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THE PAINTER AS PATRIOT: JACQUES SABLET (1749-1803) ON DEMOCRACY, FRIENDSHIP AND THE ARTS[1]

BÉLA KAPOSSY

During the eighteenth century, there were few Swiss thinkers, if any at all, who claimed that real democracy was a desirable let alone attainable system of politics. Most of them subscribed to the view that saw democracies as notoriously unstable and ultimately ungovernable. There were of course many thinkers who spoke out against the gradual oligarchisation of republican politics and who defended the ideal of a *governo largo*, where magistrates and politicians could be drawn from a wide pool of able citizens. However none of them held that political participation was a good in itself, a necessary part of what it meant to become fully human. Man, they agreed, was not a political animal in a strictly Aristotelian sense. The purpose of his nature, it was repeatedly claimed, was not to sit in the *agora*, but to try as hard as possible to become a good Christian.

Many of the anti-democratic statements formulated at the beginning of the eighteenth century were couched in the still current seventeenth-century reason-of-state-literature marked by its distinct hostility towards mixed constitutions and its tacitean distrust of the common people, the *populus*, as a political agent. For a younger generation of Swiss thinkers, however, who were born during the 1720s and 1730s, the dominant conceptual framework for thinking about republics and democracies was provided by Montesquieu's influential *De l'esprit des lois*, first published in Geneva in 1748. Montesquieu believed that the republics' fundamental instability resulted from the citizens' equalising tendency which, he claimed, led to the errosion of political authority.

> The principle of democracy, Montesquieu argued, is corrupted [when each citizen] wants to be equal to those who command. So the people, finding

[1] The following essay is a slightly revised version of the paper presented at the conference. I would like to thank the participants for their helpful comments and criticism.

nistration or of entering the officer corps of one of Berne's foreign regiments, there was throughout the eighteenth century a steady outflow of talented young Vaudois who left the shores of Lac Léman to try their chances in one of Europe's cultural and economic centres like London, Paris, or Rome. The situation, as a contemporary critic pointed out, was particularly disheartening for young artists; there was, he claimed, "no help to start off with, no encouragement to persist in one's career, and no advantage once one had reached the goal"[7]. Like his brother François who later became known as *Le Romain*, Jacques Sablet left for Paris to become a student of Jean-Marie Vien, by that time a leading exponent of French early Neo-classicism. In 1775 Sablet moved to Italy when Vien was made director of the French Academy in Rome. The following year and with the help of his father, Sablet managed to obtain a scholarship from Their Excellencies in Berne. Unfortunately, we have little knowledge of the reasons for or frequency of this sort of financial assistance, but we do know that Sablet's scholarship was renewed on a number of occasions and that in 1779, when his money started to run out, he sent the Bernese a first draft of an allegory, hoping they might commission him to do the real work (Ill.2). When the Bernese government refused his offer, Sablet simply executed the painting at his own expense, which, given the financial risks involved, must have been a rather unusual way of proceeding. In 1781, having meanwhile completed the painting, Sablet contacted the Bernese once again, this time sending them the finished version. Luckily, Their Excellencies now seemed sufficiently impressed by the talents of their gifted subject, for after a short period of deliberation they finally acquired the allegorical painting for some hundred écus and had it put up in the gallery of the city's public library. It is supposed to be one of the very few paintings the government of Berne acquired during the eighteenth century[8].

Sablet's allegory presents the interior of a large portico framed by tall Doric and columns opening up a view onto a romantic Palatine style landscape; to the left we can detect the corner of a large garden or terrace; to the right, a number of houses including an apse like edifice that could be a basilica. In the foreground we can see how Minerva, identifiable here by her distinctive helmet and *aegis*, leads another female figure, representing the republic of Berne, towards a group of sculptors and painters, who in turn seem to be offering her the various tools of their profession. The large sculpted marble statue facing the

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[7] Jean-Louis-Philippe Bridel, "Lettre sur les artistes Suisses maintenant à Rome" (1789), *Etrennes Helvétiennes et Patriotiques*, vol.8, s.l., 1790.

[8] For recent discussions of Sablet's *Allegory*, see O. Bätschmann, *La peinture de l'époque moderne*, Arts et culture visuels en Suisse, Disentis, 1989, "Ars Helvetica", n° VI, p. 113-16; P. Chessex, in D. Gamboni, G. Germann (eds.) *Zeichen der Freiheit. Das Bild der Republik in der Kunst des 16. Bis 20. Jahrhunderts*, Bern, 1991, p. 389-90.

figure that represents Berne (which we will from now on call *Berna*) must have just been completed, for we can still see the fragments lying on the wooden pedestal. On the far right we can also detect the girl who served the sculptor as a model and who, now that the work is done, is being fêted by her two young admirers. A drapery of heavy cloth thrown over a metal beam anchored in the large central column gives the artists an improvised curtain and helps to screen them from the curious glances of some of the more persistent observers visible in the background. In front of the column stands a group of three modestly dressed female figures who carry a number of objects: two garlands, three or four large golden medals on strings, and a large cup. The three figures all look in different directions; the one on the right looks towards the painting's upper left hand corner, the one on the left observes the artists and the sculpture, while the one in the middle seems to cast a glance at Minerva and Berna. If one focuses only on these components of the painting, (which is what literally all the art historians have done) then Sablet's allegory indeed appears to be little more than an easily readable and highly decorative appeal for financial support. But there are good reasons for believing that Sablet's work contains far more than just a straightforward plea for further funding, and instead, as we shall see, is an ambitious and remarkably subtle reflection on republican society.

This can be seen if we study the sculpted statue that Berna is made to inspect (Ill.3). The sculpture represents a middle-aged woman in a simple Roman-style dress; in her right hand she holds up a split pomegranate, whilst in her left she holds down a number of snakes. Next to her feet we can detect an open sack filled with wheat. The unusual arrangement of her attributes suggests that the sculpture is an allegorical figure; and indeed, if we look through the various iconographical sources of that period, we will find that Sablet's sculpture exactly fits the standard description of the figure representing democracy, a description that is usually traced back to the 1630 edition of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*[9] (Ill. 4). Following Ripa, the pomegranate represents the popular assemblies central to democratic politics; the snakes on the other hand signify that democracies, unlike aristocracies or monarchies, are incapable of achieving greatness and fame, while the sacks of wheat finally indicate that democracies are primarily concerned with providing the essential primary goods. From 1630 onwards, the representation of democracy was included in many of the numerous edi-

[9] Cesare Ripa, *Della Più che Novissima Iconologia di Cesare Ripa Perugino...Ampliata dal Sig. Ca. Gio. Zaratino Castellini Romano*, Padua, 1630. On Ripa and the representation of democracy, see Martin Warnke, "Die Demokratie zwischen Vorbildern und Zerrbildern", in D. Gamboni, G. Germann (eds.), *Zeichen der Freiheit, op. cit.*, p. 75-97.

tions and adaptations of Ripa's *Iconologia*, and this is probably where Sablet encountered it. He might also have come across it when accompanying Vien to Versailles, where a sculpted figure of democracy by Jacques Buirette (after a drawing by Charles Le Brun) could be seen at the south wing of the palace (Ill. 5).

The fact that Berna is made to inspect not just any nicely sculpted statue but a statue of democracy calls for further explication, especially since the official position of Their Excellencies was known to be fiercely anti-democratic. Given its prominent position within the overall composition of the painting, it seems unlikely that Sablet chose the representation of democracy solely for decorative purposes. Not only is Minerva pointing directly at the sculpture, hence indicating its significance, the sculpture itself is also brightly illuminated by a broad beam of light descending from the picture's upper right hand corner. It is equally unlikely that he chose the figure of democracy inadvertently, because he was well-known for spending tremendous time and care on the composition of his paintings. This can be seen from the remark by the Swiss art critic Jean-Louis-Philippe Bridel who, after visiting Sablet in his studio, noted [in his *Lettre sur les artistes Suisses maintenant à Rome* published in 1790] that his "composition est simple, mais elle est bien raisonnée, sachant combien un seul personnage insignifiant ou oisif, dégrade le meilleur tableau, il n'introduit dans les siens que ceux qui sont absolument utiles"[10]. Nor finally is it likely that Sablet was a militant democrat who chose the form of an allegory on the arts in order to make a radical, although coded, political statement. Not only did the Pays de Vaud lack a noticeable democratic tradition; if Sablet really was a militant democrat, one would rightly expect some of this engagement to show up in his later paintings. This is however not the case.

Sablet, it seems reasonable to assume, must have expected that at least some magistrates would study his work more attentively and perhaps even recognise what the sculpture stood for, particularly some of the younger ones who were well-known antiquarians and who, like himself, possessed a keen interest in iconographical details. If he wanted Their Excellencies to pay for an allegory about democracy, he obviously would have had to make it clear that his painting was not a satire of the openly aristocratic views of his benefactors. If we study the painting more carefully, we will find that this was precisely what Sablet was aiming to do. But, before doing so, we need to consider briefly why the Bernese magistrates were so fiercely opposed to the idea of democracy.

It was commonly believed that one of the main problems the Bernese patricians had to solve was to consolidate a territory, which, as

[10] J.-L.-P. Bridel, "Lettre sur les artistes Suisses maintenant à Rome", *op. cit.*

many observers commented, had by the mid-eighteenth century acquired the form of a small empire. Not only was Berne by far the largest and most populous member of the Swiss federation. It was also believed to be, rightly or wrongly, the most hungry for further expansion, and for these reasons was often compared to early Rome. Edward Gibbon, for example, when living in Lausanne in 1755, used the parallel between the two republics to predict the fall of Berne should it fail to overcome the inequality between the centre and the provinces. The only way for Berne to escape the consequences of its Roman style of politics, Gibbon warned, was thus to properly integrate the peoples it had conquered into its republic[11].

Arguments of a similar kind were also made by the Bernese themselves, especially by a number of younger, "patriotic" patricians, like for example Vincent Bernard Tscharner, who defended the idea that a republic that wished to remain free had to act as a single unified body according to a single uniform will[12]. Instead of being separated by continuous feuds over acquired rights and privileges, both citizens and subjects should be united in their common desire to defend the republic. The patricians in turn, as Tscharner pointed out, should no longer be seen to form a distinct political entity, separated from the rest of society, but instead fortify their image as the true representatives of the common interest.

Tscharner's call for the strengthening of the patriciate's representative character did not in any way imply that the magistrates should actually be elected by the people. Nor did it imply that the Bernese should grant their subjects the rights of citizenship, for this, as Johannes Müller pointed out, was precisely what they believed had caused the fall of the Roman republic:

> Berne, like Rome, accepted the neighbours it had conquered as citizens; wiser than Rome it gradually limited this principle (1536) and as a consequence prevented an excess in urban population, democracy, and ruin[13].

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[11] See Edward Gibbon, "Journal de mon voyage dans quelques endroits de la Suisse", in *Miscellanea Gibboniana*, Garvin R. de Beer, Georges A. Bonnard and Louis Junod (eds.), Lausanne, 1952, 1953; also his essay on the government of Berne, "La lettre de Gibbon sur le gouvernement de Berne", in *Miscellanea Gibboniana, op. cit.*, p. 123f.

[12] See especially the *Patriotische Reden, gehalten vor dem hochlöblichen äussern Stande der Stadt Bern*, Beat Ludwig Walthard (ed.), Bern, 1773; also Tscharner's article on "Bern" in *Historische, geographische und physikalische Beschreibung des Schweizerlandes*, G.E. Haller and V.B.Tscharner (eds.), Bern, 1775-1776, Bd..I, p. 119f.; on Tscharner and the Bernese patriots, see eg. E. Stoye, *Vincent Bernard de Tscharner. 1728-1778. A study of Swiss culture in the eighteenth century*, Fribourg, 1954; also the author's "Der bedrohliche Frieden. Ein Beitrag zum politischen Denken im Bern des 18. Jahrhunderts", in *Gente ferocissima. Mercenariat et société en Suisse (XV^e-XIX^e siècle)*, Recueil offert à Alain Dubois, Norbert Furrer *et al.* (eds.), Zurich and Lausanne, 1997, p. 217-32.

[13] *Sämmtliche Werke*, XV, Tübingen, 1812, p. 418.

Tscharner's idea that the patricians should behave as if they were representatives of the common good followed instead from his conviction that the strength of republican government depended not only on its capacity to impose disciplinary measures (although he insisted that this obviously remained the cornerstone of public order), but also on its ability to generate and to maintain the people's trust and confidence. For the more patriotic and virtuous the patricians appeared to be, he explained, the more likely it was that the people would trust them and, as a consequence, renounce their claims to political participation.

Tscharner doubted whether the Bernese aristocracy could become truly united, stable *and* popular at the same time. Not only would the patricians themselves have to become enlightened model patriots, willing always to subject their own interest to that of the community, but the Bernese political economy would also have to be arranged in such a way as to prevent individual economic success from becoming a vehicle for political opposition and a menace to the existing aristocratic order of society[14]. But the main obstacle, according to Tscharner, lay perhaps less in the patricians' latent aversion to republican ideals, nor in the structural deficiencies within the Bernese political economy, but more fundamentally in the people's inability to recognise and follow good leaders.

Tscharner based this traditional anti-democratic argument on the idea that men were by nature not only self-interested but in most cases also cognitively severely limited. Incapable of coordinating their thinking with their action, ordinary people seemed, at least in normal circumstances, unable to appreciate personal merit. This, he believed, also explained why they usually felt more attracted to artful demagogues than simple and morally upright patriots. There were times, Tscharner admitted, when the common people seemed able to accept the moral authority of the right sort of leader. But these occasions, as the history of the Bernese republic seemed to prove, were very rare indeed and occured only in times of extreme need. Only under the impending threat of political annihilation, in particular, were subjects and citizens able to surmount their individual greed and political shortsightedness and put their lives willingly at the disposal of a militarily trained patriciate: it was "the common threat", Tscharner explained, that "unites everyone into a single entity", just as it was "the need of the fatherland [that] transforms all citizens into soldiers. They do not fear any danger, because they fear servitude more than anything

[14] On Berne's political economy, see the author's "Le prix de la liberté: idéologie républicaine et finances publiques à Berne au XVIII[e] siècle", in F. Flouck *et al.* (eds.), *De l'ours à la cocarde. Ancien régime et révolution en Pays de Vaud (1536-1798)*, Lausanne, Payot, 1998, p. 143-161.

else"[15]. Despite this glorification of republican unity in times of military conflict, Tscharner never suggested that the present government should revert to its former politics of territorial expansion. But he insisted that the only way in which the Bernese republic could hope to regain its internal stability was to resurrect the political climate of its heroic past and generate a strong and austere military culture similar to that of the early Rome.

What all these Bernese thinkers agreed on was the crucial importance of the study of history for understanding good government[16]. It was the city's constitutional history, not an ahistorical, speculative theory of natural rights (it was repeatedly argued) that could strengthen the republican ideology of Berne and best explain and legitimate the present aristocratic form of government. This often overtly polemical opposition between historical approaches to politics on the one hand and more ahistorical ones on the other was once again neatly summarised by Johannes Müller who, although not himself a citizen of Berne, was strongly influenced by Bernese political thought:

> He who promises to build a house and builds it on sand, or who then builds a house of cards is a swindler. Such is a political writer who has no knowledge of history[17].

Throughout his work Müller made it very clear that those who promoted democratic theories ought to be seen as swindlers of this kind. Instead of contributing to what he took to be real political knowledge, based on empirical, historical data, they merely presented shallow and ultimately pernicious "political metaphysics". History alone, he concluded, held the key to understanding the principles of human society and history proved that the people could never really be trusted.

Let us now come back to Sablet and his *Allegory of the Republic of Berne protecting the Arts and Sciences*. Sablet was no political thinker, nor was he a Bernese patrician who spent his life in politics; yet he had a fairly good understanding of the debates we have just touched upon, for he managed to incorporate some of its main points into his composition. Sablet's discussion of democracy in his painting can be divided into two separate parts; he first gives a presentation of what he probably thought was a typically Bernese, and hence critical, view of the subject; in a second step, he then maps out a possible reply to the Bernese position.

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[15] *Patriotische Reden*, p. 19-21.

[16] See the detailed study by Hans von Greyerz, *Nation und Geschichte im bernischen Denken*, Bern, 1953, p. 9-73.

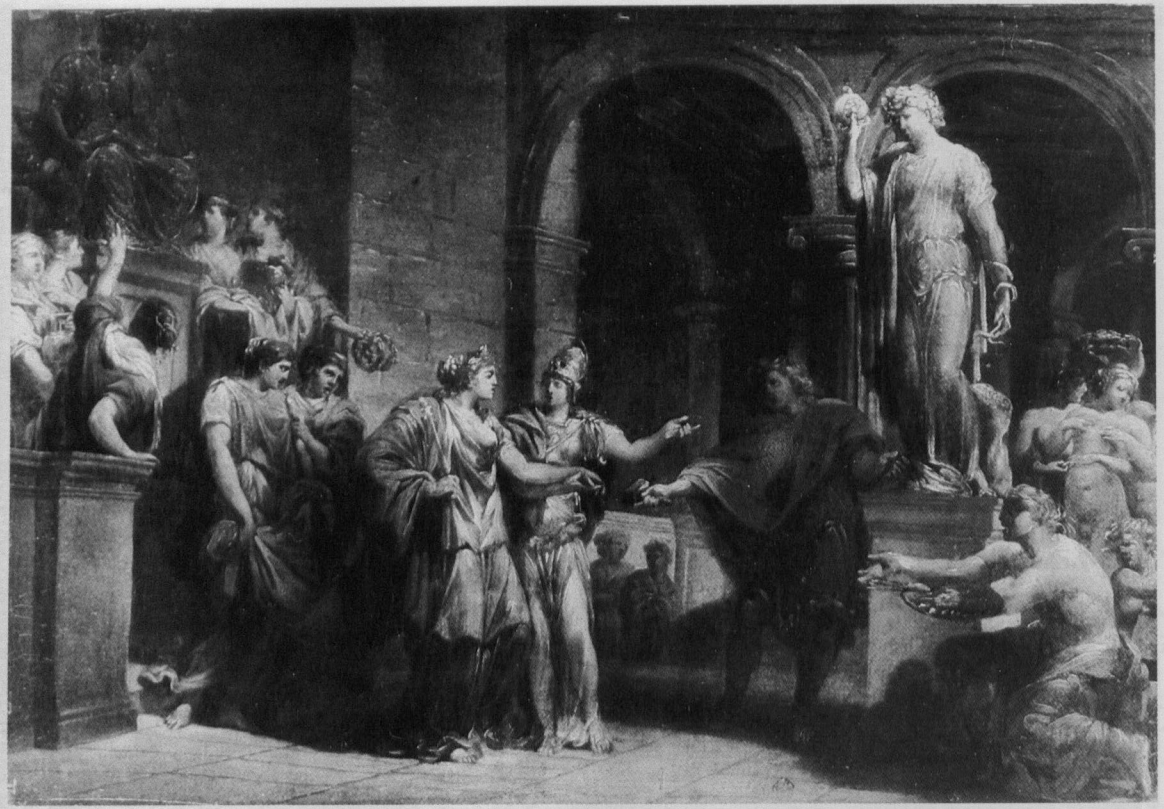
[17] Johannes von Müller, *op.cit.*, p. 398.

If we wish to see how Sablet tried to represent the critical attitude of the Bernese towards democracy we need to focus our attention less on the supreme, and perhaps for this reason also, deliberately impartial looking Berna (Ill. 6), but on the three female figures standing in front of the large central column. What links these three figures to Berna is accentuated in the earlier version of the painting (see Ill. 2) where we can easily detect the same figures as part of the latter's *cortège*. The more immediate function of this *cortège*, as the first version clearly shows, is to accompany Berna, and carry both her train and the objects that characterise the republic. These figures also have a further function, namely that of allegorising the political opinions and attitudes which may be found among the citizens, but which the sovereign Berna, due to her standing, does not wish to exhibit. Depicting emotions and feelings was one of Sablet's specialities: according to Bridel, it was even "la partie qu'on estime le plus dans cet artiste". Sablet, he claimed, was not only able to depict an easily recognisable "passion violente" like fear or joy, but also the far more difficult "expression ambiguë du mélange de deux ou plusieurs passions agissant de concert sur l'âme". His figures' expressions, he believed, even revealed the form of government and climate under which they had grown up; these, Bridel admitted, were clearly "des nuances délicates", and yet he assured his reader that Sablet's paintings were of such simplicity "que le moins intelligent peut le lire"[18]. Whether or not Sablet really was a master of the human physiognomy is for others to judge, but he certainly knew how to depict those *passions violentes* of repulsion and horror which two of the figures in the *cortège* exhibit so graphically at the sight of the statue of democracy (Ill. 7). This vigorous display of raw emotion is no longer visible in the *Allegory's* final far more subtle version, and yet the figure whose eyes are fixed on the sculpture of democracy still shows unmistakable signs of anxiety, worry, and serious distrust (Ill. 8). Sablet also gives the reasons for this critical attitude towards democracy, for if we study the objects held by the three figures once again, we will find that they are nothing other than the classic symbols of military, conquering republics: the garlands of victory, the medals of bravery for those who risked their lives for the defense of the city (Ill.9), as well as the cup to commemorate the defeat of the enemy. All of these symbols were part of a standard iconographical vocabulary of republican Rome.

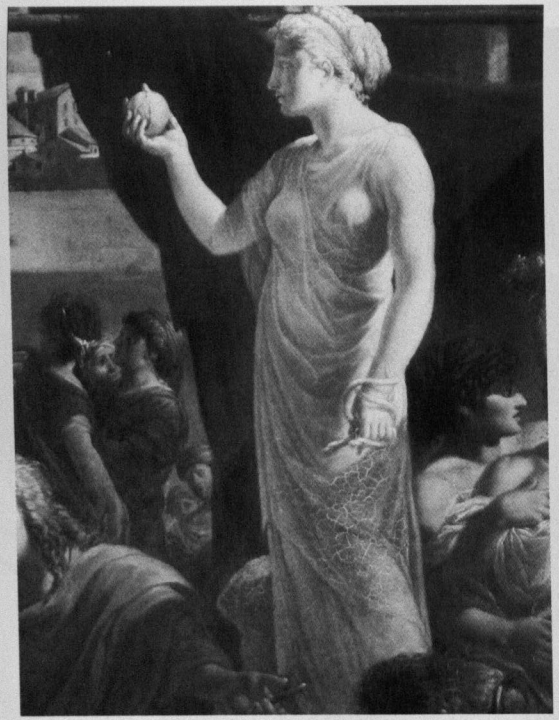
But Sablet provides a further, and perhaps even more pressing, explanation for this critical attitude towards democracy. If we follow the view of the figure holding the garlands to the upper left hand cor-

[18] J.-L.-P. Bridel, "Lettre sur les artistes Suisses maintenant à Rome", *op. cit.*

1. JACQUES SABLET, *Die Allegorie der Republik Bern wird in den Tempel der Künste eingeführt*. 1781, Oil on canvas, 227 x 179 cm. Bern, Kunstmuseum, Inv. 816.



2. JACQUES SABLET, *Die Allegorie der Republik Bern wird in den Tempel der Künste eingeführt*, Sketch, 1779, Oil on Canvas, 33 x 47,5 cm, Lausanne, Musée cantonal des beaux-arts, Inv. 1143.

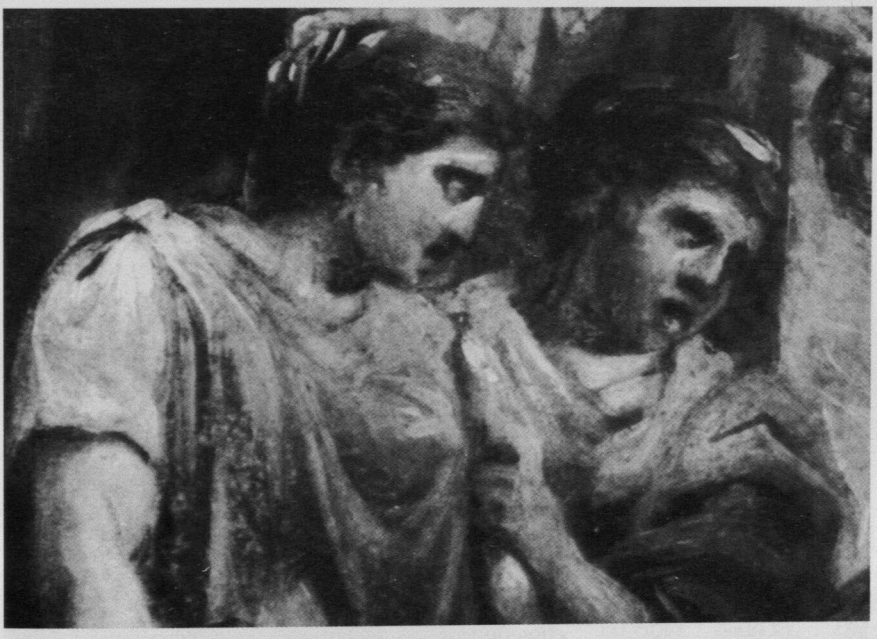


3. JACQUES SABLET, *Die Allegorie der Republik Bern wird in den Tempel der Künste eingeführt*. 1781. Detail.

4. *Democratia*, Woodcut from CESARE DE RIPA, *Iconologia*. Enlarged edition, Venice 1645, *Cf.* Martin Warnke, "Die Demokratie zwischen Vorbildern und Zerrbildern", in Dario Gamboni, G. Germann, *Zeichen der Freiheit. Das Bild der Republik in der Kunst des 16. bis 20. Jahrhunderts*, Verlag Stämpfli, Bern 1991, p. 89.

5. CHARLES LE BRUN, *La Democratie*, around 1681, chalk, 27,5 x 13,3 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des arts graphiques, Inv. 29.779, *Cf.* Dario Gamboni, G. Germann, *Zeichen der Freiheit. Das Bild der Republik in der Kunst des 16. bis 20. Jahrhunderts*, Verlag Stämpfli, Bern 1991, p. 222.

6. JACQUES SABLET, *Die Allegorie der Republik Bern wird in den Tempel der Künste eingeführt*. 1781. Detail.



7. JACQUES SABLET, *Die Allegorie der Republik Bern wird in den Tempel der Künste eingeführt*. 1779. Detail.

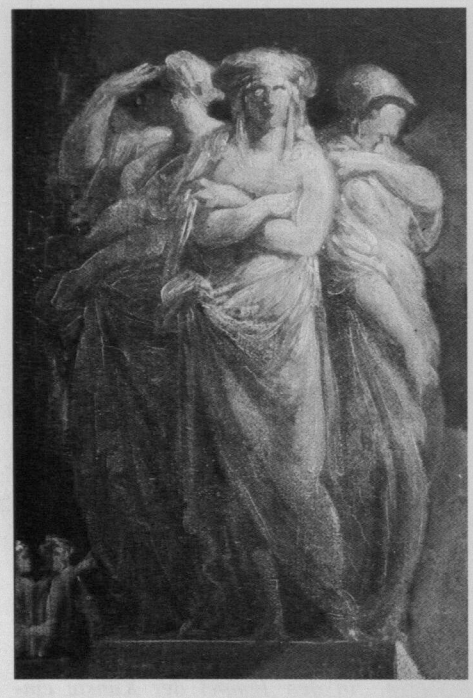
8. JACQUES SABLET, *Die Allegorie der Republik Bern wird in den Tempel der Künste eingeführt*. 1781. Detail.

9. JACQUES SABLET, *Die Allegorie der Republik Bern wird in den Tempel der Künste eingeführt*. 1781. Detail.

10. JACQUES SABLET, *Die Allegorie der Republik Bern wird in den Tempel der Künste eingeführt*. 1779. Detail.

11. JACQUES SABLET, *Die Allegorie der Republik Bern wird in den Tempel der Künste eingeführt*. 1781. Detail.

12. JACQUES SABLET, *Le colin-maillard*, Oil on canvas, 103 x 114 cm, Lausanne, Musée cantonal des beaux-arts, Inv. P. 80-17.



13. JACQUES SABLET, *Die Allegorie der Republik Bern wird in den Tempel der Künste eingeführt*. 1781. Detail.

14. JACQUES SABLET, *Die Allegorie der Republik Bern wird in den Tempel der Künste eingeführt*. 1781. Detail.

ner of the painting, we can detect another sculpted statue seated at the back of the temple. From its high pedestal placed on a middle floor accessible via an open stairway, the statue overlooks the scenery inside the temple. Once again, the first version of the *Allegory* confirms the crucial importance of this second statue for the overall composition of the painting. Together with the *cortège*, much of which is grouped around its pedestal, the seated statue becomes the core of a very serene looking, compact body from which Berna just seems to have emerged and which contrasts quite markedly with the more joyeous group of artists on the right. Some of the figures still try to call Berna's attention to the statue's existence (Ill.10), hoping that their mistress might not distance herself any further. The spatial distance that separates the two statues hence becomes an ideological one with Berna having just about reached the half-way mark.

The sculpted figure on the left presents a seated middle-aged woman in a simple dress with an open book on her lap and a writing pen in her left hand (Ill.11). Unlike the case of democracy, there is no figure in Ripa's *Iconologia* that precisely fits the description of Sablet's seated statue. And yet there can be little doubt that the figure is a representation of either History itself, or of Clio, the muse of history. As we have seen, the debates about the legitimacy of aristocratic rule usually took place within the analytical framework of constitutional history. For this reason alone, a representation of history would have been an obvious choice to make, especially as most contemporaries would have immediately grasped its meaning. Just how much cause for dispute a republic's history can present is moreover reflected in the agitated groups of discussants, most likely citizens, who fill the back half of the temple. The fact that the voluminous book is turned upside-down, the open pages resting on the statues' knee, serves as a further reminder that the facts of history are often hidden, or at best difficult to read. So the military minded *cortège* seems to be receiving its inspiration from history; and it is hence between the statues of history and democracy that the three figures in front of the column seem to be chosing. If this interpretation is correct, then Sablet's rendition of Bernese political debates is indeed astonishingly accurate.

We will now turn to the second part of Sablet's discussion which contains his own positive contribution to the apology of democracy. In his *Allegory* Sablet used a number of stylistic means by which he hoped to give the statue of democracy as attractive and reassuring an appearance as possible. For one, the statue of democracy is, in stark contrast to the one representing history, engulfed in a glistening, almost celestial light which, perhaps interestingly enough, is shown coming from the right. Less dramatic, but of great importance to the politically interested Berna, the statue of democracy is placed *within* the temple,

which (as should be clear by now) is more of an image of the republic at large than a temple of the arts. Furthermore, the statue is in the immediate vicinity of the massive central column on which much of the building's stability seems to depend. If the figure of democracy were to extend her arm a little further and embrace the column, she would resemble *Fortitudo*, usually taken to be one of the main pillars of a great republic. Besides these stylistic elements, Sablet also provides a more philosophical reason for his reevaluation of democracy.

One of the main arguments that the Bernese used against democracy, we will recall, was that democratic systems required its members to possess mental and moral qualities going far beyond what most human beings were capable of offering. Humans, it was claimed, were passionate, selfish, and as a result rarely capable of chosing what was good for themselves, let alone what was good for the community. For democracies to work, Rousseau had famously argued, men would have to be Gods, not the children of Adam, and there were few Bernese thinkers who would not have agreed with this view. According to Albrecht von Haller, men's moral faculties depended entirely on the volition of God and could be activated only under the condition of strict faith. There was little hope, he insisted, that the ignorant and superstitous masses could ever be a reliable judge when it came to choosing between a deceiving flatterer and an honest patriot. Albrecht von Haller's son, Gottlieb Emanuel, rejected democracies for similar reasons:

> Under the present condition of mankind, which has perhaps at all times been equally bad if not worse, I think of democracy as the least well-ordered of all forms of government. If princes were good, then I would a thousand times prefer to live under a monarch than in a republic[19].

Sablet argued against exactly this negative evaluation of human nature. Humans, he tried to show, despite all their various shortcomings possess a natural ability to make good choices, and as a consequence, are able to live in meritocratic societies. His idea of how cognitively limited humans could make good choices is best explained in a painting entitled *Le colin-maillard*, which, given that it was executed sometimes during the early 1790s, would perhaps be more appropriately called the *Tree of liberty* (Ill.12). The painting shows an appropriately blindfolded youth who has to recognise his beloved from a group of similar looking girls. The outcome of this innocent game is indicated by the two statues on the left which represent Venus

[19] G. E. v. Haller to J. v. Müller (12. 12. 1772). Cf. Hans Haeberli, *Gottlieb Emanuel von Haller. Ein Berner Historiker und Staatsmann im Zeitalter der Aufklärung: 1735-1786*, Diss., Bern, 1952, p. 228.

and Paris, the latter depicted with his Phrygian cap and the apple. Just as we know from the legend that Paris gave the apple to Venus, we can be sure that the blindfolded youth will almost instinctively chose the girl he loves. In each case, what allows them to make their particular choice, Sablet suggests, is not so much prudence, or calculation, but simply their sentiment of love – just as it is through the expression of their love, one might add, that the dancers are celebrating the tree of liberty.

We will find that more or less the same elements are already present in the *Allegory*, most noticably perhaps the oversized group of three female statues placed at the outer corner of the gardens behind the temple (Ill. 13). The distinctive helmet of Minerva worn by the figure on the right indicates that the group represents the three godesses Juno, Venus, and Minerva awaiting the judgement of Paris. While Sablet did not include the figure of Paris himself in the composition, he included Paris' most characterstic attribute, the apple, that he offered to Venus as a token of love – and that is now proudly displayed by the figure of democracy. If we read the figures in the painting from this particular angle, it follows that the sculpted statue is no longer just a representation of democracy, but equally a representation of Venus, or love, and this of course is precisely the kind of interpretative move Sablet would have wanted to make if he wished to defend the idea that societies based on love could overcome at least some of the more serious political hazards usually ascribed to democratic regimes. The symbol of the apple lends itself to a reinterpretation of a similar kind, for if we read the apple, or pomegranate, less as an openly political symbol that signifies popular assemblies, but rather from within a traditional Christian iconographical tradition, it becomes a symbol of fertility, unity, and overflowing love and benevolence.

Sablet does not indicate how feelings of love might be translated into principles of political agency, nor does he seem to reflect on the fact that the judgement of Paris set off one of the more bloody chapters of antiquity. Perhaps he felt there was no need for him to be more specific, thinking that his more attentive contemporaries would easily understand his allusions to the themes of love and democracy. The idea that humans possessed a natural ability for friendship and principled behaviour, as Sablet knew very well, was a central theme of the debates that took place within the moderate Protestant circles of the Pays de Vaud. In opposition to a more neo-Augustinian view of human society, the moderate Protestant thinkers defended the idea of man's natural sociability based on his capacity to participate in other humans' happiness and pleasure. Human beings, they argued, not only had an active duty to help one another, due to their ability to share others' pleasurable sentiments, they also had a real incentive to do so and hence to strengthen the underlying moral texture of society.

Several of these moderate Protestant thinkers explicitly tried to stress the implications that the idea of natural friendship might have on republican politics. A good example of this connection between friendship and politics can be found in the article "Démocratie" that Fortuné Bartholomé De Felice included into his famous *Encyclopédie* of Yverdon. Having first diligently listed all the standard arguments against democracy, De Felice then defends the latter on the grounds that

> [l]a démocratie est de tous les Etats celui où les places & les talens paroissent pouvoir le mieux s'assortir. Comme la naissance n'y distingue personne, le mérite seul a droit aux dignités; & lorsque c'est par l'élection qu'on remplit les charges, elles semblent devoir naturellement être données au plus digne dans chaque genre. [...] Et si la société des hommes s'entretient par *l'amitié*, [...] ce sera sans doute la constitution la plus à désirer[20].

It was because men could appreciate merit, De Felice claimed, that the people could also be trusted (at least in principle) to elect the most worthy and morally solid of all candidates.

Arguments of the same kind were also developed by another moderate Protestant thinker, Isaak Iselin, and they can be found in numerous other writings at the time[21]. This Christian reapraisal of democracy was not meant as a wake-up call for the people to get involved in politics, even if the sympathies of thinkers like De Felice or Iselin clearly sided with the notion of a *governo largo*. Instead it was a reminder that it always payed to be helpful to one's neighbours, even if there was no return to be expected. More particularly it was a reminder to those in power that social peace was less likely to be achieved through coercion than through moral instruction – that if a magistrate or a prince had to chose between either wanting to be feared or wanting to be loved, it was in his interest to chose the latter. It was precisely, they argued, because men could act upon principles other than mere self-interest, that a more democratic regime could be both unified and stabilised at the same time, or to use Montesquieu's vocabulary, that the equalising spirit within a republic could be prevented from turning into a destructive spirit of extreme equality.

Much of Iselin's or De Felice's strategy depended on whether it was in fact possible to secure the natural foundations of men's disposition for friendship, and this helps to explain why so many of these moderate Protestant thinkers were interested in the idea of establishing a

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[20] "Démocratie", *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Universel Raisonné des Connoissances Humaines*, Tome XIII, Yverdon, 1772, p. 371; my italics.

[21] For Iselin, see eg. his chapter "Die Bürger oder die Demokratie" that he added to the second edition of his *Philosophische und Patriotische Träume eines Menschenfreundes*, Zurich, 1758.

proper Christian anthropology[22]. The importance of having a Christian science of man for a critique of oligarchical rule might also help to explain the meaning of the curious group of semi-naked figures at the far right of Sablet's *Allegory*(Ill. 14). Earlier on, I suggested that the girl served the sculptor as a model for his statue of democracy, essentially because of the resemblance between their hair-style, facial features, and dress. There is an obvious reason why Sablet would have wanted to include the model in the painting and to place her directly next to the finished statue, for it shows better than anything else, that the artist's work was directly inspired by nature; in short, that it was real, not just the product of his imagination. The presence of the two young admirers, and the wreath of flowers (the laurels of true victory, it seems) reinforce the suggestion that the girl in their midst signifies nature. Their mutual embrace on the other hand shows that the girl also stands for harmony and love. Both the girl's posture and expression, finally, indicate that she represents no profane or blinding love leading to discord and party politics but a modest love coming only with chastity and innocence.

This leaves the question of what role Sablet thought the artist should occupy in society. Through the deliberately ambiguous gesture of the two artists in the painting, both at once giving and receiving, Sablet indicates that the relationship between the state and the arts should be one of mutual dependency, where the state is as much dependent on the presence of good artists as are the latter on state subsidies. Sablet's depiction of the artist as a servant of the common good, (illustrated through the sculptor's evocative red toga) was directly modelled on his previous claim about the natural foundations of love. If life in a society of equals not only requires self-restraint, prudence and the ability to reason, but also, as he seemed to indicate, the development of one's moral sense, it followed that an aesthetic education prompted by encouraging the arts was indeed of immediate political interest. In accepting the works of the artists, Sablet tried to show, the figure of Berna chose not only to protect the arts – more importantly, she chose to protect the entire republic.

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[22] See eg. De Felice's articles on "Homme moral", "Morale", "Bienfaisance", "Sociabilité", "Société", etc; for Iselin, see esp. Book I and II of his *Philosophische Muthmassungen über die Geschichte der Menschheit*, Frankfurt a. M. and Leipzig, 1764.