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# MARS DISARMED BY VENUS AND THE THREE GRACES

L e v K r e f t

## The Mystery of David's Late Paintings

Jacques-Louis David was one of the great history painters; together with portraiture, it was his master genre. Some of his best known paintings, monumental in size as well as in terms of their message, are *The Oath of the Horatii*, *The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*, *The Death of Marat*, *Napoleon at the Saint-Bernard Pass*, and *The Coronation of Napoleon*. David's history painting tends to represent history as a progressive force of humanity, which calls for the sacrifice of personal happiness and intimate values for the public good (*res publica*). These themes are presented as part of a story or a narrative that offers moral guidance for the contemporary society that is built on the free will of subjects and their ability to make good choices. It often seems as if David promotes the public good as the right choice under all circumstances, including when it requires sacrifice and extreme violence. During his earlier career he did produce several works that expressed less enthusiasm for violence to advance the public good, such as "The Intervention of the Sabine Women" and "Leonidas at Thermopylae"; however, it was the four canvasses he produced during his last years in exile in Brussels, where he died in 1825 at 77, that really astonished his admirers, followers and pupils. These paintings caused surprise, not just because they were so different from everything David had executed before, but also because they had such an enigmatic aesthetic appeal. During later periods, however, this part of David's opus was neglected, even seen as a failure due to his abilities deteriorating in old age or to his exile to Brussels and consequent isolation from the ambience of Paris, where a bitter fight between his classicist pupils and followers and the apostles of Romanticism was already taking place.

In *David to Delacroix*, Walter Ferdinand Friedländer dismissed late David's works: "In the work executed after David's banishment, the glossy over-all tone and the hard colour became constantly more disagreeable. His themes and composition (*Mars Being Disarmed by Venus* and the like) grew ever more conventional and empty. Unlike many great artists, David did not develop a mature style in his old age. He lacked those larger inner 'ideas' with which such geniuses as Titian, Rembrandt, and Poussin overcame their natural physical decline and rose to the sublime."<sup>1</sup>

Michael Fried, in tracing the development of French painting from absorption to theatricality, explained that David lost his confidence in non-theatricality when still in Paris: "In almost all David's late 'Anacreontic' paintings [...] the presence of the beholder is frankly acknowledged and the *mise-en-scène* assumes a more or less blatantly theatrical character. This suggests that as early as 1809, the date of *Sappho and Phaon*, David, recognising that it was becoming impossible for him to establish the fiction of the beholder's nonexistence, began to cast about for a subject matter and a mode of presentation that would allow him to embrace at least a version of the theatrical with open arms. The whole question of the signification of the 'Anacreontic' paintings, which historians of David's art have continued to find deeply puzzling, should be reconsidered in this light."<sup>2</sup>

Simon Lee is somewhat undecided in his evaluation of David's late works; however, he insists that these works cannot be analysed as the work of an old and therefore exhausted a painter: "These works from the last nine years of his life are somewhat puzzling and unexpected, though hints about their direction had been made in the *Sappho and Phaon* of 1809. It has been suggested by some that David's art went into a sad decline in this period and that the late paintings betray a dramatic loss of artistic powers. This is too harsh a judgement. It is true that David's history paintings executed in Brussels do look very

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<sup>1</sup> W. Friedländer, *David to Delacroix*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1952, quoted in: D. Johnson, "Desire Demythologized: David's L'Amour quittant Psyché", *Art History*, 4, 1986, p. 450.

<sup>2</sup> M. Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1980, p. 230-231 n. 59.

different to the muscular figures of the *Horatii*, the unity and sculptural forms of *Sabines*, or the crowded Napoleonic panoramas, but the differences come from a conscious change of emphasis and direction by the artist and should not just be seen as an old man's confused ramblings. David has an identifiable late style and the Brussels pictures need to be considered with the same degree of thought as any of his previous works.<sup>3</sup>

The only writer to dedicate full and continuous attention to late works is Dorothy Johnson.<sup>4</sup> She sums up previous issues with David's later oeuvre as follows: "Until very recently, David's late works have been neglected and largely misunderstood because they differed so greatly from the canonical works."<sup>5</sup> The first reason for that was prejudice, because these works were not painted in France, the second is the canonisation of David's heroic virtue style in art history. Johnson's explanation of David's turn from historic painting of past and actual history to historic painting of mythology is that "in early nineteenth-century France myth has become revitalised as a dynamic cultural force. Myths were understood to be expressive of the human condition, revealing universal truths about human psychology and development and containing relevant messages for contemporary individuals and society."<sup>6</sup> She also argues quite convincingly that David felt no depression because of his exile. Unlike many of his fellow-travellers who sent their letters of regret to Louis XVIII and were allowed to return to France, he certainly, did not want to do anything which would imply that he had renounced his republicanism, continuing to communicate with Paris through letters and his works which were regularly exhibited there. That is at least what he said to his friends: in a letter to Gros (1.1.1819), after most of the other exiles had already left for home, he wrote: "Let me enjoy the peace and tranquillity that I experience in this country."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> S. Lee, *David*. Phaidon Press, London 1999, p. 298-299.

<sup>4</sup> D. Johnson, "Desire Demythologized: David's L'Amour quittant Psyché". *Art History*, 4, 1986; D. Johnson, *Jacques-Louis David: The Farewell of Telemachus and Eucharis*. Getty Museum, Los Angeles 1997; D. Johnson, *David to Delacroix: The Rise of Romantic Mythology*. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 2011.

<sup>5</sup> D. Johnson, *Jacques-Louis David: The Farewell of Telemachus and Eucharis*, *op.cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> From Jacques-Louis David's letter to Antoine-Jean Gros (1.1.1819), in: Johnson, *op.cit.*, p. 28.

To underline her point, Johnson discusses two paintings, which offer a psychological counterpoint to each other: *Cupid and Psyche* and *The Farewell of Telemachus and Eucharis*. The first one, she argues, depicts the ugliness and mockery of adult lust while the other portrays a pure and virgin love that will never be realised. In a similar way, she discusses *Mars Disarmed by Venus and the Three Graces*, the painting declared by David at the same time to be his last and his best. If anything, it is even more puzzling and enigmatic than the other three late works, in which David is still displaying an obvious effort to translate myth into realistic scenery and even gods and heroes appear as ordinary persons. This work, however, is set in heaven, floating on half-dark half-white clouds. This “seriocomic work that subverts accepted conventions and norms by combining the parodic and the sublime, realism and idealism, constitutes his final aesthetic manifesto – it was the last painting he made before his death in 1825.”<sup>8</sup>

But what is the message of this manifesto, which is both serious and comic at the same time, what is it that is simultaneously sublime and an object of parody and why did he want to produce a painting which is realistic and idealistic at the same time – an impure and ambivalent message explicitly intended as a keystone to his vast and great opus and at the conclusion of artistic career?

Before we answer these questions, which call for a new appreciation of his history painting as such, we have to look into the issue of late style.

### Late Style

We owe the theory of late style to Adorno’s short essay on Beethoven<sup>9</sup>, which continues to be echoed in subsequent works, including Edward Said’s well known contribution to the subject<sup>10</sup> (Said, 2007). To put Beethoven and his case in perspective, Adorno’s main point is

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<sup>8</sup> Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Th. Adorno, “Late Style in Beethoven”, in: *Essays on Music*, University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2002, p. 564-567.

<sup>10</sup> E. Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature*. Vintage Books, New York 2007.

that all explanations of late style, which relate to the artist's "I" confronted with death, and expressing his or her feelings about imminent event, are wrong. Even more: they are a result of an abdication: "It is as if, confronted with the dignity of human death, the theory of art were to divest itself of its rights and abdicate in favour of reality."<sup>11</sup> But it is the author who dies, not the works; therefore it is they, the late works, which have to be analysed as any other works, with an intention to find their formal law, not their role as biographical clues. In this way, it is possible to separate what makes a work art distinct from a mere document.

Still, there are direct and indirect parallels between the late style periods of Beethoven and David, some of them perhaps more biographical, others perhaps more formal in terms of their relation to the corresponding works. We could, for example, compare their different exiles: Beethoven's internal retreat into deafness and David's external exile from Paris to Brussels.

But what is more intriguing is that their late style periods coincide perfectly. For Beethoven, his late or third period is from 1815 to 1827, in which year he died. Meanwhile, David left France in 1815, to settle in Brussels a year later, after declining an official offer to be exempted from exile as the greatest French painter. The late periods of David and of Beethoven started with Napoleon's second and final defeat in 1815, not because they were both really old at that time but because they were both republicans and liberals whose case was lost, as were the hopes of a whole revolutionary generation of artists and thinkers. Admittedly Beethoven had lost any faith in Napoleon long before, while David still supported him during the hundred days leading up to Waterloo.

Another parallel, which does not belong to any formal law of late style but to circumstances peculiar to the world of art, is a mystery concerning the artworks<sup>12</sup> which were begun immediately after their first performances: some thought they were great, others opined that the artist must have been mad or perhaps drunk during composition, while even their devoted public could not explain quite what it was that had

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<sup>11</sup> Adorno, *op.cit.*, p. 564.

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 564-565.

been done and for what purpose it was done in such a way. This final defeat of Napoleon and the second restoration of Louis XVIII is also a date that separates enlightenment and classicism from mysticism and romanticism, a provisory boundary that located later understandings that both masters had also progressed from one form to another.

So, what can Adorno suggest, in the case of Beethoven, as a formal law of his late music? First, there is “the role of conventions”<sup>13</sup>, as they appear in a struggle with subjectivity: “...the relationship of the conventions to the subjectivity itself must be seen as constituting the formal law from which the content of the late works emerges... The power of subjectivity in the late works is the irascible gesture with which it takes leave of the works themselves.”<sup>14</sup> This is quite true of Beethoven, who, for instance, in his 7<sup>th</sup> Symphony already (1811–12), after titillating the audience’ expectations of musical pleasure with a progressing and culminating Allegretto, followed with an agreeable Scherzo, which, cut to such an abrupt stop as if to say: “We had enough of that!”, gets to the last movement, Allegro con brio, which throws us out of the conventional listening composure completely as it beats on and on around the same wild motif as stubbornly as a defeated boxer who will not stop without an external intervention. Adorno found in Beethoven’s late works “a catching fire between the extremes, which no longer allow for any secure middle ground or harmony of spontaneity.”<sup>15</sup> Here, we do not get “an expression of the solitary I, but of the mythical nature of the created being and its fall, whose steps the late works strike symbolically as if in the momentary pauses of their descent.”<sup>16</sup>

Late works are therefore a final comedy, but they also function as a *Divine Comedy* and as a genre which, following Hegel, stands at a point of repeated and final farewell from the past. At the final end, however, is the 9<sup>th</sup> symphony with its choral finale which, using Schiller’s words set to Beethoven’s divine music, calls us to enter the Elysium, i.e., nature itself as a pagan paradise where one can already find peace in the here and now.

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<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 565.

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 566.

<sup>15</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 567.

<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 566.

Can these parallels, and the stated formal law of the late style of Beethoven, help us to contribute anything to a solution of the mystery David's late works?

### The Peace of David

The first parallel is to open the others: not all artists develop late styles. It is not just about being old, or starting anew at a later age; it has to be in a curious, even mysterious relation with the artist's earlier work. The second: there is more to their positions of exiles than just a comparison between a musician getting deaf at Vienna, the capital of music, and a painter evicted from Paris, the capital of painting, to Brussels. They had both found themselves on the wrong side of a great historical movement, which they had enthusiastically supported and which had come to a crunch point. In terms of historical events of the epoch, Beethoven holds the position of Kant's enthusiastic beholder from *The Conflict of the Faculties*. Kant claims that the French Revolution is a demonstrative sign (*signum demonstrativum*<sup>17</sup>, which confirms that we are right to hope for something better. The reason found is not in what is going on in France and in Paris but in the attitude of those who watch what is going on there from a distance: "the mode of thinking of the spectators."<sup>18</sup> David was not a spectator; on the contrary, his art participated enthusiastically in representing the revolution. If the outcome of revolution is a hangover (i.e. Katzenjammer<sup>19</sup>, then David had more reason to have a headache than Beethoven: his farewell to enthusiasm might be tinged with a more personal failure, even a bad conscience. The mystery surrounding David's last painting(s) comes from the lack of understanding of the stylistic changes. David's recognisable touch at first glance suggests a classicist origin but immediately after confirming that it denies it, upsetting expected conventions with some devices borrowed from Rococo, as many noticed, but also with those expressing mockery, humour, irony – even a taste for the farcical – which might be

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<sup>17</sup> I. Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*. Alibris Books: New York 1979, p. 153.

<sup>18</sup> Kant, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

<sup>19</sup> K. Marx, *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, p. 6.

found to be Romantic. If Beethoven develops his farewell to harmonious style into extremes, which suggest that the mythical nature of the created being is in essence tragic, David now finds reason for comical effect in dramatic oppositions he exposed in his previous history painting (intimate vs. public, male vs. female, individual happiness vs. human progress, etc.).

After the first recognition that it is indeed David the classicist who painted this, what we experience is a second recognition that he has deceived us because we are dealing with his painting but of a kind that represents a deconstruction of his previous modes of heroic history painting. There are clouds, but not friendly, white clouds, and there is an edifice built in the air. On a sofa, Mars is reclining with a lance in his right hand, holding it more as a pencil than as a weapon. In his left hand he has his sword turned around as if he is offering it to somebody else whom we cannot see. He is already decorated with flowers on his chest, and Venus, lying on the same sofa, turning her back to beholder, is holding a crown, which should end at his head. He looks detached, and is not watching the beautiful goddess, or as a beholder per se, but somewhere into the void in an attitude of resignation. Venus, a thin beauty looking into Mars' eyes – a regard he does not return. Cupid is kneeling at Mars's legs but he is more disarmed than Mars is: his mythical bow and arrows are lying on the ground – or, rather, on the clouds behind him – and he is undoing Mars's sandals as if that were his most dangerous weapon, or to prevent his escape from the sofa. Both Mars and the child have hidden genitals; Cupid by his casing, and Mars with a help of two turtledoves kissing like birds. In spite of this hideous gesture, which reveals the presence of a painter aware of cultural context, Venus is holding her hand just above one of the pigeons, at Mars's leg quite near the brown triangle that suggests the presence of his genitals. But Venus is watching Mars in awe, mouth open, as if persuading him to make love and not war in a moment of his indecision. In the right corner of the painting, or, at Mars's and Venus's left, are three graces who invest such an effort into being gracious that it shows. With them is what Michael Fried calls theatricality. They dance, or at least they hint at dancing poses. But their dance seems to be a mockery because of the expressions on their faces. One holds a jug and a cup, offering drink



with an exaggerated look of acquiescence on her face; another has taken Mars's shield with one hand and his bow with the other while smiling too sweetly, watching the beholder of the painting; the third holds his helmet in a crowning gesture with an undecided expression on her face, looking at Venus. The composition is very theatrical, pantomimic – or, better, ballet-like. This should not come as a surprise since David's models for this picture were taken from the *Théâtre de la Monnaie* of Brussels where Petipa (father of Marius Petipa, who was later to become famous ballet master at St. Petersburg) staged ballet productions. Venus is his star dancer Marie Lesueur, Mars is one of the subscribers, and Cupid is Petipa's other son Lucien who was to become a ballet dancer too. By the way, Marie Lesueur was well known to make a then scandalous gesture when still in Marseille theatre, turning her back on the public during her performance of *The Birth of Venus* in 1817, which was not only unconventional but even scandalous; however, she was pardoned for her uncalled gesture. Her appearance as Venus on David's canvass in a similar pose was for contemporaries who knew this story of her past as something of a repeated public joke.

Luc de Nanteuil interprets the painting as David's longing for absolute beauty and love: "How could anyone not be moved by this famous old man's farewell to painting – this is an enchanted world dedicated to grace and beauty, to their supreme victory over matter and force. What does it matter if the composition is theatrical? The smiles are light-hearted, the attitudes graceful, the gestures exquisite – and the female nudes are quite simply sublime. The ageing painter dreamt a final dream of beauty, more chaste than in his youth, but physically more perfect than ever, and this is how we shall remember him."<sup>20</sup>) If this is the correct interpretation, David's last painting is simply an apotheosis of Peace, a launch of the slogan that would later become famous: "Make Love not War!" But there is some surplus meaning in the painting, suggesting that something has gone wrong with this pacification, which remains ambiguous because Mars is not as decided as it seems, and the Graces are overdoing it, creating a farcical atmosphere. Mars looks similar to *Leonidas at Thermopylae* (1813–1814), but that is a picture of a neces-

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<sup>20</sup> L. De Nanteuil, *Jacques-Louis David*. Thames and Hudson, London 1990, p. 126.

sary public sacrifice, and Leonidas is seeing his and his warriors' imminent death. That really is a farewell painting, or, a painting of farewell to life, not *Mars Disarmed*, which was certainly intended as an allegory of a reluctant and excessively staged transition to disarmament and peace.

Let us compare this painting with two examples of its predecessors. The first one is Pompeo Girolamo Batoni's (1708–1787) *Peace and War* from 1776. Considered the greatest among Roman masters of the time, Batoni personified Peace as graceful virgin and War/Mars as belligerent youngster who has been arrested by her charms, to prove that he was really an elegant or Rococo painter. It seems that Peace is seducing Mars with her charms, while Mars has changed his mind and decided to protect her from evils of war, which are symbolised by a dragon on top of his helmet. The work was painted during a very short period of peace in Europe. It resembles *Farewell of Telemachus and Eucharis*, but not *Mars Disarmed*. The second one is Louis Jean François Lagrenée (1734–1805) *Mars and Venus: Allegory of Peace* from 1770. Here, we have a morning-after scene: Mars is looking at Venus who is still sleeping (or pretending to sleep) with post-coital look of love. It is, again, a typically elegant rococo painting. Compared with these two, David (as some interpretations suggested) has not abandoned his classicist style, to return to elegant or rococo style from the previous period. What he did was to shed some doubt about this encounter between Mars and Venus, using ambiguity, irony and even farcical dance. Why?

In 1824, peace no longer meant what it used to mean during Napoleon's military campaign, when he was the one who was supposed to bring peace and freedom to the peoples of the European continent, as represented in Pierre-Paul Prud'hon's painting from before 1801. Also, it was not a peace signified by the erection of the *Arc de Triomphe*, which had been commissioned and designed in 1806 but actually begun in 1815, only to be abandoned the same year because of Napoleon's second defeat, and left unfinished until 1833, when new symbolic parts were added that diminished the Napoleonic ideology of the original design. The monument to French global aspirations was finally completed in 1836. It could not be the same peace added to the *Arc de Triomphe* at that later time by sculptor Antoine Etex because this came years after David's farewell to painting and to life. What this addition is expressing

is the idea of peace as it started in 1815 following Waterloo with a series of four peace treaties between France and each member of the anti-Napoleonic coalition (Great Britain, Austria, Prussia and Russia). This peace signifies Napoleon's, France's, and revolution's defeat, and puts the final mark on an epoch which had begun in 1789, an epoch in which David had, not just as a painter, a very prominent public position.

Jacques-Louis David produced his last painting as a representation of the state of France and Europe after 1815, with peace and order restored but the hopes and will of peoples unsatisfied and deceived, following long years of war, terror and destruction in the name of liberty and freedom, without having achieved any result which could at least partially outweigh the price. Beethoven, an indirectly involved beholder and supporter, found a reason for tragedy, after a divine period of heroism brought defeat and hangover, and transported enlightenment's faith in the progress of humanity towards freedom into the realms of a cosmic struggle of opposites and its harmonious outcome. David, directly involved, defeated and exiled actor of the whole process from 1789 to 1815, found here a reason for comedy as human condition, and for mockery, laughter and irony, which are not only expressed as the grievances of an old republican against a reactionary outcome of the world's affairs but also as self-parody. This comic dance over a disarmed but equivocal Mars, who is unsure if he needs to accept the love offered by Venus, with Cupid behaving not just as a god of love but also as a god of history, who is postponing his decisive shot, is at the same time a criticism of the public virtue invested in struggle for freedom, a criticism of a farcical restoration of peace and order, and an ironic depiction of the fate of historical painting as the painter's life-long vocation.

The mythical idea of peace presented through an ironic attitude to actual historical peace coincides with Hegel's idea of the role of tragedy and comedy in history. With tragedy, humanity can express a farewell to its own past with an understanding that the old way of life was not a divine but rather a human product. But such a farewell leaves many afterthoughts, hangovers and nightmares. With comedy, a farewell to the past can be finally free not only of the past but also of all afterthoughts, hangovers and nightmares it leaves with us because we – and not gods or heroes – were responsible for it. When we are able to bid farewell to

our history in a comic adieu, we can finally dismiss the past and leave it in peace.<sup>21</sup> *Mars Disarmed by Venus and Three Graces* is David's last painting, and it is a farewell not just to painting but also to history, executed with an appeal to leave it in peace. But peace is not a heroic tragedy. It is a comedy with a touch of irony and even farce, which exposes "the mythical nature of the created being and its fall"<sup>22</sup> as a comic ballet.

The peace and tranquillity of David in Brussels were not of the same kind as the peace in Europe of that time. The conventions of the European restoration and David's subjectivity clash in his last, and – as he believed – finest work.

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<sup>21</sup> This topic was recently discussed (2012) by two authors: Rachel Aumiller in "Comic Anguish: Hegel and Marx on the Theatrical and Historical Style of Comedy", and Anna-Katharina Gisbertz in "On Karl Marx, the Sublime, and the Comical". Both articles will appear in Slovene translation in one of next issues of journal *Borec*.

<sup>22</sup> Adorno, *op. cit.*, p. 566.

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