

BOOKS

**WILL & CIRCUMSTANCE:
MONTESQUIEU, ROUSSEAU AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION**
by Norman Hampson

(University of Oklahoma Press; 208 pp.; \$17.50)

REPRESENTATIONS OF REVOLUTION: 1789-1820
by Ronald Paulson

(Yale University Press; 416 pp.; \$29.95)

Richard Rand

There seems no end to the riddle of "Revolution." Some think revolutions don't really happen, and some think revolution a constant state of affairs. There was a time when the academic disciplines habitually used "Revolution" with verbs in the *past tense*, and not only the social sciences. Humanists devoted themselves as never before to determining the life-spans of various revolutions: "Romanticism," "Impressionism," "Symbolism," "Modernism." Woman had yet to arrive. There was in those days a sort of meta-science of revolution which, seeming to understand the eruptions of the past, hoped to predict, to comprehend, and so to *condition* events yet to arise.

But the definition of "Revolution" has not been settled, certainly not for scholars. Here, for example, in 1983, we are given two new works, one by British historian Norman Hampson and one by the American professor of English literature Ronald Paulson, both entranced by a two-hundred-year-old revolution yet visiting upon us a nagging bewilderment. We cannot let slide their ambiguities, for they are men of eminence and standing and not to be lightly dismissed. Hampson has written a twenty-year-long shelf of works on the French Revolution *alone*, among them a "social history," a background study of the Enlightenment, and the best biographies ever of Danton and Robespierre. Paulson has published an equally long shelf of studies on eighteenth-century literature and fine art. Swift and Fielding, Hogarth and Rowlandson are among his favorite subjects.

Hampson is a committed life-long worker within the so-called *Annales* school of French historiography. Paulson descends from the two dominant traditions of American literary studies, the New Criticism and the neo-Aristotelian school of Chicago, both—for all their apparent differences—rising up in the middle of the Great Depression to furnish American classrooms with

a reliable, systematic method of literary criticism. The prose and the learning of Hampson and Paulson are thoroughly self-composed, yet there is a stressful hint of distress in the very projects they have undertaken. Hampson writes with the rhetoric of empiricism but argues in a circle. Paulson creates a system that distorts his evidence. Revolution remains an elusive and problematic concept.

Will & Circumstance begins with a statement of aims: to turn up a missing link that nevertheless "must" exist, the link between political theories and "the society in which they were born." The problem for Hampson lies in the *nature* of this link. Of one thing, however, he is sure: "A meaningful search for such a connection must involve the detailed examination of a short period," there being a danger that "any general enquiry over a long span of time would be only too likely to mean looking for evidence to support one's initial assumption." Hampson avoids the "long span" because he does not wish to argue in a circle. But might not the "detailed examination of a short period" run the same risk of merely verifying initial assumptions? Hampson concedes that it could, but, as he puts it, even though "my initial assumptions were still likely to reappear as conclusions...., I would have a better prospect of making some unexpected acquaintances on the road than if I sped over great distances by motorway." To put it roughly, the *Annales* school, Hampson's school, is empirical. Hampson, then, has good reasons to be anxious about arguing in a circle, reasons that traditional historiography could politely ignore.

Since Hampson's aim is to find an a priori link between social theory and social context, any "short period" ought to serve. He just *happens* to choose the period in France between 1789 and 1795. As for the "theory" whose link to society he wishes to examine, he just *happens* to choose the theories of

those "thinkers" who played a very active part in the early phase of the French Revolution. Again, as if by accident, Hampson *happens* to settle on the radical Girondists and Jacobins. The rather different "Necker, Condorcet and Babeur," for example, "were obvious candidates, but they recently have been the subject of excellent books...and there seemed no point in reploughing well-cultivated ground." Others "proved disappointing," though Hampson forbears to say why. We are therefore left, for apparently valid because fortuitous reasons, with Brissot, Marat, Mercier, Robespierre, and Saint-Just—all, save Mercier, to be counted among the most vehement men of the Terror.

Having given his reasons for wishing to confine his attention to a "brief period," and having chosen the period 1789-95, Hampson acknowledges that all five "theorists," excepting the youthful Saint-Just, had "already reached their maturity" before 1789. If we want to learn how they thought, we shall have to go back a few decades in time; for "although the revolutionary years were to impose their own imperatives and constraints, the men who reacted to them had been formed in a different period, and that formation was bound to influence their reactions."

The functional word here is "formed." What does it imply if not an already determined "link" between "theory" and "society"? The "society" in question turns out to be Robespierre and his peers, while the "theory" turns out to be—in its most articulate state—the writings of Montesquieu and Rousseau. Mostly Rousseau's: The "missing link," which clearly never was really missing, is a *causal* link between the works of Rousseau, on the one hand, and the political acts of his "readers" on the other.

Hampson needs his circle; it allows him to read Montesquieu and Rousseau in terms of those they "formed." Hampson does so, it would appear, from a prior and unexamined commitment to the richness of insignificant people, a commitment to the "unexpected acquaintances on the road."

Not surprisingly, there are some excellent things in *Will & Circumstance*. Hampson finds the faces in the crowd and gives names, dates, and desires to each and every individual. He can tell us why a particular crowd would rise to a particular kind of action on any particular day. In addition, he has an extraordinary gift for tracing out the labyrinth of the political scene. If anyone doubts that there was something unique and singular called a "Revolution" that happened in France, a tour through the writings of Hampson and his colleagues will set the

matter straight. Here, as elsewhere, Hampson has constructed a living memorial to something that happened *once*.

But was it *one* thing that happened, and did it happen just *once*? It is clear from the circularity of Hampson's procedure that he would like to extend his reading of the insignificant—not just back in time, but also by including the writings of Rousseau within the perspective of the "insignificant." He would have us read the *Social Contract* as if it had the same status as a broadside composed by Marat. The urge to match up the two is not obviously ridiculous. Both writers are eloquent, and eloquence moves us to action. But it founders on a lack of precision. The work of Rousseau, for all its eloquence, is first and foremost a *speculative* work and, as such, a powerful critique of other works in a long and distinguished tradition: Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke among others. There is more than one "society" to which Rousseau's work is linked. France is the name for one, and Western Thought is the name for another.

What Hampson cannot do is to let the work of Rousseau speak out in its own language of concepts and complex dialectical relations. Here is an instance of Hampson's manner:

"No government can make men live happily; the best is that which makes it possible if they are reasonable, and this happiness will always be beyond the multitude' (*Political Fragments*). 'It is difficult to find among the dregs of society a wife who can make a gentleman [*honnête homme*] happy' (*Emile*). It is curious how radicals seem to need their *lumpenproletariat*. What it probably amounted to is that Rousseau had some respect for peasants, especially those who lived in the mountains, like those idealized in the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, but a pretty fair contempt for the urban poor."

Hampson has conflated two statements that do not fit well together, then offered a gratuitous and mistaken commentary of his own. One hardly knows where to begin to criticize. Scholarly readings of Rousseau have certainly established that Rousseau is hardly a "radical" in the sense that Hampson implies. Rousseau's project is more analytical than prescriptive, and the distinction between the urban and rural poor is irrelevant to Rousseau's thought. He does distinguish among gentlemen, the multitude, and the dregs. But this distinction is not an economic one. It is founded on "reason" and "happiness." A gentleman is one who finds happiness in the activity of reason. The multitude is made up of people who do not or cannot seek out the life of reason,

and such people may be rich, poor, or those who fall between. The dregs are those whose material situation is so desperate that they are unlikely to have time for or interest in the life of reason.

Rousseau, moreover, consistently regards the institution of marriage as a school, a situation for learning in general and for learning the happiness of "reason" in particular. It makes little sense in this context for a "gentleman" to marry a woman from the dregs, since the difficult quest for "happiness" would be too difficult even to launch.

Where *Will & Circumstance* resembles a ride around town in a circle. Paulson's *Representations of Revolution: 1789-1820* resembles a subway system whose transfer points are named "David," "Burke," "Rowlandson," "Wordsworth," and "Goya." The lines that converge on those stations are the dominant codes of contemporary criticism: the rhetorical theory of tropes, the genres of art history, the drive theory of psychoanalysis, and a slight dose of *Annales*-inspired sociology. The system as a whole is powered by the alternating current set up by the tension between "higher" and "lower." For example, the Lower Class somehow is and represents the Unconscious; the Unconscious both is and rep-

resents the Grotesque. The French Revolution both is and represents an Oedipal uprising against paternal authority.

Like any work organized as a system, *Representations of Revolution* is hard to read, not only because the system is opaque but because the procedure itself makes its findings at once arbitrary and predictable. Once the system is in place, there is little for Paulson to do but work out its doubtful connections. Enormous violence is done to any picture, poem, or person Paulson elects to discuss. He sees things that are not there; he overlooks any material, great or small, that threatens to show the limits of his system; and he draws connections that are predetermined and forced. One instance will suffice.

In the fifth chapter, Paulson discusses an etching by Rowlandson entitled *Pygmalion and Galatea*. In this etching, subtitled "The Ancients," a young and well-muscled Pygmalion, having cast aside his sculptor's smock, lies back upon a couch, while his Rubensian Galatea, having shed her inhibiting marble existence, is poised above him, ready to commence the altogether familiar but exciting and visually shocking act of sex. Need I add that Pygmalion wears a smile, that his eyes are full of delight? Paulson comments:

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"Rowlandson's etching ... is his clearest statement that art represses or seeks to sublimate or displace the sexual instinct. A sculptor's kiss, or better his sexual organ, and not his chisel will bring his statue to life.... But once alive, in Rowlandson's version, Galatea takes control, mounts Pygmalion, holding the sculptor's 'tool' in her hand, about to insert and engulf it. As long as she was a statue on a pedestal she posed no threat; once alive, she proceeds to castrate him."

There is hardly a page in this book that does not carry on in this way. One might, with considerable effort, dope out the system that generates this sort of reading, but since the system itself is a symptom of something concealed, it would be—as Freud himself remarks of system-formation in general—"futile and really foolish to try to understand the symptomatic structure... in terms of its basic assumptions. For the whole logic and strictness of connection is only apparent" (*Totem and Taboo*).

One point, however, is clear: Paulson's system is guaranteed to protect him from surprises. All circles are systems of defense, and this one confirms itself by casting about for appropriate concepts (for example, an image of sexual intercourse is an image of castration), and then *finding* those concepts in whatever object it happens to study. In this case it blinds itself to at least two different things. First, it blinds itself to the concepts *at work* in the objects under study—in this case Revolution. Second, it blinds itself to the details, the nonconceptual marks, the idiomatic oddities, the proper names and dates that distinguish one work of Goya from another or the works of Goya from the works of William Blake.

The truly bizarre, the saving grace, of Paulson's performance is that he himself is aware of it—and deserts it, finally, at the end. Earlier I compared Paulson's circle to a subway system. It so happens that Paulson, in his first chapter, alludes to the graffiti of the subways as "the graphic expression of a subculture that has felt itself to be repressed." This repression returns in the chapter on Goya. Goya, we read in a comment on the paintings of the "Deaf Man's House," "outrag[es] his walls with obscene images as a kind of graffiti.... The paintings stand for the stark violation of all the stylistic conventions of beauty in Western art."

In these fleeting words, Paulson, who is nothing if not tenacious, breaks from his circular system and comes up with a *revolutionary* insight: A painting is not just an image (violated or otherwise), and not just a representative statement. It is a signature, the name—the *insignificant* proper name of

the artist who paints the picture. In the concept of painting as "graffiti"—and it is a concept that can be extended to any artist who makes a name for himself—Paulson has not only discovered the unit of insignificant detail, the proper name, but he has also indicated that the images at work in a painting or the words at work in a poem may be an intimate connection with the artist's insignificant singularity—to his everyday life as a named, individual person.

And as with a person, so too with a group of people: The proper name and date of Bastille Day, July 14, 1789, is a kind of graffiti on the pages of history. The idea, at least, is a refreshing one; and it says something about the repressive condition of our intellectual climate that Paulson could only happen upon this idea after so much unprofitable running in circles. WY

THE WAR-MAKING POWERS OF THE PRESIDENT: CONSTITUTIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LAW ASPECTS
by Ann Van Wynen Thomas and A. J. Thomas, Jr.

(SMU Press; xiii + 177 pp.; \$15.00)

Barbara Kellerman

The summer of 1983 has reintroduced the subject of this book with fresh urgency. Ronald Reagan's war games in the Caribbean and off the coast of Central America, and new directives to the Marines in Lebanon, have triggered another round of debate on not only the proper use of U.S. military might but also the extent of a president's authority to engage in real or even symbolic shows of force. Now that the passions and lessons of Vietnam have had a decade or more to sink in, such debates may well be more reasoned than in the past. And there does seem to be a feeling that well-intentioned men and women, who after all share a deep longing for peace, can agree to disagree about ways to prolong it.

With ideological fervor at an ebb, this is precisely the time to examine the legal aspects of the war-making powers of the president. With each new circumstance comes a replay of a debate that is as old as the Republic: Who has the right to do what to whom in situations of international conflict? Consider this emotional yet collected exchange between Senator Claiborne Pell, a Democratic member of the Foreign Relations Committee, and Secretary of State George Shultz about the Reagan administration's decision to put on a display of

military strength off the Central American coast:

"Shultz: At least until recently, there has been no incentive for the Salvadoran guerrillas, no incentive for Fidel Castro and no incentive for the Soviets to believe that anything credible, anything difficult stood in the way of imposition of Communist rule by armed force in El Salvador and in the rest of Central America. But something has now begun to happen. A victory by the far left and its foreign supporters through armed force is not in the cards.

"Pell: I am deeply concerned that the military exercises recently announced will lead to the Americanization of the conflict in Central America. [Mr. Reagan] appears to be playing hard ball with Nicaragua and Cuba by brandishing guns before their noses. On the other hand, he attempted to soft-soap the American people by portraying these exercises as routine. The Administration can't have it both ways."

The merit of the Thomases' book is that it takes us straight back to the Constitution. Like Richard Pious, whose first-rate textbook *The American Presidency* is based on the theory that "the key to an understanding of presidential power is to concentrate on the constitutional authority that the president exerts unilaterally," the Thomases base their study on "an examination of the constitutional powers of the President and the Congress which bear upon war-making and uses of force in foreign affairs to determine the proper constitutional assignment of power between the two." And they proceed, by examining the deed as well as the law, to try to unravel whether it is the Reagans or the Pells who ought to carry the day.

War-Making Powers is not an elegantly written book. Too many of its sentences are long and tortuous, to wit: "Experiences in accommodating this living document to the vicissitudes of history become important in determining its meaning, for the interpretations of constitutions do respond to changing historical concepts of political and social values, and historical practices do shape the meaning of the Constitution if not violative of its language or of the clear-cut intent of its framers." And it is not well organized: When one chapter is three pages long and another fifty-four, something is out of kilter. But the book does have something to offer students of the subject.

There are brief case histories. In one—a discussion of Theodore Roosevelt's naval action that preceded construction of the Panama Canal—there is an observation well worth keeping in mind: "Following this episode, presidential military intervention in the Caribbean area was to become almost