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"David's Studio" : desire, creation, history

Annie Becq

In his second book, devoted to "David's studio", Thomas Crow admits to "having more keenly felt what an intellectual community is". These words which introduce the traditional "acknowledgements" assume their full import once one has read this fine work¹. In it, and in a spirit of sound interdisciplinarity, art history marshals a store of information—as is evident from the bibliography and the copious notes—which is at once historical and literary (about Sedaine's entourage, Sedaine being a much overlooked figure, despite Diderot's admiration for this "amorphous colossus", about Diderot himself, who crops up in the book along with Mercier—and the *Journal des dames*—, Cubières and the poet Lebrun, about the Trudaine brothers' circle, the Trudaines being friends of A. Chénier, and the Grimod de la Reynière circle; and about notions of "Socratic love", "patriots" and the figure of Hippocrates, based on Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique* and the *Encyclopédie*). It also subtly reveals in "the hotchpotch of spatial and visual metaphors" of Mercier's comments about Corneille, the catalyst of the formal conception of the Horaces, and it offers a re-reading, from its own standpoint, of Balzac's *Sarrasine*. But it is in the dialogue with specialists in his field (R. Michel, A. Potts, possibly N. Bryson², etc) that it is fascinating to see, so to speak, this book take form and proceed—pending the reactions that it will inevitably stir up—in the course of mutual exchanges and debts (and Crow underscores the analogy with the experience he examines), which can be read in the many references and the significant comparison with the 1989 Conference *David contre David* where, as it happens in the section titled "*le grand atelier*" (the great studio), Crow introduced the central thesis of the present work, based on the artistic and political dialogue between David and his great disciple Girodet.

The "David's studio" in question here is not in fact a place whose configuration a historian of David's career would describe or whose movements in Paris he would recount, for it was also located in Rome, with or without the master. Nor, more precisely, does it embrace all those who worked under his authority, for many are omitted. One such is Rouget, for example—who nevertheless took part in *Leonidas*?—, whereas Géricault features, after Drouais, Girodet, Gérard and Gros, in the foreground, as opposed to Hennequin, Wicar, Fabre and, later on, the Franque brothers. This is an excellent relationship which goes beyond teaching and instruction³. The study of this relationship is not aimed at situating this type of studio, from a sociological viewpoint, in the development which leads from the mediaeval workshop (*officina*) to the sanctuary of brilliant creation. As a term which describes first and foremost the workplace, the studio is here metonymic for the very act of production, presenting the collective dimension, as understood and practised by David in a way which sets him apart both from painters who were his contemporaries, and, we might add, later an artist such as Ingres, about whom

¹ Crow, Thomas. *L'Atelier de David : émulation et révolution*, Paris : Gallimard, 1997, (Bibliothèque illustrée des histoires)

Amaury Duval would complain that he never worked in the presence of his pupils, nor did he ever attempt to make use of them. Apprenticeship, as distinct from the instruction meted out at the Academy, far from being restricted to technical tasks and subordinate participation in large pictures (intermediate work, treatment of secondary areas in a painting), forged essentially family-like relationships, capable of achieving intense levels of affection, and, based on an egalitarian ethic, associated creation with certain elected disciplines, in a forward movement where the quest for originality and artistic mastery were merged with the existential search for an identity. "David's studio" was that space of desire and creation, an outstanding moment with a high degree of interdependence and rivalry between powerful individual personalities. And this, we might note, was neither the unmistakable dominance of a "powerful leader" of a "school", nor the anarchy of the "republicans" of art, to which Baudelaire was so opposed.

The master thus proceeded and ventured into those exchanges, not to say confrontations, where the artistic links up with the fantastic, and where, by and through the creative act, an attempt is made to associate the feminine part and the problems of close association. In the prospects opened up by the design of this game with several hands, which turns the mere contribution of an assistant to a pressing job of work into a personal activity (untimely and possibly misunderstood, in the case of Drouais painting the Camille figure in the *Horaces*) in the complicated interactions of a unity in conflict, certain subtle and stimulating analyses come to the fore. This is so with *La Mort de Socrate*, whose enigma, put to a "workshop" of researchers, lies at the root of this investigation, then the *Brutus*, where the use of the valuable but hitherto neglected document of Coupin's inventory helps to justify the stylistic breaks and the noteworthy shifting of the aggressive masculinity of the *Horaces*. But a fertile and formidable dialogue is also enjoined from work to work, between master and disciples, and between disciples. How are we to account for the detailed analyses of these complex developments? Let us focus on one or two main tracks: the new image of the artist (which intrigued David in Drouais), driven by the single-minded passion for art (thanks to resources whose beneficial existence is emphasized by Bachaumont), hero and martyr, as Girodet would later be, of a quest for beauty with a political scope, in accordance with the association between physical perfection and Greek freedom by Winckelmann, who had already embodied that dire, heroic fate without being a "precursor" of any "pre-Romantic" movement. The theme of conflict with the ubiquitous father figure, as expressed by Drouais, in the *Retour de l'enfant prodigue*, with that of the beautiful young man (the *ephebe*), proclaiming love for just its "radiant singularity", image of the dream of these fatherless sons in a world of patriarchs and passionately loved adolescents; the heroic treatment, a response to the challenge of the Horaces, again by Drouais, of the academic nude, "crucible of artistic creativity", inspiring, inversely, in Girodet the major figure of *Endymion*, narcissistic dream of blissfulness in death, acknowledged as appropriate for expressing revolutionary heroism, as experienced by its author in Rome, as it happens by way of this sexually uncertain fullness, unharmed by History³, with which David haloes Bara, that androgynously ideal figure which thus does the rounds from Girodet's *Pieta* to *Marat*.

David's studio, whose dispersal and hampering rivalries, right up to the death of Girodet, erected as the symbol of a dazzling but forever lost mastery, are retraced by this book, after the master's emergence from prison to reorganize his workplace and in the recession that, in 1795, followed in the wake of a radical form of society, is, in the end of the day, a sort of myth. It is essentially historical as a product of the

convergence of exceptional circumstances, but it is also an imaginative report on relationship and history, tending to do away with the latter. The energy here spills over into a nostalgia for these perfect and intact forms, whereby Balzac, in 1830, revealed the sting of History, and whose unalterable youth cannot depict the difficult liberation of individuals as expressed by the alienated monomaniacs painted by Géricault. But would Baudelaire—another fatherless son—to whom the enquiry does not lead, who saw a “family circle” in past Schools as “the dull and involuntary domination which extends well beyond [the] studio, as far as regions where the thinking [of a master] cannot be understood”, would Baudelaire not see in this heroic dream, whose ideal irreality gave off a scent of death and degenerated, with Girodet, into bizarreness and even melodrama, “the austere relationship of Romanticism”?

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY SIMON PLEASANCE & FRONZA WOODS

1. The first, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (1985) will shortly be available in French.

2. The translation of which at times leaves something to be desired.

3. Who sees in Marat “the complete human being”, “the one who can incorporate in himself the qualities of the opposite sex” (Paper at the Conference on David, in *La mort de Marat* (published by J.C. Bonnet), mentioned for the historical contribution by J. Guilhaumou.

4. An example of a study recently provided by Reed Benahmou: “Diderot et l’enseignement de Jean-Jacques David” (*Recherches sur Diderot et l’Encyclopédie*, April 1997) has quite a different ring.

5. Chénier’s well-known text springs to mind: “Make me a body which has not experienced and which does not fear any change, and affront from passing years [...], to harmoniously united muscles, that not exertion has tired out, full of that tranquil vigour, that calm that is inseparable from the person who can do everything he wants”.