

“Maîtres antiques”: the *Bucoliques* of André Chénier and the Neoclassical Mode

D.R. Gamble

In late March, 1792, amid the bitter rivalries and intense factionalism that marked the final stages of the French Revolution, a young poet already deeply involved in the polemics of the upheaval paused to express his views on the distinctions, which he opposed, still drawn between painters of portraits and painters of historical subjects. In the course of this article, entitled *Sur la peinture d'histoire* and published soon after in the *Journal de Paris*, the author cited an artist he deeply admired who had already achieved eminence in both fields of painting,¹ and went on to refer to him as “le chef de notre école, que son génie et ses travaux lui ont acquis même chez les étrangers” (286). The writer of this article was, of course, André Chénier (1762 - 1794), most of whose verse, with the exception of two occasional poems,² was not published until long after his death, and the artist Jacques-Louis David (1748 - 1825), who has left such masterpieces as the *Oath of the Horatii* (1784) and *Marat Assassinated* (1793), and been described as “the most powerful genius that eighteenth-century French art produced” (Bertrand, 319). By “notre école” Chénier meant the movement for change that dominated European art and architecture in the decades before the French Revolution. It was characterised by “a desire to recreate the heroic spirit as well as the art of Greece and Rome” (Chilvers et al., 393); its renewed scholarly focus on classical antiquity was in large measure made possible by archaeological discoveries in Southern Italy earlier in the century. “The order, clarity and reason of Greek and Roman art appealed greatly in the Age of Enlightenment, and in France . . . [this] style held strong moral implications, being associated with a change in social outlook and a desire to restore ancient Roman values into civil life” (Chilvers et al., 393). Although the painter David was the most eminent French representative of the school, it was in fact pan-European and centred not in Paris, but Rome, where from about the middle of the century such artists and theorists as Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717 - 1768), Anton Rafael Mengs (1728 - 1779), and Gavin Hamilton (1728 - 1798) had elaborated the ideas which would underlie the reforming movement that became known only in the middle of the nineteenth century as Neoclassicism.

Like his sometime mentor David, Chénier created much of his best work when inspired by a personal vision of classical antiquity. In spite of the amorous elegies he composed before the Revolution, and the odes and declamatory iambics he wrote toward the end of his life, today Chénier’s most memorable poetry is invariably considered to be the *Bucoliques*, the graceful pastoral verse he fashioned after the poets of ancient Greece and Rome and, it has been argued, “the only great collection of lyrical poems to have been written in French between La Fontaine’s last collection of *Fables* in 1693 and Lamartine’s *Meditations* in 1820” (Scarfe, 162). But as Chénier himself implied in his (twice) repeated references to “notre école” (286, 287), his adherence to the ideals and objectives of the Neoclassicists, or “restorers of the true style,” as they preferred to see themselves (Honour, 113), extends well beyond this appropriation of classical subject. What I would like to do in the pages that follow is to clarify Chénier’s own claim of

1 All references to Chénier's work in this study are made to the *Oeuvres complètes* prepared by Gérard Walter for the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

2 These two poems are the “Hymne aux Suisses de Châteauneuf” published in the *Journal de Paris* on 15 April 1792, and *Le Jeu de Paume*, printed as a pamphlet by Bleuet in 1791. It is worth noting that the second, a long ode, was dedicated “à Louis David, peintre,” described in the first stanza as “roi du savant pinceau” (167).

allegiance by demonstrating the degree to which this part of his work in particular is informed, conceptually and even technically, by the prime tenets of the Neoclassical movement.

Central to this movement was the concept of the imitation of nature, an unsullied, elemental nature characterised by clean lines and pure geometric shapes. In reaction to the fanciful embellishment of the Rococo style which had preceded it, to the “amas d’ornaments sans goût” (285) that Chénier dismissed even in the article to which I have referred, Neoclassicism aimed at a more natural effect which, it held, could best be achieved by reflecting the essential simplicity of nature.³ What resulted was a preference for more natural subjects, such as the depiction of early man (the ancient Greeks and Romans), and an entirely different manner of expressing them: it has often been remarked that the word “nature” was interpreted over the course of the eighteenth century in many different ways, but for artists “nature was opposed to deformity, to any departure from the norm, to affectation . . . and hence to a mannered artistic style” (Honour, 105).

Chénier’s declarations in his long *Essai sur les causes et les effets de la perfection et de la décadence des lettres et des arts* (written between 1780 and 1790) make it clear that these views were also very much his own. Describing the true poet, he wrote that

tout dans la nature l’inspire et lui donne à rêver: toute la nature
lui appartient . . . Il n’est aucun objet si méconnu, si abandonné,
qui ne lui fournisse quelque image nouvelle, quelque expression vivante,
quelque allusion délicate, quelque emblème ingénieux . . . (684 - 685).

Such is the importance of nature in the *Bucoliques* that the poet José-Maria de Hérédia (1842 - 1905) could later claim that Chénier gave renewed life to the feeling for nature in French verse that before him only La Fontaine had not entirely misunderstood: “Il voit, il sent la beauté multiple des choses, il en écoute la musique . . .” (Hérédia, 163).

It had fallen to Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Neoclassicism’s primary theorist whose influence on Chénier was deep and lasting,⁴ intimately to link this desire to imitate nature to the study of classical art: for in the ancient statuary Winckelmann so much admired were to be found, more compellingly united, more movingly portrayed, essential examples of what nature at its best could offer: “das Studium der Natur muß also wenigstens ein längerer und mühsamerer Weg zur Kenntnis des vollkommenen Schönen sein, als es das Studium der Antiken ist” (Winckelmann, 13).⁵ This interest in classical art, and especially in sculpture, much more of which had survived, was fuelled by the excavations at Herculaneum and Pompey (beginning in 1738 and 1755 respectively), and the enthusiastic descriptions of what had been recovered in a large number of influential books like Cochin and Bellicard’s *Observations sur les antiquités d’Herculanum* (1757), l’abbé Richard’s *Description historique et critique de Pompéi* (1770), and the comte de Caylus’ *Recueil d’antiquités* (from 1750): to list but three. They appeared, moreover, at a time when the arts were intimately associated; although much was made later of the bond between the poets of the Cénacle and the painters and sculptors of French Romanticism, this confluence had begun long before. It has in fact been claimed that the principles governing literature and the plastic arts had never been closer than they were in the eighteenth century (Bertrand, 277).

3. There is an interesting comparison of the spirit and expression of the Rococo and Neoclassical styles in the article by Patrick Brady, given below.

4. This influence is discussed in the article by Paul Dimoff, and also in his edition of *L’Invention*, both listed below.

5. Strikingly similar views are expressed in Sir Joshua Reynolds’s *Discourse III* at the Royal Academy (14 December 1770), 49.

Even as David's paintings like the *Death of Socrates* (1787) and the *Love of Paris and Helen* (1788) were inspired by both the literature and the art of antiquity,⁶ in his *Bucoliques* particularly (composed with few exceptions between 1778 and 1790), Chénier drew upon the art as well as the literature of Greece and Rome. It was in classical statuary that he found the inspiration for more than one poem, or *quadro*, to use the Italian word (for picture) that he himself often preferred. Among others, there are his memorable lines in *L'Invention* on the *Apollo Bebevedere*, the *Farnese Hercules*, and the *Laocoon* (ll. 278 - 280: 129); but among his manuscripts there is also this revealing plan for a poem never written:

Il faut peindre des jeunes filles marchant vers la statue d'un Dieu, tenant d'une main sur leur tête une corbeille de fleurs et de l'autre des pans de leur robe . . . ou d'autres attitudes qu'il faut tirer des marbres, des pierres et des peintures antiques (*Sujets et ébauches de bucoliques*, IV, 530).

In literature Chénier's acceptance of the classical hierarchy of genres was complete, as still other lines in *L'Invention* confirm ("La nature dicta vingt genres opposés . . .," ll. 57 - 59: 124), and his reliance on the work of earlier authors, and especially classical authors, in the creation of his own verse was avowed. He outlined his method in the *Épître sur ses ouvrages* ("Souvent des vieux auteurs j'envahis les richesses . . .," ll. 94 - 96: 159); but for Chénier, no more than for any other adherent of the Neoclassical movement, did imitation imply a servile copy of Graeco-Roman models: "Plus souvent leurs écrits, aiguillons généreux, / M'embrasent de leur flamme et je crée avec eux" (ll. 94 - 95: 159). That was because "imitation called upon the artist's higher faculties, especially his creative powers" (Honour, 107), whereas copying did not. Neoclassical theorists emphasised the difference: Anton Raffael Mengs, like Sir Joshua Reynolds after him (*Discourse on Art VI*, 1774, 107), declared that one artist's reliance on the productions of another did not necessarily constitute plagiarism "[because he] makes himself capable of producing works which resemble them, because he considers the reasons with which they are done" (quoted in Honour, 107, presumably from his *Gedanken über die Schönheit und den Geschmack in der Malerei*, 1764). Chénier arrived at similar distinctions in his *Essai* between a writer who merely copied and an author capable of creative imitation or, as he called it, *imitation inventrice* (690): "car l'un ne fait que transposer des mots d'un papier sur un autre; . . . tandis que l'autre les goûte, les savoure, les digère et leur suc devient sa propre substance" (689).

For Chénier, as for David, the sculptor Antonio Canova (1757 - 1822), and other Neoclassical artists, such imitation was not only creative but highly selective, as their ultimate objective was to attain, through the union of all that was best in individual models, a timeless perfection in their completed works of art. Their ambition, in short, was to rival the ancients, who had left, in Chénier's words, "cette foule de chefs-d'oeuvre dont rien depuis n'a approché, même de loin . . ." (650). In this way the practice of imitation was intimately linked to another distinctive feature of Neoclassicism, its utter preoccupation with the ideal. Here, too, Chénier's own views mirrored those of earlier theorists such as Mengs, Reynolds,⁷ and particularly Winckelmann, who had posited that "the way to the universally beautiful and ideal portrayals of it" ("der Weg zum allgemeinen Schönen und zu idealischen Bildern desselben") was, as the Greeks had shown, through the compilation of individual perfections (Winckelmann, 13). As his numerous fragments and uncompleted manuscripts attest, Chénier, too, was a perfectionist in thrall to the ideal: in his late article *Sur la Peinture d'histoire*, for

6. For Bertrand's unforgiving assessment of David's reliance on the ancients, see 311-314.

7. Quotations illustrative of the views of Mengs and Reynolds in this regard are found in Honour, 105 and 106 respectively.

instance, of approximately four small pages, the phrase “la perfection de l’art / d’un art” is used three times (284, 285, 286) and the adjective “parfait” twice (“un portrait parfait,” 285; “cette parfaite représentation de la vie humaine,” 288); nor does his poem *L’Invention* leave any doubt that for Chénier as well the representation of the ideal was a composite affair:

Ainsi donc, dans les arts, l’inventeur . . .

 C’est le fécond pinceau qui, sûr dans ses regards,
 Retrouve un seul visage en vingt belles épars,
 Les fait renaître ensemble, et, par un art suprême,
 Des traits de vingt beautés forme la beauté même (124).

What resulted from such a method, of course, was the expression of what Winckelmann called “Bilder bloß im Verstande entworfen” (Winckelmann, 5: “images born in the brain”) and Reynolds “ideas that subsist only in the mind” (*Discourse IX*, 1780, 171); and so André Chénier’s work, like John Flaxman’s (1755 - 1826) or Antonio Canova’s (1757 - 1822) ~ or David’s⁸ ~ is illuminated by a Platonic vision of absolute beauty. It characterises central figures in his poetry, where it is essential to the development and appeal of such *Bucoliques* as *Néaere* (10 -11) *L’Oaristys* (16 - 22), and *Hylas* (28 - 29): “Trois Naiades l’ont vu s’avancer dans la plaine, / Elles ont vu ce front de jeunesse éclatant, / Cette bouche, ces yeux.” (28). And it often figures in his theoretical pronouncements as well: apostrophising an imaginary young sculptor in his long *Essai*, Chénier clearly echoes earlier Neoclassicists:

Je veux voir la beauté. . . Je te demande Achille ou Apollon et, en copiant servilement le premier beau portefaix qui s’est montré devant toi, tu crois me montrer des héros et des dieux. Ce n’est point là qu’ils sont; c’est dans l’imagination brûlante, c’est dans la sublime pensée (650 - 651).

However summary, the portrayal of nature in the *Bucoliques* is idealised as well, its own beauty no less central to the creation of Chénier’s limpid pastoral vision. Nature is, as it were, seen from within; invested with all the grace of its youthful inhabitants, it becomes an active participant in the brief dramas these poems often present.⁹ These, for instance, are the unforgettable lines which describe the response to Homer’s song in *L’Aveugle*:

Il poursuit; et déjà les antiques ombrages
 Mollement en cadence inclinaient leurs feuillages;
 Et pâtres oubliant leur troupeau délaissé,
 Et voyageurs quittant leur chemin commencé,
 Couraient (46).

And in her final farewell to her lover, it is the power of nature that Néaere invokes to recall her always to mind:

O cieux, ô terre, ô mer, prés, montagnes, rivages,
 Fleurs, bois mélodieux, vallons, grottes sauvages,

8. See Clark, 35-36: “[David’s] portraits show us how skillfully he could generalise direct from his model. . . In his histories David tuned each form up to the concert pitch of the ideal, and we can perhaps only tell by ear when a string has been screwed too tight.” Commenting upon the *Coronation of Napoleon*, Clark goes on to declare that “the heads of the ladies are very accomplished, and might have been painted at any epoch. . . They prove the high power of idealisation in David’s earlier works, even those like the *Horatii*, which seem realistic.”

9. The present study is the continuation of an earlier work on André Chénier, given below, where these points are developed at greater length.

Rappelez-lui souvent, rappelez-lui toujours
Néaere, tout son bien, Néaere ses amours . . . (VIII, 11).

Whether man or nature is involved, the use of idealisation can easily be defended on aesthetic grounds: Sir Joshua Reynolds wrote that its contemplation could “raise the thoughts, and extend the views of the spectator; and . . . conclude in Virtue” (*Discourse IX*, 1790, 171). It also enabled Chénier to evoke a response in as many readers as possible; the natural appeal of idealisation was broadened further by the familiar situations he often depicted, involving moments and emotions understood by everyone. Idealisation, therefore, helped to secure that direct communication with the public Chénier believed essential in any work of art; but it also facilitated transmission of the moral lessons which, as an enlightened Neoclassical reformer, he considered to be no less important. However modest, such lessons are frequently included in his verse: in the *Bucoliques* they are found especially in the completed, longer poems. Chénier may illustrate solicitude for the ill (in *Le Malade*), generosity to the destitute (in *Le Mendiant*), respect for the aged and infirm (in *L'Aveugle*), the punishment of treachery (in *Le Retour d'Ulysse*), or the blessings of freedom (in *La Liberté*), but virtue, in the main, is rewarded. It is the inclusion of these touching descriptions of moral rectitude in many of his *Bucoliques*, these “sobering lessons in the more homely virtues, stoic exemplars of unspoilt and uncorrupted simplicity” (Honour, 19) that distinguish Chénier’s graceful pastoral - and almost entirely apolitical¹⁰ - world from the playful Rococo Olympus of, say, François Boucher (1703 - 1770), and ally it to the sterner moral vision of Neoclassical artists like his acquaintance David, whose *Oath of the Horatii* (1785) has come to exemplify the didactic intentions of Neoclassical art: although it was commissioned by the King of France, it represented the atmosphere of deep moral conviction and commitment in the last years before the Revolution and, it was claimed, “inflamed more souls for liberty than the best books” (quoted in Levey, 186).

It was to accommodate these reforming tendencies that Neoclassical artists preferred to elaborate a vision of antiquity quite unlike the one that had preceded it: philandering gods and lesser deities now gave way to warriors, legislators and even common men (Honour, 44) who could provide memorable examples of moral probity and civic rectitude. David, for instance, also chose to represent *Belisarius Receiving Alms* (1780 - 1781) and the *Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of His Sons* (1789). Chénier preferred very minor figures (like Néaere, VIII, 10 - 11), whose stories complemented his own idealised vision, or completely imaginary characters (such as Cléotas of *Le Mendiant*, XXV, 34 - 42) whom he too could include in morally edifying situations. Because the work of Homer more than any other classical author “expressed the unaffected simplicity of primitive emotions, the natural nobility of heroic deeds” (Honour, 66), it grew in stature over the course of the century, and so became a particular source of inspiration for Neoclassical artists. Like Gavin Hamilton and John Flaxman, David illustrated the funeral of Patroclus (1780) and other scenes from the Homeric epics. Chénier composed *Le Retour d'Ulysse* (XIX, 26 - 27) and *Xanthus* (“Le beau Xanthus succombe . . .”, XXI, 27 - 28), and it was the veneration of Homer, still brilliant if blind and infirm, that provided him with the subject of *L'Aveugle*, described as his greatest poem (Scarfe, 164): “Viens, prophète éloquent, aveugle harmonieux,/ Convive du nectar, disciple aimé des Dieux” (48).

Beyond the conceptual bases, sources of inspiration, and often edifying themes that Chénier shared with other Neoclassicists, however, his *Bucoliques* reveal specific stylistic traits characteristic of other fields or art, and of Neoclassical art in particular. Some have

10 The clear exception is, of course, the dialogue extolling liberty between the goatherd and the (enslaved) shepherd in *bucolique XXVII* (49-53).

already been noted by Louis Bertrand.¹¹ Chénier's ability to compose attractive pictures in his poetry makes it possible for readers easily to visualize the scenes he created; it is almost impossible not to see, for instance, the water nymphs bearing the body of "la jeune Tarentine" above the waves to the shore. Chénier's appreciation of the human form and his ability to describe it resulted in the graceful poses of his characters: there is the example of the old slave in *Le Mendiant* kissing the forehead and hair of her beautiful young mistress (l. 64: 35). His attachment to purity of line led him, finally, to emphasise contours in some of his most memorable descriptions, such as these lines, particularly appreciated by the poet Alfred de Musset (1810 - 1857), addressing two doves: "Sous votre aimable tête un cou blanc, délicat / Se plie et de la neige effacerait l'éclat" (*Bucoliques inachevées*, IV, 307).

While the comparison of different genres of art can rarely be much more than tentative, still other stylistic parallels can be drawn linking Chénier's work to Neoclassical practice. Art historians have described David's *Oath of the Horatii* as "simple, severe and uncompromising in its subordination of colour to drawing" (P. and L. Murray, 121). With only slight modifications these remarks could also be applied to Chénier's manner in the *Bucoliques*. The essential simplicity of David's technique in his most successful paintings is reflected by the economy of means that characterise Chénier's style: the adjectives most frequently found ~ *beau, jeune, doux* ~ are commonplace and noteworthy only for their restraint; they conform to the familiar character of most of the words used in these poems: "le fonds de son vocabulaire," it has been observed, "restera constitué par des mots d'une vertu éprouvée . . . parfois relevés d'une teinte d'archaïsme" (Fabre, 162); and while almost all the devices of classical rhetoric find a place in his poetry, the development of Chénier's most convincing verse remains essentially uncluttered; the syntax of *La Jeune Tarentine*, for instance, has been described as rigorously plain (A.-M. Taisne, 22). "Ce sont les gris qui font la peinture," David is reported to have declared (quoted in Bertrand, 313), and this preference for line over colour is characteristic of Chénier as well: while graceful attitudes are regularly struck, there is very little reference to colour in his poetry beyond the primary shades, most notably black and white; and even then what colours there are can be used to convey less a literal than a figurative sense, as in his reference to "les noirs ennemis, les deux oiseaux de proie" (XVII, 24). Like other notable Neoclassicists, like the sculptor Antonio Canova or the architect Claude Nicholas Ledoux (Honour, 40, 42), for example, David often relied upon the use of contrast in his work; he certainly did so in the *Oath of the Horatii* where, in the words of Hugh Honour, "[it is] the compositional technique of dissociation or isolation of parts from which so much of the picture's power derives" (Honour, 36). The use of contrast is also one of Chénier's most habitual ~ and effective ~ stylistic traits: the dramatic juxtaposition of elements and perspectives his poems contain regularly serves to sharpen their outlines. In *L'Aveugle* (42 - 48), for instance, the curiosity and inexperience of the respectful young shepherds stand in counterpoint to the candour and wisdom of the venerable old bard, Homer, whom they befriend. In "La Jeune Locrienne" (12 - 13), a much briefer poem of only twenty-four lines, the moral censure of a follower of Pythagoras, "un sage d'Italie, / Maigre, pâle, pensif," is set against the "naïve et riante folie" of a beautiful young woman who sings of free love. For Chénier, as for David, this use of contrast was a means of maximising the effect of stylistic components which in themselves were simple and subdued, of animating, even, the idealised descriptions so characteristic of the movement ~ "l'école" ~ to which both belonged.

Unfortunately it was a movement of only brief duration: much of the idealism that had originally underpinned it was lost irrevocably in the turmoil that followed 1789, and

11 See particularly 249-250 of Bertrand's chapter on Chénier (VI), to which this paragraph is heavily indebted.

as a style it was soon debased: the understated and even delicate simplicity of genuine Neoclassical art was often transformed, under the Empire that followed, into an excessively ornamental pomp.¹² That was a school, however, to which Chénier did not belong: by virtue of the concepts which inform his art and the techniques he preferred to express it, he may be considered a true Neoclassicist, may in fact be the leading representative of this movement in French literature.¹³ It is a great irony, of course, that the fundamental reforms many Neoclassical artists strove to bring about fostered the climate that led ultimately to the Revolution, “the drastic moral regeneration in real life represented in art by the Neoclassical movement” (Levey, 166); it is yet another, greater still, that it was Chénier’s commitment to measured reform, even as the forces of revolution spun out of control, that led to his own early demise in 1794, on the guillotine.

Memorial University

Jacques-Louis David, 1784. « Le Serment des Horaces ». Huile sur toile. 330 x 425 cm. Musée du Louvre



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¹² This devaluation is described in Honour, 171-184.

¹³ By very different avenues Bertrand arrives at much the same conclusion: see 258.

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