

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### Neil McWilliam on Three Centuries of French Painting

**Antoine de Baecque**, *The Body Politic: Corporeal Metaphor in Revolutionary France, 1770-1800*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997. xvi + 363 pp. 17 b. + w. ills. Notes and index. \$55.00 US (cl); ISBN 0-8047-2915-1. \$18.95 US (pb); ISBN 0-0847-2817-8 (pb).

**Paul Duro**, *The Academy and the Limits of Painting in Seventeenth-Century France*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. xii + 300 pp. 80 b. + w. ills. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$80.00 US (cl). ISBN 0-521-49501-6.

**Beth S. Wright**, *Painting and History during the French Restoration: Abandoned by the Past*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. xi + 269 pp. 60 b. + w., 8 col. ills. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$70.00 (cl). ISBN 0-521-57203-7.

Review article by Neil McWilliam, University of East Anglia, for H- France, October 1998.

For some three centuries, roughly spanning the years between the establishment of the *Accademia del Disegno* in Florence in 1563 and the celebrated *Salon des Refuses* authorized by Napoleon III in 1863, European visual culture was dominated by a hierarchy of values in which history painting was accorded pride of place. Understood to embrace themes drawn from ancient and modern history, mythology, and religion, the genre was prized as making the highest demands on the conceptual and executive skills of the artist, while addressing the spectator in a manner which was intellectually rigorous and morally inspiring. Perhaps in no other country was the practice of history painting and the ethos subtending it embraced more systematically than in France, where the establishment of the *Academie royale de peinture et de sculpture* in 1648 ensured a prestigious and highly visible forum for the elaboration and transmission of an aesthetic code and pedagogical structure built around the promotion of grand manner historical compositions. In their different ways, each of the works currently under review confronts this exceptional tradition, considered either directly from within the institutional apparatus itself, or from outside--one might even say, *pace* Duro, from beyond the limits--where the conventions of the grand manner and its ideological underpinning are eroded or thoroughly subverted by historical exigencies incompatible with the socio-political regime within which it had been nurtured.

As Beth Wright sets out to demonstrate for the post- Revolutionary decades, history painting itself--in its thematic repertoire and stylistic range--was profoundly implicated in the historical moment in which it was embedded. From the courtly culture of Versailles to the far more fragile political environment of the Bourbon Restoration, history painting could be used to provide an allusive gloss on current events either through direct thematic parallels or through the complex, coded language of pictorial style. As the Academy provided an authoritative and, in the pre- Revolutionary period, virtually hegemonic forum for the transmission of an ideologically inflected visual language, so its deployment--or subversion--carried inherently political implications. Antoine de Baecque's masterly discussion of David's unfinished *Serment du Jeu de Paume*, begun in 1790, demonstrates how the artist's portrayal of a mass of contemporary figures galvanized into the collective rapture of independent political action, works with, but ultimately cuts across, conventions of ideal beauty central to academic doctrine. On a more demotic level, the catalogue of deformity and degradation he compiles from revolutionary print culture, verbal and visual, significantly draws meaning from its violent repudiation of the values of harmony and decorum central to Academic discourse.

The Academic tradition, the roots of which are so ably traced by Paul Duro, has been regarded for much of this century as oppressive and dull, stifling artistic originality in the interests of a corporate culture underwritten by the state and dedicated to moral edification rather than aesthetic gratification. The image of the Academy as reactionary monolith, fostered by champions of modernism hostile to the regulated aesthetic it ostensibly perpetuated, has proved difficult to dislodge. Though in recent years historians such as Albert Boime and Philippe Grunchev have offered a far more nuanced interpretation of the institution and the pedagogical system it oversaw through the *Ecole des beaux-arts*, the Academy still invariably attracts the instinctive opprobrium of many art historians. Yet if, during the nineteenth century, the Academy may be regarded with some justification as a force for artistic inertia, as Duro convincingly demonstrates, its early years were characterized by a high degree of inventiveness and debate. Engaged in an enterprise which involved staking out boundaries--separating the new royal institution from the painters' guild, segregating fine art from manual craft, distinguishing the intrinsic characteristics of pictorial from literary representation--the early Academy undertook a systematization of theory and practice in which history painting took pride of place. For Duro, the seventeenth century marks a moment in which history painting could function as "the site of revolutionary practice" (p. 64), opening up challenging possibilities to ambitious artists such as Charles Le Brun whose interventions both as painter and pedagogue proved so decisive in shaping the genre and its institutional support.

Central to Duro's argument is the Academy's imputed desire to "inscribe extrapictorial meaning onto the figural field of seventeenth-century painting" (p. 68), an enterprise which, he argues, was reliant on an inherently contingent and unstable process of "ideological framing". This framing was at once institutional and discursive, and it is Duro's aim to explore the mutually sustaining relationship they enjoyed in providing painters (sculptors are essentially ignored) with a base from which to advance their claims as practitioners of a liberal art. Exploiting Jacques Derrida's theoretical considerations on the *parergon* (frame), Duro emphasizes the essentially ambiguous and permeable notion of limits, the very existence of which calls into being those forces of contamination and dissolution they are intended to hold at bay. His exploration of the early institutional history of the Academy, revolving around the campaign spearheaded by Le Brun to monopolize professional authority at the expense of the artisanal *Maitrise* (guild), demonstrates the extent to which the new institution's authority had to be worked for rather than simply assumed as intrinsic to its foundation. Furthermore, even after the marginalization of the *Maitrise*, achieved in 1655, the fledgling Academy remained sensitive to initiatives which apparently equated painting with the more mechanical crafts. Hence, the 1650s witnessed a violent quarrel within the Academy itself between its Professor of Perspective, the engraver Abraham Bosse, and a faction of painters led by Le Brun who bridled at the openly mechanistic way in which this foundational skill was approached by Bosse both in the classroom and in his published theoretical writings. Culminating in the engraver's expulsion in 1661, the dispute over perspective highlights painters' instinctive sense of the fragility of those boundaries which the Academy was intended to lay down and police.

The Academy's troubled early years have attracted several recent scholarly studies. Where Duro proves particularly useful, and unfailingly insightful, is in his integration of this institutional narrative with an in-depth discussion of early academic theory. At the heart of his thesis lies the contention that "in the end... the object of theoretical discussion within the Academy was not the elucidation of practice, but the practice of theory" (p. 122). The elaborate system of *conferences* and *preceptes* sponsored by the new organization was, Duro maintains, directed by a desire to buttress the authority of painting through recourse to extrapictorial references which, in themselves, proved resistant to practical application in the production of history painting. Indeed, Le Brun himself, today perhaps best known for his influential lectures on physiognomics and the portrayal of emotion, is a model of pragmatism--"both authoritarian and liberal, Poussiniste and Rubeniste, flexible and dogmatic as circumstances dictated" (pp. 64, 66). Yet, within the institution he dominated until his death in 1690, exchanges over such apparently abstruse questions as the pictorial *bienseance* of camels (the subject of heated controversy in a debate over Nicolas Poussin's *Eliezer and Rebecca at the*

Well in 1667) acquired a theological centrality which had little to do with issues of practice.

The energies expended over such disputes highlight the Academy's desire to place theory at the center of painting as a means of asserting its status as an independent liberal art predicated on universally valid foundations. To conclude that Poussin had, indeed, been justified in overlooking the biblical reference to camels in the story of Rebecca recounted in *Genesis* was to assert that painting enjoyed an autonomy from its textual sources, and that it was the discernment and discrimination of the painter which should serve as ultimate arbiter in transforming verbal narrative into pictorial image. Here as elsewhere, Duro effectively brings alive the issues at stake in a discourse at the very moment of its institutional inception and shows with considerable elegance and skill how efforts to legislate its limits gave rise to passionate disputes rooted in professional rivalries, political antipathies, and philosophical and theological antinomies. Finally, he suggests, this elaborate edifice sustained by such extensive extra-pictorial outworkings proved vulnerable to a practice rooted in a radical challenge to painting's referential limits. The admission of Antoine Watteau to the Academy in 1717, received under the unprecedented rubric of "*peintre de fetes galantes*", signifies, Duro argues, the institution's collision with the limits of painting, as it accepted within its ranks an artist whose opaque subject matter and painterly style emphasized the image's inherent nature as fabricated object rather than as crucible for abstract ideals and narrative meaning.

It was, however, a commitment to such ideals which heralded the re-emergence of the Academy as a force to be reckoned with in the final decades of the Ancien Regime, following a period of comparative decline during the Regency and under Louis XV. The revitalization of the Academy, coinciding with the pan-European vogue for neo-classicism, not only gave history painting renewed visibility, but also helped disseminate the aesthetic idealism associated with the German scholar Johann Joachim Winckelmann. Though the Academy was to prove one of the casualties of revolution, being (if only temporarily) abolished in an assault led by Jacques-Louis David, the doctrine of ideal beauty to which it was committed provided one of the poles in a representational spectrum which embodied contending ideologies in vivid physical form. As Antoine de Baecque brilliantly demonstrates, the "*imaginaire revolutionnaire*" was populated by heroes and monsters whose physical characteristics were shaped, at least in part, by Academic notions of the ideal, and by the visceral rebellion against the social discriminations they implied. In the wake of 1789, it was the plebeian who figured as the regenerate "*Homme nouveau*", virile and sleek as a Greek god. His antithesis was the monstrous Iscariot (a partial pun on "aristocrat"), a hysterical hybrid, part hydra, part devil, whose repulsive physical features advertize the corruption and treachery in his heart.

Such figures form part of a vast repertoire of physical types which de Baecque has gleaned from the imagery and pamphlet literature of the revolutionary period. Presenting the Revolution as a metaphorical struggle between the marvellous and the terrible (p. 180), he demonstrates the ubiquity of bodily imagery in every branch of discourse, from the Tennis Court oath and the abbe Sieyes' political writings to the denunciatory rhetoric of Jean-Paul Marat and pornographic satires on the court. Crucially, corporeal metaphors serve as a particularly effective medium for the symbolic usurpation of power, as traditional sources of authority--notably the monarch and aristocracy--are disarmed through a radical questioning of their physical potency.

In a particularly fascinating opening section, de Baecque demonstrates how opponents of the crown used rumors of Louis XVI's sexual impotence to devastating polemical effect. In a world where physical intimacy was itself an object of courtly spectacle, the unusual discretion of Louis and Marie-Antoinette, together with the protracted wait for the birth of a male heir, excited feverish speculation at Versailles that the King's mortal body was unequal to his dynastic responsibilities. Popular satires on regal impotence first appeared in the late 1770s, but it was with the assault on royal authority following the fall of the Bastille that the theme acquired particular force. Often decorated with obscene prints which pitted a sexually voracious Queen against her pathetically inadequate consort, pamphlets equated the King's physical deficiencies with a more fundamental moral and political weakness. As the King's mortal body was decried as inferior to that of the ordinary citizen, so the prerogatives attaching to his political body were transferred to his newly-empowered subjects. Thus libertine pamphleteers effect a "transfer of virility of royal sex to popular sex" (p. 55), in which the patriot enthusiastically performs the matrimonial task of which Louis was apparently incapable, while casting the King aside as unequal to his public responsibilities.

Louis' impotence--sexual and political--also emerges as a trope in aristocratic critiques of royal weakness after 1789. Yet, for their popular opponents, aristocrats themselves were tarred with the same brush, and were frequently mocked as effeminate or physically incapacitated. By contrast, the new man of the Revolution, de Baecque maintains, was conceived, in the words of one of the pamphleteers, as a "Herculean fucker", whose physical strength was matched by his virile beauty. As the future deputy Jerome Petion proclaimed more decorously in February 1789, the free man displayed an easeful confidence born of political independence: "The free man does not walk with his head bent; nor is his gaze haughty or disdainful, but rather assured; his walk is proud; none of his movements proclaims fear; full of confidence in his own strength, he sees no one around him of whom he need be afraid and before whom he might have to abase himself" (p. 139).

It is such figures, de Baecque suggests, who populate David's *Serment du Jeu de Paume*, notably the poised and graceful figure of the representative Antoine Barnave whom he singles out as a present-day incarnation of the classical ideal. In this regard, physical aspect become not only a metaphor for, but a literal embodiment of, moral nature. In a world familiar not only with the highly-charged evocations of male beauty penned by Winckelmann in such seminal texts as the *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (1764), but also with the elaborate physiognomical analyses popularized by the Swiss pastor Johann Casper Lavater, the body readily lent itself to complex semiological anatomization. Yet, as de Baecque points out, classical male beauty, at least as conceived by Winckelmann, was essentially incompatible with activity, since to act in the world disturbed the harmony and balance in which physical perfection was seen to reside. De Baecque's concentration on the male body as agent of change--whether the animated bodies who dominate David's portrayal of the stirring of popular sovereignty, or the physically imposing colossus who is the plebeian Hercules--occludes this essentially passive, often sexually ambiguous ideal. Yet, as recent scholars have pointed out, the ephobic male is a recurrent feature in the iconography of the Revolutionary period and beyond. In works such as Anne-Louis Girodet's *Endymion* (1790-91) or David's *Death of Bara* (1794), the Winckelmannian ideal is deployed, it has been argued, in ways which politicize the androgynous body as enjoying a wholeness and plenitude which transcends sexual difference.

This more ambiguous sexual economy is largely absent from de Baecque's otherwise remarkable and astoundingly wide-ranging study. So too is any extended discussion of the prevalence of female allegorical figures, the subject in recent years of extensive discussion by historians such as Maurice Aguhlon. Yet the reader is constantly impressed by the freshness and sophistication of de Baecque's analysis; whether he is discussing the role of laughter in revolutionary festivities (in a chapter which significantly modifies Mona Ozouf's classic account), the image of Louis XVI as a pig, or the revolutionary poetics of blood, de Baecque is an astute and stimulating reader of images and texts. As an exercise in what the author describes as "nonquantitative serial history" (p. 18), *The Body Politic* succeeds as an exemplary exercise in elucidating the revolutionary mentality by decoding the metaphorical language of its actors.

As Beth Wright remarks near the beginning of her study on *Painting and History during the French Restoration*, "French citizens in 1815 knew that they were no longer the same people they had been in 1789... The French Revolution had broken apart the secure assumption of permanent meaning that could be expressed in universal emotion" (pp. 17-18). In cultural terms, the self-confident belief in the image or text as transparent media capable of articulating unambiguous meaning and inculcating determinate moral values--the belief enshrined in the theoretical discourse

of the *Academie*--had received a fatal blow. The proliferation of contested meanings tracked by de Baecque, in which consecrated forms could be diverted, subverted, or brutally cast aside, decisively undermined inherited sources of cultural authority and the political structures which traditionally sustained them. In the wake of a period which had figured itself as a new beginning unencumbered by the institutional and cultural baggage of a discredited monarchy, the nation found itself obliged to devise its relationship with the past anew. It is Wright's contention that the painters and historians active during the Bourbon Restoration adopted a set of strategies to cope with this task the ideological inflections of which resulted in discursive and pictorial forms which figured the past in distinctively different ways.

Wright identifies three modes of evoking the past in verbal and visual form during the Restoration which she characterizes as "the hallucination of the 'now' in fragments (preferred by Ultraroyalists); the willed configuration of meaning in dramas (preferred by Conservatives); and temporal fusion in psychic resurrection (preferred by Liberals)" (p. 21). Each of these modes is equated with distinctive historiographical pedigrees--respectively represented by Louis-Antoine-Francois de Marchangy, Francois-Rene Chateaubriand, and Augustin Thierry and with an associated pictorial address--epitomized by Troubadour painters such as Pierre Revoil and Fleury Richard, the "eclectic" master Paul Delaroche, and the "romantics" Eugene Delacroix and Ary Scheffer. This fragmentation itself demonstrates the degree to which history painting as a category, formerly restrained in large measure within normative boundaries, was breaking up, taking on hybrid qualities, losing its formal and ethical clarity. Yet, it is Wright's contention, that this dissolution is symptomatic of a broader crisis, in which the past had suddenly become unstable, problematic, and--largely as a consequence--vivid, urgent, and contentious.

Wright presents Troubadour painting as an intensely nostalgic, though morbidly impotent, meditation on the past conceived in terms of fetishized ruins which dominate, and often overwhelm, the human actors who populate them. The body of imagery on which she draws largely comprises small, exquisitely detailed scenes of (often insignificant) episodes from medieval or early modern French history, painted in a self-consciously historicizing style occasionally reminiscent of manuscript illumination. The loving evocation of the material remains of the past typical of these works signifies for Wright both an investment in the "iconic charisma" of a world demolished, literally and metaphorically, by the Revolution, and a "fatalistic view of human capability" (p. 50) indicated by the comparative insignificance of the figures portrayed.

This reliance on materiality as a tentative link with a lost world is seen as central to the rhetorical address of such works by Marchangy as *La Gaule poetique* (1813), and as more generally typifying Ultraroyalists' sense of loss, which Wright rather

unconvincingly likens to a form of collective post-traumatic stress syndrome (p. 50). The precise mechanisms for such collective psychic disfunction, apparently extending over some thirty years, remain unclear. Nor is it immediately apparent how we are meant to square the image of a dazed and disabled aristocracy with the often violently assertive political intervention of the Ultras in the years following the return of Louis XVIII. More importantly, Wright entirely glosses over the origins of Troubadour painting in the early years of the Empire, says nothing of the genre's popularity within the Imperial household, and provides little evidence that the patronage for artists such as Revoil and Richard came predominantly from Ultra circles.

Wright identifies the dramatic mode with what she describes as the "corporal conservatism" evidenced in the paintings produced by Paul Delaroche in the late 1820s and early 1830s. By this, she means to argue that Delaroche's emphasis on the poignant physical vulnerability of figures such as Charles I (in *Cromwell and Charles I*, 1831, or *Charles I mocked by Cromwell's Soldiers*, 1836) or Bishop William Laud (in *Stafford*, 1835) is designed to elicit the spectator's sympathies for the suffering individual at the expense of any more penetrating analysis of the social forces which have shaped the situation in which they find themselves. Here it is Chateaubriand's *Les Quatre Stuart* of 1828 which provides an historical parallel, though, as the historian Stephen Bann has recently shown, the historiographical resonance of Delaroche's work cannot be contained by a single source, and embraces figures such as Prosper de Barante, whom Wright discusses elsewhere in her text.

In her final category, Wright confronts the work of Delacroix, notably the *Scenes from the Massacres at Chios* (1824) and *Marino Faliero* (1826), with the work of the liberal historian Augustin Thierry. Like Thierry, she maintains, Delacroix and other Romantic painters, such as Scheffer, conceive of history in a fundamentally new way, locating the forces of change not in the decisive actions of a particular individual or elite group, but in the anonymous mass who had previously been relegated to the very boundaries of verbal and visual narrative. Thus, the enervated figures scattered across the canvas of the *Chios* with a randomness which strikes at the heart of the conventions of grand manner history painting, testify both to a new way of conceiving the limits of painting and a new way of conceptualizing the very limits of history itself. Wright draws some valuable parallels here with developments in Britain, notably the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott and Sir David Wilkie's phenomenally successful portrayal of *Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Gazette of the Battle of Waterloo* (1822). Her discussion overall is never less than absorbing, but her argument is cast in terms which are too neatly schematic entirely to carry conviction. Her notion of the Restoration itself seems at times opportunistically porous: much of Delaroche's work was produced following the fall of Charles X, yet Wright does little to consider the potential impact of the change of regime on historical representation.

In this context, mention at some point of Louis-Philippe's hugely ambitious *Musee Historique* opened in Versailles in 1837 would seem appropriate, though the institution is conspicuous by its absence.

For all of this, however, Wright has made a substantial contribution to our understanding of a period which, with the exception of a handful of familiar names (Theodore Gericault, Eugene Delacroix, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres) remains remarkably elusive to the modern scholar. Her work vividly highlights the centrality of history painting to an era in which the past provided an inescapable point of reference to the present. Yet it demonstrates at the same time the degree to which history itself, and the means of satisfactorily encapsulating its meaning, had become enmeshed in a world where the certainties born of monarchical absolutism were gone forever.

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