

1789: THE EMBLEMS OF REASON

by Jean Starobinski

translated by Barbara Bray

(The University Press of Virginia; 297 pp., illus.; \$24.95)

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Jean Starobinski belongs to the justly celebrated constellation of scholars and critics loosely referred to as "The Geneva School." Beginning with their founders, the great Marcel Raymond and the even greater Albert Beguin, they have produced a long and distinguished shelf of first-rate works on all aspects of European culture from the Reformation to the present day. Touching on music, philosophy, the fine arts, and literature, their work blends a sophisticated philology with writing that is both lucid and passionate. We don't hear as much as we used to about the Geneva School, but there is no danger that its work will go ignored for any length of time. Its books are strong, original, and imperious. Its empire reaches into coming decades. Yet that this is so is not immediately obvious in the case of *1789*. The book seems merely to argue a stale point in tedious language. One must dig, and dig deep, to discover its genius.

The first problem is the transformation wrought upon Starobinski's original by the "Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia." The second arises from the conflict between Starobinski's argument, on the one hand, and his findings, on the other. The chief interest in this book lies in finding out what its real findings are.

We begin with the strange transformation effected by the University Press of Virginia. Starobinski originally published a small paperback largely devoted to painting and sculpture. What began in French, however, as a four-by-seven, \$3 paperback has here become a monument weighing nearly two pounds and costing \$25. The book has gained almost a hundred pages; the forty small illustrations have become eighty large ones, and whereas the French illustrations were functional, the American ones are rarely so. Worse yet, there is at least one place in the American text—a passage about Jacques-Louis David's *Brutus*—where an illustration is needed but absent, and another where the illustration is precisely the wrong one for the work in question—Canova's *Cupid and Psyche*. As with the format, so with the language and critical apparatus. Starobinski's pamphlet has been transformed from a sparkling polemic that wears its learning lightly into a lumbering, overannotated coffee-table encyclopedia, whose language is almost unreadable.

In defense of the indefensible it should be said that the editors may have been led astray, at least in part, by an aspect of Starobinski's own argument. He can be unusually tedious. His is the simplistic argument of the old-style historian of ideas—Babbitt, say, or Lovejoy. He indicts the artists and writers of the latter half of the eighteenth century as the mystified fools of an ideology of revolution and enlightenment. He exposes the vocabulary and syntax of this naive mythology, after the manner of Lévi-Strauss among the natives, and then crowds the story with villains—Rousseau, Canova, Fuseli—who are vanquished in the end by a white knight from Spain known as Goya. The argument is expressed in absolute, even silly assertions, shot through with the rhetoric of a superannuated *Geisteswissenschaft* that could easily monopolize the attention of a lazy or impatient reader.

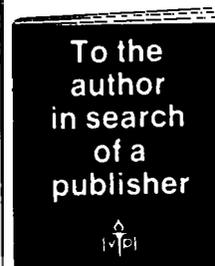
But Starobinski gives the lie to his own thesis whenever he turns to specific works of art and literature. At these points he suddenly discovers his own voice and becomes a kind of uncanny genius, a ghost to terrify the sleepy citizens of the faculty common room. We must content ourselves with one example. As any student of the period knows, the aesthetic treatises of the eighteenth century have much to say about the priority of the line over color and texture in painting and drawing—a priority asserted in the service of reason. Line, to adopt Starobinski's terms, is the "emblem of reason" par excellence. To quote another historian whom Starobinski seems to cite with unqualified approval: "line drawing, which is an abstraction, seemed [to the neo-classical artists] the logical method for depicting their ideas." Line makes the forms of reason, and it makes them present as forms, to the exclusion of all that is irrational, dark, and unformed. It took a Goya to transcend all this, fearlessly embracing the hitherto repressed resources of color, depth, and shading.

When he gets down to the work especially of David and Fuseli, however, Starobinski suddenly discovers a completely different value for the line. Far from being a form of presence, the line becomes the emblem of *absence*, the absence, indeed, of reason. This is so because the line is not merely a form but also a "memory-trace." The neo-classical line remembers or tries to remember a past that can never be recovered; never made present; thus, neo-classicism "was based on a great absence: Line determined forms which were at once swallowed up again in the light of the past." Again, "line has a memory and refers to celebrated prototypes.... It figures forth an

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event, but the function of representation is paralleled by a dimension of reminiscence." The line, at last, far from being a living presence, is to be seen as the characteristic, quoting Joshua Reynolds, of a "dead language."

The radical impact of this interpretation of the line, both on Starobinski and the neo-classical artists, cannot be overstated: In the paintings of David, in the marbles of Canova, in the sketches of Fuseli, Starobinski finds that "reason is confronted with something radically different from reason...the anarchic power of negation." His analysis is somber, eloquent, and powerful, especially his pages on the *Marat assassiné*, which compare favorably with Baudelaire's remarks on the same painting. In sum, the proponents of reason turn out to be almost too stark and rigorous for Starobinski's comfort. They demonstrate with unparalleled vigor that reason is the name they gave the insight that the mind of man must move in darkness.

1789 is a valuable piece of work, whose value shines through its hapless American travesty. Why it should have happened this way is mysterious, but very much in keeping with Starobinski's own intellectual style.