91; William Vaughn and Helen Weston, ed., *Jacques-Louis David's Marat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and numerous essays in *David contre David: actes du Colloque David, Musée du Louvre, 1989*, ed. Régis Michel, 2 vols., (Paris: La Documentation française, 1993).

Two studies worthy of mention that devote considerable attention to art and commemoration during the Revolution are: Philippe Bordes and Régis Michel, ed., *Aux Armes et aux arts ! Les arts de la Révolution, 1789-1799* (Paris : Adam Biro, 1988); and Edouard Pommier, *L'Art de la liberté: Doctrines et débats de la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).

David O'Brien
University of Illinois
Obrien1@uiuc.edu

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