Paul Delaroche's Early Work in the Context of English History Painting

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Stephen Bann

This essay presents an argument that cuts across the generally accepted view of Anglo-French artistic exchanges during the first half of the nineteenth century.[1] It directs attention to the career of a French painter whose death in 1856 anticipated a drastic decline in a previously formidable reputation. A century and a half later, it is time to revisit the sources of Paul Delaroche's international celebrity, and in particular to review his strong connections with England, which have barely been explored up to now.[2] Delaroche's *Jane Grey* was first shown at the Paris Salon of 1834, this being the fourth occasion since 1824 at which he had exhibited major works that featured subjects from English history. This showing also offered the occasion for a forthright article by the prominent critic, Gustave Planche, who claimed to detect a similarity – highly suspicious in his view – between Delaroche's composition in *Jane Grey* and a print on a similar theme from the illustrated edition of David Hume's *History of England*, published by Robert Bowyer in the 1790s. Planche compounded his accusation of plagiarism by pointing out that an earlier work by Delaroche, his *Death of Elizabeth* shown at the 1827–8 Salon, had also used a visual source from Bowyer's edition of Hume (and in this connection he might have acknowledged that Delaroche's entry for the salon catalogue actually referred the salon visitor to the particular section in Hume's history). Planche terminated his attack by issuing a challenge to future scholars to track down the genealogy of other paintings by Delaroche in comparable print sources: 'so I leave to the erudite the task of discovering the origins in engraving of the master's other compositions'.[3]

The erudite have hardly been eager to take up Planche's challenge, probably because of more pressing priorities.[4] If I begin by rehearsing Planche's remarks, this is not with the purpose of denying that Delaroche's reliance on recent English prints was indeed very considerable, but to make the claim that his very reliance betokens a more profound affiliation on his part. Born in 1797, Delaroche was the son of a noted picture dealer and expert. He was also related through his mother to the Joly family who, father and son, were in charge of the national print collection of France throughout the entire period of the Empire and Restoration.[5] There is no difficulty in supposing that he would have had access to the prints in the Bowyer edition of Hume, or to the numerous prints from the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery that had preceded them in stimulating English artists to produce ambitious historical paintings, but the argument needs to be pressed to a further stage. The more substantial issue is how far Delaroche might have been guided in his development by this radically new mode of history painting that the print editions of both Bowyer and Boydell had summoned into existence.

It will be suggested here that Delaroche's role as 'choir-leader' of the new French historical school (as Heine would term him in 1831[6]) was largely the

1. The origin of the present paper was a brief discussion of Delaroche's possible connections with English history painting. This was presented at the conference 'The French affair with British art', held at Tate Britain on 22 March 2003 in the context of the exhibition, *From Constable to Delacroix*. I would like to acknowledge the help of Mark Ledbury, who encouraged me to produce a revised version, and the Editorial Group of the *Oxford Art Journal*, who agreed to publish it in the year of the 150th anniversary of Paul Delaroche's death.

2. My own interest in Delaroche, originally kindled as a result of a general concern with the representation of historical themes in the Romantic period, was first adumbrated in a chapter of *The Clothing of Clio* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1984), pp. 54–76. My monograph, *Paul Delaroche: History Painted* (Reaktion Books: London and Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 1997), attempted an overall survey of his career which left little space for this crucial aspect of his early development. Several of the key works discussed here – and particularly the early sketches and drawings – have come to light since that publication, and are reproduced here, together with reproductive prints after the major paintings that illuminate his connections with England. I have not undertaken to illustrate the many references to Delaroche's paintings, several of which cannot now be traced. Most of the remainder were reproduced in the 1997 monograph.

3. Gustave Planche, *Etudes sur l'Ecole Française (1831–1852): Peinture et Sculpture* (Michel Levy Frères: Paris, 1855), Vol. 1, p. 240: 'Il y a dans les illustrations de *David Hume* un dessin [sic] d'Opie, gravé par Skelton, et publié par Bowyr [sic] Pall Mall, qui représente sa mort de Marie Stuart . . . Je le demande, n'y a-t-il pas entre l'oeuvre d'Opie et celle de M. Paul Delaroche une frappante analogie'. Likewise, the Death of Elizabeth is a 'réproduction littérale d'un dessin de R.Smirke, gravé à Londres par Neagle . . . je laisse donc aux érudits le soin de découvrir les origines calcographiques des autres compositions du maître'. It is significant that Planche appears to imply that the original works by Opie and Smirke were drawings or prints, rather than *paintings*.

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result of his early immersion in this new manifestation of the genre, which set out a direction very different in spirit from the traditional approach of the French Académie des Beaux-Arts, to which he was elected in 1832. In brief, the issue to be explored is not whether Delaroche consulted English print sources, overtly or sotto voce, but how far his highly influential reorientation of 'genre historique' was attuned to his awareness of the ethos and practice of the upstart Academy on the other side of the channel.

This is not a possibility that has been investigated so far in any serious way, in spite of recent scholarly exploration of Anglo-French artistic exchanges over the Romantic period. Exhibitions in France and in the English-speaking world have retained their focus on those aspects of English influence that were already well acknowledged in the nineteenth century – and justifiably so. The landscapes of John Constable and the portraits of Sir Thomas Lawrence (to name only the most prominent English exponents of these two less prestigious genres) fuelled the debates of French critics from the 1820s onwards, and influenced the practice of many French painters in ways that need no underlining here.[7] Yet what of the English historical subjects that found their way, to a great extent through Delaroche's work, into the superior genre of history painting? The recent rediscovery of a small oil sketch for the *Death of Elizabeth*, which will be considered later, leaves us in no doubt that, in this particular case, Delaroche's starting point was an oil sketch that juggled with the composition of Robert Smirke's *Queen Elizabeth Appointing her Successor* (as engraved by James Neagle in 1796 for the Hume edition). As has already been suggested, the connection with Hume was hardly disavowed by Delaroche, since he credited the historian's text in the salon *livret*. Yet such unequivocal evidence might seem to provide conclusive support for Planche's indictment of plagiarism, if it were not glossed by a more global interpretation of Delaroche's early development as an artist in the 1820s.

Yet there is little prospect of reaching such an understanding from the study of contemporary sources, whether through combing the French criticism of the period, or through focusing on the authoritative accounts of Delaroche's career that would appear after his death in 1856. Planche's accusations of plagiarism were advanced in the 1830s, and they may have played some role in influencing Delaroche's decision to withdraw from exhibiting in the Salon after 1837.[8] They had been completely forgotten by the 1850s, but the more challenging proposition that Delaroche had immersed himself in English historical genre – that he had promoted his own career not just by copying English print sources, but by familiarising himself at first-hand with the cultural milieu in which they were produced – was not advanced at the time, and has not been investigated subsequently.[9]

However, this view is far from implausible. To take one example that eluded Planche's critique, it is instructive to look at Delaroche's first major state commission, a prestigious assignment initially granted to his studio master, Baron Gros, but then diverted towards Delaroche by an official decision of February 1827 (Fig. 1). *The Taking of the Trocadéro* (Salon of 1827–8: Musée de Versailles) was intended to commemorate what was being acclaimed as France's successful military intervention in Spain in 1823, under the leadership of the Duc d'Angoulême, nephew of the Bourbon King, Louis XVIII, and elder son of Charles X, who was to succeed to the throne shortly afterwards. This campaign was highly important for the self-esteem of the French Government since it was

4. It should also be noted that Delaroche's defenders were not especially interested in rebutting Planche's charge. The issue of the 'sources' for nineteenth-century French paintings has only been tackled with any degree of rigour in the relatively recent past, and primarily so in relation to the work of Manet. See the discussion in Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism: or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, 1996), Chapter 1, 'Manet's sources' and Chapter 2, '"Manet's sources" reconsidered'. In Chapter 1 (originally published as an article in *Artforum* in March 1969), Fried alludes to 'the literalness and obviousness with which he often quotes earlier paintings', but then detects and condemns 'attempts to explain disquieting aspects of Manet's art in terms of supposed defects in his talent or temperament' (pp. 24–5). In the present essay, I try to show how, in the case of a French painter who might well be considered the antithesis of Manet, a similar accounting can profitably be undertaken.

5. For general information on Delaroche's career in this period, see Bann, *Delaroche*, p. 33ff.

6. See Bann, *Delaroche*, pp. 107–8, for a discussion of Heine's view of Delaroche's work presented at the 1831 Salon.

7. I refer in particular to the previous mentioned exhibition *Constable to Delacroix*, organised by Patrick Noone and shown initially at the Tate Britain, London, in Spring 2003, and subsequently travelling in North America.

8. The broader context for this withdrawal was, however, the unsuccessful conclusion of Delaroche's lengthy campaign within the French Academy for a reform of the salon jury. For Delaroche's position on the matter, see Stephen Bann, 'Paul Delaroche à l'hémicycle des Beaux-Arts. L'histoire de l'art et l'autorité de la peinture', *Revue de l'art*, vol. 146, no. 4, 2004, pp. 21–34.

9. Ingres was reputed to have said of Delaroche's *Jane Grey*, which competed with his own *Martyre de Saint Symphorien* at the 1834 Salon, that it was no more than a 'vignette anglaise', but this remark was possibly no more than an echo of Planche's critique.

Musée de Versailles. Private collection.

regarded as having reaffirmed their right to bear arms in Europe after the humiliating occupation by foreign troops that followed France's defeat at Waterloo in 1815.

Contemporary French critics of Delaroche's painting inevitably compared this product of a young artist trained in Gros's studio with the magnificent pictorial record of warfare during the Revolution and Empire to which Gros and his fellow pupils from David's studio had valiantly contributed. Étienne Delécluze, himself a former pupil of David, commented on the nature of modern heroism as portrayed by Delaroche, which in his opinion struck a new note of 'resignation to danger'. He suggested that David himself had already begun to tread the same path in response to 'public events and the defection of taste' over the final years of the Empire.[10] Yet to assimilate Delaroche to this final phase of David's imperial patronage is perhaps to miss the wider aspect of the conjuncture that had formed connections between English history painting and the French neoclassical

10. Quoted in Norman Ziff, *Paul Delaroche: A Study in Nineteenth-Century French History Painting* (UMI Dissertation services: Ann Arbor, MI, 1994), p. 61.