

ANOTHER LIGHT

Jacques-Louis David to Thomas Demand

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DAVID / MANET: THE “ANACREONIC” PAINTINGS

I

It is now more than thirty years since the publication of my book *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, and I am going to proceed in this essay (and the ones that follow) on the assumption that a sizable portion of my readership will be familiar with the basic claim put forward in that book and in subsequent ones on Courbet and Manet – namely, that in the course of the 1750s and 1760s in France there emerged a new, *antitheatrical* conception of the art of painting. The crucial figure in the formulating of that conception was, as the title of the book suggests, Denis Diderot, both in his *Salons* and other writings on painting and in his early texts on the theory of the stage, the *Entretiens sur le Fils naturel* (1757) and *Discours sur la poésie dramatique* (1758). But the conception can also be discerned in the writings of other eighteenth-century critics, and it plays out importantly – this is what really matters – in the work of a number of significant artists from Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin to Carle Van Loo, Joseph Vernet, Joseph-Marie Vien, Jean-Baptiste Greuze, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, and, the decisive figure for the establishment of modern painting in France, Jacques-Louis David. (And beyond David, in the work of artists such as Géricault, Daumier, Courbet, and, dialectically, Manet, and beyond Manet, in the art of Gustave Caillebotte, like Géricault the subject of an essay further on in this book – indeed I have argued in recent books and essays on contemporary art and photography that the issue remains alive to the present day. The essays on films by Douglas Gordon and Thomas Demand also gathered here will make that case in some detail. I shall also show its operation, so to speak behind the scenes, in Roger Fry’s art criticism.) The basic idea – to remind those who already know this but also to inform those who might not – is that starting just after the middle of the eighteenth century the painter began to be called on to depict personages who would appear to the beholder to be totally

engaged or (a key term in what follows) *absorbed* in what they are ostensibly doing, feeling, and thinking; only if that was the case would the beholder find himself or herself stopped and transfixed before the picture, a condition that itself emerged during these years as the *sine qua non* of a successful painting. By the same token, the least hint in the treatment of the personages that one or more of them were less than wholly absorbed – that instead of appearing completely caught up in what they were doing they appeared to be acting or behaving so as to make a particular impression on their audience – and both the personages and the painting as a whole would be judged *théâtral*, theatrical, the very worst of faults according to the new aesthetic. More broadly, what the rise of that aesthetic indicates is that starting shortly after the middle of the eighteenth century in France (and for the time being, only there) the very existence of the beholder – more precisely, what I have called the primordial convention that paintings (to stick with them) are made to be beheld – emerged for the first time as a fundamental problem for the art as such (I mean for its continuation at the very highest level).^{*} Only if the presence of the beholder before the canvas could be neutralized or negated by one means or another, principally by the depiction of figures who appeared oblivious to anything but the object of their absorption, was distinguished achievement feasible.¹ And the alternative to such achievement, work that seemed theatrical, was scarcely worth consideration. (We might say that a new sort of gulf between successful and unsuccessful art opened up around this time.)

In the last pages of *Absorption and Theatricality*, I subject Jacques-Louis David's first major painting, *Belisarius Receiving Alms* (1781; fig. 2), to an extended analysis, in the course of which I try to show that various features of that work – Belisarius's blindness, the placement of the soldier gesturing in surprise, and above all the curious organization of the picture's architecture and overall composition combine to suggest a deliberate effort on the part of the painter to bring about a kind of double displacement of the beholder away from the figure of Belisarius.² By my reference to the picture's organization I refer, first, to its almost exaggeratedly off-center perspective structure, which I read as seeking to position the beholder over toward the painting's left-hand edge, almost directly in front of the figure of the soldier and as far as possible from that of Belisarius. (The unpersuasiveness of the ground plane as it recedes toward the vanishing point – its tendency for the leftmost rows of flagstones to appear vertical rather than horizontal – is a mark of the strain it is under to bring about this unusual

^{*} The French word for "beholder," of course, is *spectateur*, which to my ear is translated only imperfectly by the English "spectator." In standard usage the latter connotes witnessing an event rather than the subtly different – the more narrowly focused – activity of taking in a painting.



2 (left) Jacques-Louis David, *Belisarius Receiving Alms*, 1781. Oil on canvas. 288 × 312 cm. Lille, Palais des Beaux-Arts.

3 (below) Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Socrates*, 1787. Oil on canvas. 129.5 × 196.2 cm. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund, 1931 (31.45).





4 Jacques-Louis David, *The Oath of the Horatii*, 1784. Oil on canvas. 330 × 425 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

state of affairs.³ A comparable structure is at work far more “naturally” in the subsequent *Death of Socrates* [1787; fig. 3], the beholder being imagined in front of and looking down the strongly perspectival tunnel toward the left of the composition, at the end of which grieving visitors slowly climb a flight of stairs leading out of the prison. Indeed the third of those figures turns and gestures in farewell toward someone at the mouth of the tunnel, an action that on the one hand appears to violate the Diderotian injunction to ignore the beholder but on the other underscores the latter’s separateness from the integrated group of disciples around Socrates.) And second, to the establishing in the *Belisarius* of a second plane of representation, defined by the direction in which the blind hero faces, by the main face of the arch of triumph against the base of which he sits and, most strikingly, by the plane of the masonry block on which is inscribed the traditional motto, “Date Obolum Belisario.” That is, David seems to have explored the possibility of rotating the frontal plane of the representation 90 degrees clockwise along the axis of its right-hand edge, in order to isolate within his painting a



5 Nicolas Poussin, *The Testament of Eudamidas*, 1644–8. Oil on canvas. 110.5 × 138.5 cm. Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst.

second, more essential *tableau*, consisting of Belisarius and his young guide, placed at right angles to the first and therefore not directly exposed to the actual beholder's gaze. Both strategies, the implied positioning of the beholder away from Belisarius and the implied rotation of the second *tableau* away from the beholder, imagine the latter to be a source of cognitive and ontological disturbance, one that must be neutralized, almost literally put out of view, if the painting is to succeed.⁴

David's next ambitious history painting, the electrifying *Oath of the Horatii* (1784; fig. 4), has been the focus of considerable discussion during the past thirty-odd years. Much of that discussion has concerned the issue of pictorial unity; specifically, it has been suggested that David sought in that canvas to challenge prevailing conceptions of unity, if not to call into question the value of pictorial unity as such. So for example Norman Bryson has described what he takes to be David's "assault on unity"⁵ and Thomas Crow has argued that the very qualities of the *Horatii* that previous art historians had viewed as epitomizing its "perfect fusion of form and content" (Hugh

Honour's phrase, and now this is Crow) "exist to sustain and validate the more immediate message of discord and provocation."⁶ In fact, the response of contemporary *salonniers* confirms that the *Horatii* was seen as challenging established ideas about how paintings ought to hold together. But I want to insist on the extent to which its most radical compositional feature, the stark division between the principal group of the elder Horatius and his sons swearing their oath and the secondary group of the swooning, grieving women, is based on a similar separation of male and female groups in Nicolas Poussin's *Testament of Eudamidas* (1644–8; fig. 5) – a work that Diderot particularly admired, not least as a paradigm of absorption, therefore of antitheatricality. Indeed the *Eudamidas*'s division into separate groups was viewed by Diderot as powerfully expressive of the obliviousness of the members of the two groups to everything but their own thoughts and feelings (he remarks more than once on how deeply moving he finds the figure of the grieving woman who sits with her back turned toward the dying man), while the consistency of the emotional tonality *across* that division doubtless contributed to the overall unity of effect that made the *Eudamidas* for him the very paradigm of both a stage and a pictorial *tableau*. (The key text here is his proposed pantomime of the Death of Socrates in the *Discours sur la poésie dramatique*, which I am not alone in regarding as a source for David's *Death of Socrates*.⁷ In both the *Discours* and its predecessor treatise, the *Entretiens sur le fils naturel*, the *tableau* is theorized as an absorptive device or *dispositif*, operating outside the imagined consciousnesses of the *dramatis personae*, in contrast to the *coup de théâtre*, of which they are all aware.) I suggest that David sought in the *Horatii* to achieve a comparable thematization of absorption and unity of effect, and that his shift especially in the principal group to a far more vibrantly dramatic expressive register – from absorption in taking a dying man's pulse and transcribing his last will and testament to passionate engagement in swearing a mortal oath to fight and, if necessary, die for Rome – made the division between the groups even more salient and contrasting than in the *Eudamidas*.⁸ A larger historical point is that whereas the presence of the beholder simply was not an issue for Poussin – as was noted in the Introduction, the beholder emerged as a problem for painting only in the course of the 1750s and 1760s – I take David's commitment in the *Horatii* to an exacerbated mode of pictorial drama and to a heightened, because more schematic or indeed diagrammatic, mode of compositional unity to have been essentially antitheatrical in intent.

Experience has taught me that my insistence on antitheatricality as a structure of artistic intention or, on the part of the critic, of demand and expectation rather than as a quality or effect inhering or failing to inhere (timelessly, as it were) in certain pictures is difficult to grasp, but it will, I hope, become more intelligible if we turn to a some-



6 Jacques-Louis David, *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*, completed 1799. Oil on canvas. 385 × 522 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

what later moment in David's career. The moment is the second half of the 1790s, at which time David was working on *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* in the Louvre (completed 1799; fig. 6). We know from the testimony of Etienne-Jean Delécluze, who was at that time a student in David's atelier and who later became a leading art critic, that while working on the *Sabines* David himself characterized the composition of the *Horatii* as theatrical in a pejorative sense.⁹ What David seems to have meant by this was that the unprecedented dramatic intensity that made the *Horatii* so electrifying at the Salon of 1785 had come to strike him (more than ten years later) as excessive and exaggerated, which is to say as too deliberately aiming to impress. And in fact the *Sabines* marks a clear and deliberate withdrawal from the values and effects of pictorial drama as these had been brought to a new pitch of expressiveness in David's history paintings of the 1780s. In particular David plainly found it necessary to eschew the compositional strategy basic to the earlier pictures, the evocation of a single, highly specific moment of tension or crisis (a strategy that reaches its zenith and perhaps its breaking

point in the *Brutus*), in favor of a less actively temporal mode of representation that might be said to depict a moment of a sort but one that has been dilated, expanded, almost to the point of no longer serving to advance the action and within which the actors themselves have been made to relax, to suspend their efforts, in a general détente. The de-dramatization of action is most apparent in the sleek-limbed figure of Romulus poised to throw his spear, but it is also at work in the crowding of the pictorial field with innumerable personages at different distances from the viewer, as well as in the atmospheric perspective that gives the painting as a whole an almost silvery tone, and it is all but made explicit in a small *livret* issued to accompany the public exhibition of the *Sabines* in 1799. There David provided a speech of more than 170 words for Hersilia, Romulus's wife, whom the painting depicts intervening between her husband and Tatius, the chief of the Sabines, to prevent further bloodshed. The effect of painting and text together might be compared to the arresting of action brought about by an aria in an opera.¹⁰

Now it may seem as if, for this very reason, the *Sabines* is finally more theatrical than the *Horatii*, and indeed just over ten years after its exhibition in 1799 the *Sabines* was strongly criticized by Guizot, as later by Stendhal, for its reliance on figures holding static gestures taken from the stage (the "imitation of Talma," the famous actor, was how Stendhal put it in 1824).¹¹ Modern commentators, among them Bryson, have essentially confirmed such a view: in the *Sabines*, Bryson writes, the "explicit surrender of the image to an audience . . . signals a regression to such outward-turning theatrical pictures as [David's earlier] *The Death of Seneca*."¹² But David's criticism of the *Horatii* reported by Delécluze suggests that the dramaturgical and stylistic innovations of the *Sabines* were largely antitheatrical in intent, as difficult as that may be to reconcile with the painting's apparent emphasis on self-display. Put slightly differently, it is as though for David in the second half of the 1790s the depiction of what would shortly come to be viewed as figures not so much acting as *posing* offered the only seemingly viable alternative to the inherent excessiveness of the dramatic. (In other words, there was no "explicit surrender" of the sort Bryson ahistorically imagines.¹³)

David's withdrawal from dramatic values and effects, and in a sense from action and expression as such, is carried still further in his next and last ambitious history painting, the *Leonidas at Thermopylae* (begun ca. 1800 but not finished until 1814; fig. 7), in which the principal action, that of Leonidas seated sword in hand at the center of the composition, is explicitly atemporal and antidramatic – a purely inward act of meditation, consecration, prayer – while the numerous figures of Spartans readying themselves for the unequal combat to come are, I want to say, simply not meant to be persuasive as dramatic actors. Nor, however, does the notion of posing exactly fit the



7 Jacques-Louis David, *Leonidas at Thermopylae*, completed 1814. Oil on canvas. 395 × 531 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

case; rather, they are necessary to the subject even as their presence in the painting might fairly be described as nominal or notional, as if they belong to a subtly different pictorial regime, one that seeks to escape the harsh terms of the Diderotian either/or, dramatic or theatrical, by virtue of a certain “unreality.”¹⁴ Again, Delécluze’s witness is invaluable. He quotes David as saying:

I want to paint a general and his soldiers preparing for combat like true Spartans, knowing that they will not survive; some absolutely calm, others braiding flowers to attend “the banquet that they will hold in Hades” . . . I want to try to put aside those movements, those theatrical expressions, which the moderns call “painting of expression” . . . But it will be hard to establish such ideas in our time. Everyone loves *coups de théâtre*, and when one doesn’t paint the violent passions, when one doesn’t push expression in painting to the point of *grimace*, one risks being neither understood nor admired.¹⁵

David's repudiation, in terms derived from Diderot, of the taste for pictorial drama that his own painting of the 1780s had done much to promote could not be more emphatic.

All this suggests that in the course of thirty years the project of seeking to defeat the theatrical had changed its nature profoundly. The *Horatii*, the *Socrates*, and the *Brutus*, I have claimed, were quickly and widely accepted as exemplary works of major ambition largely on the strength of being seen as representing with unequalled persuasiveness personages wholly absorbed in a moment of tension or crisis in the unfolding of a heroic, tragic action. Within less than a decade, however, David moved in the *Sabines* to a far less urgently dramatic *mise-en-scène*, one to which the notion of absorption can scarcely be applied. (No wonder it soon came to seem an epitome of theatricality via the pose.) And by the time he came to conceive and paint the *Leonidas* he seems to have found himself compelled, throughout most of that teeming composition, to forego all but the most notional or superficial representation of action and expression, and to concentrate instead on depicting, in the figure of the Spartan general, an inward state – the term absorption once again seems appropriate – but a state that David himself described in terms so unworldly as to call into question the very possibility of its outward manifestation.¹⁶ We see in these developments a progressive loss of conviction in action and expression as vehicles of absorption and antitheatricality and therefore as resources for ambitious painting as Diderot had theorized it. Put another way, David's history paintings from the *Belisarius* through the *Leonidas* chart the trajectory of an ever deepening pictorial and ontological crisis, certain ramifications of which I now want to discuss in some detail.

2

First, though, it is necessary to say something about another of David's projects of the early 1790s, the never completed *Tennis Court Oath*, and in particular about the large drawing in the Louvre Cabinet des Dessins in which David exploited the action of swearing an oath in order to involve a large number of figures (more than 600 deputies took part in the actual event) in a highly dramatic and, he hoped, strongly unified composition (1791; fig. 8). Philippe Bordes, in his richly informative study of that project, rightly emphasizes the importance of the fact that the central figure of Jean-Sylvain Bailly reading the oath to the assembled deputies directly faces the beholder. He writes:

Bailly's frontality, which transfixes the beholder, is one of those *coups de théâtre* decried by Diderot; the latter maintained that illusion and persuasion could only be attained, by the actor as by the painter, in and by negating the presence of the



8 Jacques-Louis David, *The Tennis Court Oath*, 1791. Pen and brown ink, brown wash with white highlights on paper. 66 × 101.2 cm. Versailles, Musée National du Château (dépôt du Musée du Louvre).

beholder . . . But the beholders, and we are thinking above all of the deputies who would have had the immense canvas constantly before their eyes, could not content themselves with admiring the composition; they are called to take part physically and spiritually in the oath. Is it not precisely the new fact of a painter concretely engaged [in the political situation] which incites David to adopt a simple and direct means of communication contrary to the artistic theory of his time?¹⁷

(With this last phrase Bordes has in mind my reading of Diderot; thus he speaks of David's composition as producing a "theatrical effect" [59].)

Basically I agree with the gist of Bordes's analysis, though rather than seeing the figure of Bailly as breaking with Diderotian conceptions, I would want to argue that the combination of the political circumstances of the early 1790s and the political mission of David's project redefined the very issue of theatricality in such a way that it was now not only possible but imperative to directly address the beholder (the deputies, more broadly the citizen-beholder) as a means of morally if not physically absorbing them in the action of the painting. In other words, as regards David's intentions in the *Oath*

there is neither a “theatrical effect” nor anything that could be called a *coup de théâtre*. (Put more strongly, there was to be no essential difference between actors and audience.) Such an interpretation emblemizes not only the resolutely antiformalist character of my approach – it is not the case that a figure who faces the beholder inevitably counts as theatrical (think of Brutus and Leonidas in this connection) – but also the level, or one level, at which the problematic of beholding I claim was at work throughout this period continually intersected with political reality, and with the political *imaginary*, which in the early 1790s was at least equally important. A similar point might be made about the *Sabines*, in which a *mise-en-scène* geared to dedramatization and expressive détente went hand in hand with a politics of reconciliation, or about the *Leonidas*, in which a hypostatization of purest interiority is perhaps to be understood, at least in part, as seeking refuge from the Napoleonic regime’s normalizing of theatricality in and through its demand for a new kind of propagandistic painting. As Napoleon may in effect have recognized when in 1799 he criticized David for choosing to paint the defeated.¹⁸

3

The works to which I now want to turn (they will be the focus of this essay) are known collectively as David’s “Anacreonic” paintings, on the basis of their general reliance on classical Greek subject matter of a distinctly non-tragic, indeed non-dramatic, sort – scenes of mythology, in most cases keyed to themes of love. (The reference is to the ancient Greek lyric poet Anacreon.) These belong to his later career: most were painted in Brussels, where the painter and his wife moved in January 1816 following the decree that all former deputies who had voted for the death of Louis XVI, as David had done, were to be banished from France. (David could have remained in France had he been willing to swear allegiance to the Bourbon regime but this he refused to do. He died in Brussels in 1825 at the age of 77.) For a long time the “Anacreonic” paintings received relatively little attention from scholars. The prevailing view was that the aesthetic level of his art suffered an irreversible falling off after he left Paris, and indeed the art of the preceding years, during which he was for all intents and purposes court painter to Napoleon, has also widely been perceived as of uneven quality (the *Distribution of the Eagles* [see fig. 20] being especially hard to like). More recently, however, there has taken place a sharp growth of interest in the later work, as expressed, first, in Dorothy Johnson’s monographic study of 1993 and second, in Philippe Bordes’s exhibition catalogue, *Jacques-Louis David: Empire to Exile* (2005) and the collection of essays

mainly drawn from a symposium associated with that exhibition, *David after David: Essays on the Later Work* (2007).¹⁹ Obviously I think that growth of interest is justified – these are important pictures by a major painter and deserve to be taken seriously both in their own right and for what they can tell us about the state of ambitious painting during the years immediately preceding the emergence of Gérault and the young Delacroix. Yet they are also deeply problematic works that continue to present a challenge to our capacity for historical and aesthetic understanding. Not surprisingly, I shall argue that the issues I have been tracing are crucial to making historical sense of what certain of these paintings place before our eyes.

The first of the "Anacreonic" paintings, *Sappho, Phaon, and Cupid* (fig. 9), today in the Hermitage, was painted in 1809, while David was still in Paris, and in some respects it remains the most fascinating of all. We know that it was painted for the Russian Count Youssapoff but there is no reason to think that the conception was not wholly David's, and it is precisely its conception that is of greatest interest to me. What is going on? Let me say up front that I think the answer is obvious, but that for various mutually reinforcing reasons scholars without exception have managed not to see it. Sappho, the famous poet of Lesbos, has been composing or improvising lyric poetry on her lyre. This has been going on for some time, with her male lover, Phaon, standing behind her. In the moment represented in the painting, Phaon has turned Sappho's head toward "this" side of the picture, which of course is where are to be found both painter and beholder, and at just that moment too the kneeling Cupid has removed Sappho's lyre from the grasp of her hands. (Until that moment, presumably, he was supporting it as she played; possibly he is still supporting it, but Phaon's gesture has moved her back from the lyre, so that her fingers seem to pluck only air.) The reason I claim that the basic scene has persisted for some time is that Phaon has been portrayed standing with his right leg crossed over his left while leaning with his right hand on the arm of the chair in which Sappho has been sitting. In other words, his stance has nothing in it of the momentary – on the contrary. Nor indeed does his gaze directly out of the painting, which gives the strong impression of having been directed for some time toward another, opposite gaze "this" side of the picture surface, one for which the entire scene has been arranged. Phaon's spear, too, with its butt end on the ground and its upper portion resting against his upper chest, bespeaks nothing if not stability.²⁰ And what this suggests to me – this is where description almost palpably becomes interpretation – is that Sappho and Phaon have been posing for the painter, Phaon standing and facing the latter, Sappho seated at right angles to the picture plane and accompanying herself on her lyre, or perhaps merely pretending to do so. But then something happened: perhaps Sappho became too caught up, too intensely absorbed, in her playing and singing for the good of



9 Jacques-Louis David, *Sappho, Phaon, and Cupid*, 1809. Oil on canvas. 225.3 × 262 cm. St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, inv. no. GE-5668.

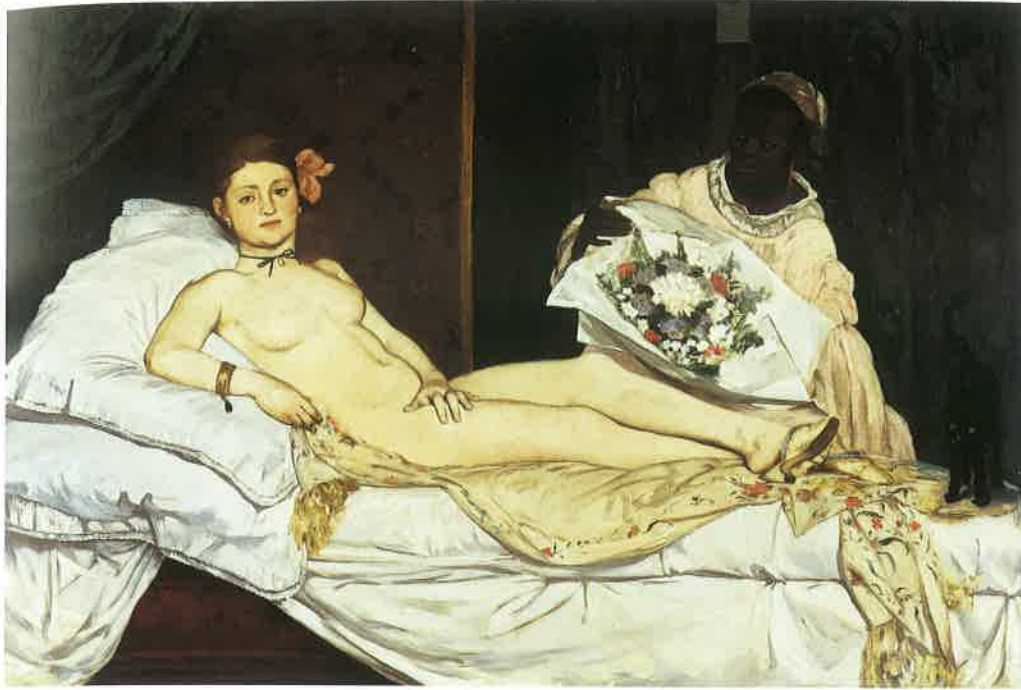
the depiction, or perhaps there simply came a moment when she was requested to turn her gaze toward the painter (presumably *by* the painter, but of course this must remain forever an inference), a request that in the painting as we have it is now being acted on by Phaon who grasps the poet's lower face and turns it physically in the direction in question. (As if he were saying "*Chérie*, please, stop poetizing for a minute and look at David. He's been very patient.") The overall effect comes close to being photographic,

all the more so in that Phaon's features convey the sense of having been based on those of an actual model. All this, I realize, amounts to a somewhat extraordinary claim, which doubtless goes some way toward explaining why the painting has not been viewed in this light by other commentators. But having spent hours within recent years standing before the actual canvas first in Williamstown and then in St. Petersburg, I see no credible alternative to the account I have just offered. (Susan Siëgfried, the author of an essay in *David after David*, prefers to see in it a dream of Sappho's; this involves conflating one of Sappho's best-known poems with a poem by Ovid, and it also requires casting David's Phaon as nothing more than a figment of Sappho's erotic imagination.²¹ I find this unconvincing.)

The question that now arises is what it means that David in 1808–9 conceived and executed a large painting with such an odd scenario. And the answer I want to propose is that the *Sappho, Phaon, and Cupid* marks a significant turning in David's art, the moment when, simply put, David recognized that the entire Diderotian project of somehow negating or neutralizing the beholder by virtue of the persuasive depiction of absorption and more broadly of the lateral coherence of the *tableau* (in effect closing the *tableau* to the beholder) was no longer feasible, or at any rate was no longer within the power of his art to realize; and that if he wanted to continue making works based on classical subject matter, which for him remained one of the key indices of high pictorial ambition, he had no alternative not just to relinquish but to abjure and revoke that project by emphatically turning his figures toward the viewer – in other words, by embracing the theatricality that until then he had been striving to defeat.²² (In 1809, of course, the *Leonidas* had not been completed, but I associate that painting and its last-gasp attempt to evoke absorptive obliviousness, as regards the figure of Leonidas, with the period of its conception earlier in the decade. I should add that when I say that David "recognized" that the Diderotian project was now closed to him, I do not mean to imply that he understood this in so many words. Yet the paintings of his Brussels years leave no doubt but that a kind of recognition guided his actions from first to last.)

I find this intensely interesting simply in its own terms. What makes it even more so is that such a pictorial strategy anticipates by more than half a century the development that I have associated with Manet's breakthrough masterpieces of the first half of the 1860s, notably the *Old Musician* (1862; fig. 10), *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1862–3; fig. 11), and *Olympia* (painted 1863 but not exhibited until the Salon of 1865; fig. 12). More precisely, in *Manet's Modernism* and other writings my claim has been that starting around 1860 in France the Diderotian project that had got under way just over a century before had reached a new, more urgent phase of crisis.²³ Not that no painters of major ambition after that date sought to make absorptive paintings as regards both





12 (above) Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863. Exhibited Salon of 1865. Oil on canvas. 130.5 × 191 cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

10 (facing page, top) Edouard Manet, *The Old Musician*, 1862. Oil on canvas. 187.4 × 248.2 cm. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection.

11 (facing page, bottom) Edouard Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863. Oil on canvas. 207 × 265 cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

individual figures and entire compositions – far from it. (See for example the essay on Caillebotte later in this book.) But, as the key example of Jean-François Millet shows (fig. 13), by the 1850s and 1860s it was no longer possible for paintings such as his to impose themselves as truly absorptive, which is to say as antitheatrical in their overall effect, on more than a portion of the sophisticated viewing audience. At any rate, this seems to me the lesson of Millet's strongly conflictual status among the serious art critics of the day, many of whom continued to admire him on Diderotian grounds but others of whom, including writers like Baudelaire, Duranty, and Gautier (after 1861), found his peasant personages altogether false and mannered – merely pretending to plant a tree or sow potatoes or recite their prayers rather than actually doing these



13 Jean-François Millet, *The Gleaners*, 1857. Oil on canvas. 83.5 × 111 cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

things.²⁴ Put this way, of course, it should be clear that the task of the historian in the face of this divided body of writing is not to take sides – to decide whether Millet's peasants are or are not authentically planting a tree, and so on (remember, those figures are mere depictions, not actual peasants absorbed in what they are doing or fake peasants pretending to be so). The important point, in any case, is that the absorptive strategy as such was now likely to misfire. And the chief antitheatrical project of the previous generation, Courbet's hyperbolic attempt to paint himself all but corporeally into his paintings (a project analysed at length in my book *Courbet's Realism*), being hyperbolic, was never a pictorial option for anyone but Courbet himself, quite apart from the fact that by the 1860s the works in which that project found its fullest expression – the great Realist canvases of the late 1840s and first half of the 1850s – belonged squarely to the past.

Enter Manet – and what we find in the major paintings of the first half of the 1860s is precisely a decisive giving up of the Diderotian project in its various forms and a compensatory strategy that I have associated with two terms drawn from the criticism

of his time, *facingness* and *strikingness*.²⁵ That is, Manet's major pictures of those years may be said to face the beholder with a new vehemence, a new power of address, keyed not just to their *mise-en-scène* but also to their handling of contrasts of light and dark, their somewhat grating – in the eyes of contemporaries – treatment of color, and certain hard to summarize aspects of their execution. (Also to their characteristic effect of abstract instantaneousness, as if the painting as a whole stamped itself out unforgettably in the very moment of beholding.) In all these respects as well as in others such as choice of subject matter, there is a considerable dissimilarity between the *Sappho*, *Phaon*, and *Cupid*, with its bright color, meticulous execution, and jewel-like details, and the *Old Musician* and related Manets of the early 1860s. And yet there is enough in common, by which I mean not simply enough of a formal accord as compositions but, more important, a deep analogy between the respective pictorial dialectics that brought them into

being, to cast the differences between them in a singularly intriguing light – as if what one now would like to know (or would like to know how to begin to investigate) is by virtue of what concatenation of prior and present conditions and commitments did Manet's embrace of facingness (to name only that) have the epochal consequences that turned out to follow, whereas the same basic strategy in post-1800 David had no comparable significance. In fact the "Anacreonic" paintings led nowhere, artistically speaking. But this in turn does not mean that the *Sappho*, *Phaon*, and *Cupid*, and more broadly the "Anacreonic" paintings as a group, the chief hallmark of which is their deliberate address to the viewer, are not worth taking seriously in this connection. (Thinking about early Manet, it occurs to me that the *Surprised Nymph* [1861; fig. 14], with its female figure seated sideways but turning her head toward the viewer, makes a particularly apt comparison with the figure of Sappho.)



14 Edouard Manet, *Surprised Nymph*, 1861. Oil on canvas. 146 × 114 cm. Buenos Aires, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes.

Here it will be useful to consider perhaps the most controversial of the “Anacreonic” paintings, *Love Leaving Psyche* or, as it is usually called, *Cupid and Psyche* (1817; fig. 15). As Dorothy Johnson and others have noted, the first critics of this canvas were scandalized by the depiction of Cupid, who has been represented disengaging himself from the sleeping Psyche while looking directly toward the beholder, a sexually frank smile on his face. Thus Kératry in 1819: “It is appalling, this empire of a base sort over idealism . . . it strangles the heart.”²⁶ Indeed Johnson herself admits being put off by the painting on these grounds. “We are disconcerted,” she writes, “by this terrible conjunction of a realistically depicted, saurian god of love, and the idealized, beautiful young woman by his side who is under the domination of this loathsome monster. The contrast between the dark, sinister, ugly [Cupid], whose cynical, leering, self-satisfied grin is directed at us, with the sensual yet vulnerable Psyche, also causes much disquiet. . . . Equally disturbing is [Cupid’s] action, for he seems about to step out into our space as if he were a disquieting intruder in our world and not safely contained in a remote mythological past (that the figure is life-size contributes to this impression)” (247–8). (A detail Johnson does not mention is that although a fold of drapery conceal’s Cupid’s genitals, an obvious displacement occurs via the “erect” big toe of his conspicuous left foot. This is not an accident.²⁷) In the pages that follow Johnson summarizes various literary sources for the subject, mainly Apuleius and La Fontaine, and concludes by suggesting that David’s aim was precisely to bring about “an ironic reversal of the aubade tradition – the regret of lovers parting at dawn – to express a disturbing psychological truth that underlies the charming surface of the literary versions of the myth; he has represented Psyche as a sexual slave, captive of the leering, satiated [Cupid]” (253). A more recent commentator, Issa Lampe, writing in *David after David*, emphasizes that David had begun the painting before moving to Brussels and that in the final version the artist transformed the bedroom of Cupid and Psyche

in the manner used for Napoleon’s palaces, drawing from memory on objects that he knew from his work as the emperor’s portraitist and interior designer. By dressing the scene in the *style empire*, David sets the narrative action in the historical milieu of Empire France. . . . The painting David completed in 1817 is a bawdy send-up of a traditional love story that also alludes to the Empire’s demise. In it, the artist reflects on the end of an era and registers the historical disruption in the form of an unlikely – and unlovely – god.²⁸



15 Jacques-Louis David, *Cupid and Psyche*, 1817. Oil on canvas. 184.2 × 241.6 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr. Fund (1962.37).

In other words, “His painting tells the story of the male god’s crisis, his fall from the ideal. *Love Leaving Psyche* emerged from its metamorphosis as a memorial to Napoleon’s Empire, with its divine male protagonist brought low” (120).

I am not persuaded by either of these readings, both of which in different ways deflect attention away from what I take to be the most striking feature of the painting (not that either commentator fails to note it), namely, the extraordinary daring with which the figure of Cupid has been depicted about to step from the world of the painting into the space, the world, of the beholder.²⁹ (Johnson sees this clearly but finds it merely disturbing – in the end it simply adds to the rebarbateness of his portrayal. For her part, Lampe writes: “Sliding off the bed, [Cupid] seems to be falling into our

space, his legs spread indecorously" [110], which does not seem quite accurate.) The result, as I understand it, is a further radicalization of the address to both painter and beholder in the *Sappho, Phaon, and Cupid*, one that aims to make all but tangible the physical presence, the corporeal reality, of the figure of Cupid, in stark contrast to the still blissfully sleeping – still utterly absorbed – but also relatively idealized figure of Psyche. In other words, my impulse is to discard the moralistic slant of the previous accounts and to stress instead the extraordinary boldness with which David made use of a classic mythological subject for his own highly unorthodox pictorial purposes – purposes, I suggest, that had essentially to do with rethinking and recasting the encounter between painting and beholder that had been at the center of his art since the early 1780s. In this connection, does it go too far to propose that the sense of extreme discomfort that the *Cupid and Psyche* evidently provoked in both early viewers and more recent commentators invites comparison with the documented responses to Manet's *Olympia* when the latter appeared before the Parisian public in the Salon of 1865? I do not think so, especially when we bear in mind that the figure of Cupid was seen and indeed continues to be seen as disturbingly realistic on the strength of his brownish skin color and distinctly non-ideal body type and facial features.³⁰ (E.-F. Miel in 1817: "This Amor is not at all a god, he is not even a beautiful adolescent. He is the model, an ordinary model, copied with a servile exactitude, and in which the expression of happiness is nothing more than a cynical grimace."³¹ Manet faced this sort of criticism more than once.)

To be clear: nothing could be further from my purpose than to suggest that Manet had the *Cupid and Psyche* in mind when he painted the *Olympia*. (There was a painting by David that perhaps played a role in its conception: *Marat at His Last Breath* [1794; see fig. 28], which was on view at Martinet's, Manet's gallery, in April 1863, a time when he might well have been at work on the *Olympia*.³² But that is another story.) My point is rather that the two canvases fairly cry out to be viewed alongside one another, so to speak. In each the genre of the female nude has been given a highly original interpretation that significantly revises the figure's traditional relation to the beholder (roughly, of being a sensuous object of the latter's gaze): in the *Olympia*, by virtue of the almost completely naked courtesan's brazen deadpan gaze and the aggressively foreshortened hand covering her sex (as many have noted, the effect is of a transfer of agency to the depicted woman), not to mention the implication that the bouquet being brought to her by her maid is the gift of the male viewer who has just entered the room; in the *Cupid and Psyche*, perhaps even more emphatically, by the actions of the naked Cupid, who seems about to call into question the very separation between real and depicted worlds (as less directly does the business with the flowers

in the *Olympia*), and who in effect displaces the nude Psyche as the object of the beholder's attention. (A contrast: Cupid seems about to enter our space, the implication of the *Olympia* is that the male viewer has entered Olympia's. Is this significant, and if so, exactly how?) More broadly, both David in the *Sappho, Phaon, and Cupid* and *Cupid and Psyche* and Manet in his controversial canvases of the first half of the 1860s may be seen as instantiating a phase of overt crisis in the Diderotian tradition. But whereas in Manet's case this turned out to be profoundly productive, setting modern painting on a path that it has followed down to the present (or so I claim), in David's it was without further consequence of any sort.

The reasons behind this must be, to use a psychoanalytic notion, overdetermined. Considering David first: it is obviously pertinent that between 1816 and his death nine years later he lived in Brussels, not Paris, where the further viability of the David school was now an open question; in Brussels, it appears, he could take solace in the fact of his European reputation, even as his portrait practice during those years shows a deep involvement with Flemish pictorial tradition (and even as he berated Gros long-distance for not exerting a leadership he himself would have been taxed to achieve). It is also to the point that classical subjects of the sort he chose to paint were bound to have little interest for the most ambitious of the younger French painters (think of Géricault, who did however stop off in Brussels to pay his respects in 1820); nor were the tightness of execution of the "Anacreonic" paintings and (especially in the *Sappho*) the ornamental brilliance of the color in accord with progressive tendencies in Paris (Géricault, again, is a relevant comparison). In any case, the expressive tonality of those paintings, as exemplified by the bizarre interplay among *Sappho, Phaon, and Cupid*, and by the provocative and unappealing expression of the naked Cupid, scarcely seems designed to establish a new paradigm of high pictorial seriousness. (Exactly how did David expect these works to be received, one cannot help wondering. Granted, the same question might reasonably be asked of the painter of the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*.)

As for Manet, it matters greatly that his art was viewed as realistic at a moment when the advanced painter of the previous generation, Courbet, had established realism (which Courbet spelled with a capital "R") as the most important pictorial tendency of its time – at any rate, the young painters who almost instantly responded to Manet's paintings of the first half of the 1860s, the future Impressionists, understood themselves from the first to be realists in an extended sense of the term. Not that they or anyone else at the time understood Manet's art in the Diderotian – more precisely, counter-Diderotian – register I have outlined here. Rather, Manet's significance for Monet and his contemporaries had largely to do with what Matisse later called his "simplification" of the art of painting, I mean the directness and summary brilliance with which his

brushwork, more broadly his paint handling, was seen as recording his perceptions with extraordinary freshness as opposed to falsifying them in accord with stylistic conventions of one or another sort. Also contributing to the impact of his art was his elimination of continuous light/dark modeling (as in *Olympia*) while nevertheless achieving extremely refined coloristic effects – though in fact by the 1870s the future Impressionists found it necessary to “gray” their colors in the interest of pictorial unity. But Monet’s coloristically bold beachscapes of the late 1860s are inconceivable without the precedent of Manet’s inspired seascapes associated with the project of the *Kearsarge and Alabama* (1864), a scene of naval combat off the port of Cherbourg (which Manet may or may not have witnessed).

In my view, however, Manet’s painterly innovations were themselves largely in the service of the counter-Diderotian attempt to engage the beholder in a new, more challenging, indeed positively aggressive manner. And there is something else: in the wake of Manet’s embrace of facingness, which is to say following his uncompromising abandonment of the absorptive ideal (the foundational move of his artistic career), the young painters were at a loss as to how to resolve the problem of figure painting on a life-scale – what were such figures to be represented as doing, and in what relation to other figures and to the beholder? Absorption, the young painters grasped, was no longer viable as a controlling effect but facingness had Manet’s stamp on it, quite apart from being almost impossible to manage, so what were they to do? Monet’s ambitious figure paintings of the mid- and late 1860s, the immense, unfinished *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* (1865–6; fig. 16), the fashion-plate-like *Women in the Garden* (1866; fig. 17), and the enigmatic *Le Déjeuner* (1868–9; fig. 18), with its veiled woman in black standing to the left and its place presumably set for the artist in the right foreground (a nod to Courbet?), show in different ways that the problem was unresolvable, which I take to have been a significant factor in the young painters’ collective turn to landscape as the arena of their endeavors.³³ (It is never recognized how unusual an event the Impressionist reliance on landscape was in the history of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French painting. Of course landscape painting in France had flourished for decades. But the only truly major French painter of an earlier generation for whom landscape was primary was Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot [I am probably slighting Théodore Rousseau and Charles-François Daubigny], while the leading French painter of the following generation, Georges Seurat, returned to the figure – also to a kind of absorption – in his most important canvases. Indeed before Seurat there was Gustave Caillebotte, a significant painter albeit not a great one, whose art is the subject of “Caillebotte’s Impressionism” further on in this book.) And it was precisely within the limits of landscape as a genre, crucially including limits of picture size, that ambitious painting in



16 (left) Claude Monet, study for *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1865–6. Oil on canvas. 130 × 181 cm. Moscow, Pushkin Museum.

17 (below, left) Claude Monet, *Women in the Garden*, 1866–7. Oil on canvas. 255 × 205 cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

18 (below, right) Claude Monet, *Le Déjeuner*, 1868–9. Oil on canvas. 230 × 150 cm. Frankfurt am Mein, Städel Museum.



France found the means to engage with what turned out to be the decisive issue at that juncture in its evolution: the pursuit of a maximally perspicuous mode of pictorial integration down to the level of the individual brushstroke which nevertheless maintained a place for spatial illusionism, the depiction of depth – Cézanne’s signature achievement in the 1880s. (This is a topic that calls for further development.) In other words, Manet’s embrace of facingness played a role in motivating the Impressionists’ or at least Monet’s commitment to landscape, which was the enabling condition of their most important innovations. Much more might be said about these developments, which were dialectical in the fullest sense, but I hope enough has been said to flesh out somewhat the difference between 1809 or 1817 and the first half of the 1860s.

5

One final mythological, though not exactly “Anacreonic” work, the *Anger of Achilles* (1819; fig. 19), has a bearing on our topic. We are dealing with a new format, one ultimately based on that of various Caravaggios of the early 1600s, in which half-length figures are juxtaposed in a shallow space and in close proximity to the picture surface. The subject is drawn from the background to the *Iliad* and specifically, it seems, from Jean Racine’s tragedy, *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1674), which Johnson tells us was performed often in Paris in the early nineteenth century (258). As Thomas Crow emphasizes though, there is no equivalent scene in the play, and Crow also cites a recently discovered letter from David to a M. Van Guffel of July 1819 in which the artist declares the subject of his painting to be as follows: “The Anger of Achilles: The painter has chosen the moment when Achilles confronts Agamemnon as he is leading his daughter Iphigenia to be sacrificed. This rage of Achilles stops the tears of Clytemnestra and gives her a brief glimmer of hope for her daughter.”³⁴ (Iphigenia is to be sacrificed in order to propitiate the goddess Artemis, who has stilled the winds needed to carry the Greek armada to Troy.) Accordingly, going from right to left, the figures in the painting represent Agamemnon, Iphigenia, Clytemnestra, and Achilles, the last seen from behind with his helmeted head in profile. In no version of the story does Achilles actually kill the king; Johnson persuasively suggests (259) – Bordes agrees (254) – that David has tried to show Agamemnon subjugating Achilles with his gaze and the downward gesture of his right arm.

The *Anger of Achilles* marks a departure in David’s art in respects other than those of format. For unlike what is to be found in any previous work by the painter, the emphasis in the Fort Worth canvas falls squarely on the particular expressivity of the



19 Jacques-Louis David, *Anger of Achilles*, 1819. Oil on canvas. 105.3 × 145 cm. Fort Worth, Kimbell Art Museum.

individual figures (Jean-Claude Lebensztejn refers aptly to “a quartet of diverging affects,” which he compares to moments in contemporary operas³⁵). More precisely, there is a striking contrast between the male and female figures that harks back to a not dissimilar opposition in the *Horatii* between the active but emotionally restrained men and the essentially passive but emotionally reactive women, and then a subtler pair of contrasts between the two men and the two women. Thus Agamemnon’s air of command is set off against Achilles’s impetuous reaching for his weapon; Iphigenia has been depicted sad, as if withdrawn into herself, evidently accepting her fate (a good daughter, in other words); while Clytemnestra, tall, wearing her crown, one hand on her daughter’s shoulder, appears dignified but deeply unhappy even as she turns her gaze – hopefully, David’s text suggests – on the ostensibly angry Achilles (her red eyelids show clearly that she has been weeping). In short one has the sense that for David him-

self the artistic success of his canvas hinged more than anything else on its ability to evoke tragic intensities of feeling, especially in the figures of the two women.³⁶ And yet on looking closely at the painting one comes to recognize that the figures' expressivity is curiously *external*, a matter of what might be called deliberate affective nuance, by which I do not quite mean to claim that it should be seen as false or theatrical. It is rather that one becomes aware that Iphigenia's sadness and Clytemnestra's grief have been applied to them from outside, in a manner of speaking; that instead of striking the viewer as the spontaneous overflow of feelings welling up from within their respective psyches, both women's expressions reveal themselves to be "mere" outward signs that the painter has deliberately deployed, not so much in order to produce a particular emotional effect on the beholder (who however is invited to study those signs at close range) as in an attempt to render the expressive "truth" of a potentially tragic situation (in the interests of a certain affective accuracy, one might say). Agamemnon's expression too seems more willed than spontaneous; while Achilles – it is here that the painting most palpably runs into trouble – in the first place appears almost completely facially *inexpressive* (apart from the reddish flush that spreads across his cheeks, another manifestly external sign of inner feeling), and in the second has been depicted reaching with his right arm not so much across his body as across his face in a manner that lacks all physical and psychological verisimilitude. (As if David found himself driven to this extraordinarily awkward expedient by the desire to show as much as possible of Achilles's arm and hand rather than allow them to be obscured from view behind his body.) Indeed it is quite astonishing to find David, during the 1780s and for that matter the early 1790s – I am thinking of the never-finished *Tennis Court Oath* – the absolute master in European art of the convincing depiction of powerful bodies totally engaged in energetic action,³⁷ allowing such an unnatural, unpersuasive, almost boneless-seeming treatment of (admittedly an emblematic rather than a truly dramatic) action to go forth from his studio.

Let me be clear: the point of these remarks is not at all to degrade the *Anger of Achilles*, which, like the other works discussed, I take to be a painting of considerable significance. More precisely, I view this canvas as laying bare with particular clarity a development that had been visible in David's art for some time, namely, the loss of an unforced sense of lived bodily reality, as regards his figures and their worlds. Again, the considerations bearing directly or indirectly on such a development are far from obvious, but the *Distribution of the Eagles* (1810; fig. 20), with its half-stationary, half-upward-surg-ing mass of French officers hyperbolically – and wholly unconvincingly – swearing allegiance to the Emperor, shows that the problem goes back well into the Napoleonic period, as does, in a less hysterical register, the *Leonidas* with its merely



20 Jacques-Louis David, *Distribution of the Eagles*, 1810. Oil on canvas. 610 × 970 cm. Versailles, Musée National du Château.

“nominal” throng of Spartan soldiers (my point being that we are not being asked to “believe” their actions and emotions; basically they are there to set off Leonidas). Here it is tempting to consider the possible influence on David’s art of the blatant theatricality of the Napoleonic regime, with its call for painting to serve propagandistic purposes (that is, to produce scenes of recent history expressly designed to be seen). But an incipient crisis of absorption is already palpable in the *Sabines* (conceived in 1796, completed in 1799), not that those years – the end of the Directory, the early rise to power of Napoleon – were themselves devoid of an emphasis on extremes of outward display.³⁸ Then, too, one would like to know what to make of the deeply fascinating fact that the early 1790s, the years between the Revolution of 1789 and the fall of Robespierre in 1794, saw the emergence of an extreme ideology – more precisely, an extreme politics – of personal and public antitheatricality on the part of the Jacobins, with whom David was affiliated. The particular thrust of that politics with its emphasis on perfect “transparency” and its impassioned hostility to the very idea that a person might dif-

fer inwardly from his or her outward demeanor (hence the need for continuous surveillance, hence too the paranoid suspicion that theatricality was everywhere) owed far more to Rousseau's totalizing *Lettre à M. D'Alembert sur les spectacles* than to Diderot's *Entretiens sur le Fils naturel*, *Discours sur la poésie dramatique*, and *Salons* (which of course theorized an aesthetic version of the inner/outer split), not that Diderot was not also part of the Revolutionary mix.³⁹ With what sense of continuity or discontinuity with his previous artistic commitments did David negotiate those developments and indeed play a major role in them by devising elaborate public festivals aimed at realizing the "transparent," that is, anti-spectacular, ideal?⁴⁰ (His major pictorial achievement during those years was of course the *Marat at His Last Breath*, already mentioned in connection with the *Olympia*. Note, by the way, how ingeniously the *Marat* recycles the carved block alongside Belisarius in David's first important history painting, the trompe-l'oeil incised face now turned to the beholder – think of Bailly in the *Tennis Court Oath* – in contradistinction to the lateral axis of the composition as a whole.⁴¹) For that matter, with what sense of artistic dislocation, if any, did he come to terms with the liquidation of the Jacobins, an event that sent him to prison and very nearly cost him his life? In any case, the subsequent evolution of French painting, culminating in Manet's canvases of the 1860s, leaves no doubt but that the absorptive aesthetic, with its fiction of obliviousness to the world "this" side of the painting, could not be sustained. And that is to say that the interaction between sheerly pictorial and extra-pictorial factors in David's career-long engagement with issues of theatricality – a distinction that would surely break down under scrutiny – is likely to resist even the most historically sensitive and informed attempts to assess their relative weight.

A further suggestion is that there exists an intimate connection between David's embrace of theatricality in the *Sappho, Phaon, and Cupid* and other "Anacreonic" paintings and the loss of all conviction of psycho-physical inwardness in those same paintings as well as, with extraordinary clarity, in the *Anger of Achilles*. That is, according to the structure of the Diderotian *tableau*, the beholder is understood as in effect walled off or say radically separated from the action taking place on the stage or in the fictive, laterally organized space of the painting. But by virtue of that strategic walling off, the beholder is also given something like free imaginative access to the depicted states of mind and feeling, even in a sense to the implied psycho-physical energetics of the *dramatis personae*. The immense public success of David's history paintings of the 1780s owed much to this "identificatory" dynamic. Starting in the early 1800s, however, the Diderotian strategy is abandoned and the beholder is directly addressed to the extent of feeling himself or herself the principal focus of the composition (in the *Sappho, Phaon, and Cupid*, standing in for the painter) or indeed on the verge of being



21 Jacques-Louis David, *Mars Disarmed by Venus and the Graces*, 1824. Oil on canvas. 308 × 265 cm. Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique.

physically confronted by one of the figures (in the *Cupid and Psyche*). And when *that* happens, what I have just described as free imaginative access to the inner lives of the *dramatis personae* turns out to go by the board (in the *Anger of Achilles* the fiction of “inner lives” is definitively given up in favor of a sheerly outward “expressiveness”). In short, what I have been calling the world of the representation is now voided in favor of the world in which the painting is encountered, even as the latter is defined as one of sheerest externality, a place of mere confrontation, surfaces, theater. The singular achievement of the “Anacreonic” pictures, reaching a peak of absurdity in the large and meticulously executed *Mars Disarmed by Venus and the Graces* (1824; fig. 21), in



22 Jacques-Louis David, *The Fortune Teller*, 1824. Oil on canvas. 62.2 × 74.9 cm. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Gift of David David-Weill.

which the heroic protagonist is being divested of the attributes of manhood – the Manet comparison at least with regard to absurdity would be the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* – is to have pursued this logic with perfect lucidity, if also with insouciance, sexual daring, humor. Once and for all, what was David thinking?*

* One other very late work calls for comment: the seemingly unfinished or at least *ébauche*-like *Fortune Teller* (1824; fig. 22), a half-length depiction of two women, the one on the left pondering the open right palm of the “matron” on the right. What is fascinating, of course, is not only that the picture is so clearly absorptive but also that stylistically it reverts to an earlier moment in David’s career (say the 1790s), two facts together suggesting that the very different dramaturgy of the “Anacreonic” paintings was in part a function of generic considerations, absorption and the earlier handling being still possible in a work of “lesser” ambition. Note too the gesture of the “matron” as she seems to draw a diaphanous violet veil so as partly to shield her face from view, though not from the beholder before the painting, a gesture that recalls the action of the woman bestowing alms in the *Belisarius* of forty-six years before.

6

A few words about David's late, so-called "aporetic" small-scale pencil drawings (figs. 23–5), which exemplify a still more extreme development. Consisting for the most part of indeterminately expressive heads in no intelligible relation to one another, some plainly absorbed and others, often seemingly troubled or haunted, gazing directly out of the sheet, these mysterious works, which David appears to have made in a semi-automatistic manner, relate only to the painter's imagination – also to his memory of previous works of his own – and thus give no purchase for the very thought of worldhood.⁴² (They are without context of any kind.) In that sense they go even further along the trajectory that we have been tracing, the staring figures often giving the impression of seeking a human connection of which they despair.⁴³



23 (above, left) Jacques-Louis David, *A Scene of Mourning (Composition with Five Figures)*, 1819. Black chalk on cream laid paper. 13 × 20.2 cm. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts Endowment Fund.

24 (above, right) Jacques-Louis David, *Three Female Heads*, 1821. Pencil on paper. 13.3 × 19.6 cm. Denver Art Museum, Collection of Dr. Esmond Bradley Martin.

25 (above) Jacques-Louis David, *The Prisoner*, 1819. Black chalk on paper. 13.3 × 19.6 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase of the J. H. Wade Fund.

GÉRICAULT'S ROMANTICISM

I

Historiographically speaking, we know as much about the life and career of Théodore Géricault as we are ever likely to.¹ Maybe some scholar will get lucky and a few additional biographical facts will emerge about his year – more or less – in Italy or his year – slightly over, comprising a short stay and a longer one – in London, both largely blanks in his chronology. And in the course of time new drawings and a few more oil paintings are bound to come to light. But even then, the essential picture will not be altered. Born in Rouen in 1791, to a family of means that included one of the Revolutionary regicides, Géricault seems to have been passionate about two things, painting and horses (also women, especially one woman, his maternal uncle's young wife, Alexandrine-Modeste Caruel, with whom he had a disastrous affair). As a young aspirant, he studied briefly with Carle Vernet and somewhat longer with Pierre-Narcisse Guérin, noted for highly concentrated and stagey scenes based on classical subjects (Phaedra and Hippolytus, Andromache and Pyrrhus, Clytemnestra and Agamemnon), though Géricault is often aptly described as largely self-taught. He made his Salon debut in 1812 with a *tour de force* of astonishingly vigorous brushwork and intensely glowing color featuring a magnificent rearing horse, the *Charging Chasseur* (see fig. 38), which is said to have attracted admiring notice from David himself (“Where does he come from? I don't know this touch,” he is supposed to have said²), and two years later exhibited another single-figure military painting of comparable size, of another warrior, this time on foot, with a splendid horse accompanying him, the *Wounded Cuirassier* – on the whole a less successful but still extremely imposing work (Géricault was then just 23). During these years too he made numerous smaller paintings based on military themes as well as countless studies of horses, his perennial obsession.

In 1816 he journeyed to Rome – stopping at Florence and visiting Naples as well – where he stayed roughly a year, studying Michelangelo, Raphael, and, it also seems,

31 (facing page) Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the “Medusa”* (detail of fig. 49).



32 Théodore Géricault, *Start of the Race of the Barberi Horses*, 1817. Oil on paper mounted on canvas. 44.9 × 59.5 cm. Baltimore, Walters Art Museum.

Roman equestrian sculpture, producing a host of small works on classical themes (among them a Michelangelesque *Leda and the Swan*), and laboring on an ambitious project based on an annual Roman event, the race of the riderless Barberi horses down the Corso, from the Piazza del Popolo to the present Piazza Vittorio Emmanuele. In the end, the project was abandoned (he is said to have ordered a canvas thirty feet wide [nearly ten meters]), but not before he had made scores of drawings and twenty small paintings (five of which have since been lost), mainly depicting the start of the race as muscular grooms struggle to bring the horses to the starting line and to keep them from bolting prematurely once they are there. Two of those paintings in particular, one from early on and the other from near the end of his efforts, in Baltimore (1816; fig. 32) and

the Louvre (1817; see fig. 46), give a vivid idea of the interplay between men and horses that evidently attracted Géricault to the theme.

Back in Paris, Géricault resumed his affair with Alexandrine-Modeste, and soon enough a son was born, precipitating a family scandal the secret of which emerged only in 1976. He also made a gripping small painting based, it seems, on a Roman subject, the *Cattle Market* at the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard (1817; see fig. 47), an oil on paper that held me spellbound virtually every day during my graduate student and junior faculty years. But the major project of the post-Roman period was of course the monumental *Raft of the "Medusa"* (1819; see figs. 31, 49, 51), a work based on recent history, the shipwreck of a French frigate off the coast of Senegal and then the abandonment of a makeshift raft bearing 147 men (and one woman) from the ship, all owing to the incompetence of the captain. The incident was politically charged, the captain, a returned émigré, being a recent appointment under the Bourbon regime; Géricault himself has been associated with the Liberal circle centered in the studio of his close friend, the painter Horace Vernet (son of Carle), which like his own studio was on the rue des Martyrs below the village of Montmartre.³ Probably during the fifteen-month-long campaign on the *Raft* (1818–19), much of which was conducted in a larger studio in the faubourg du Roule, Géricault also painted a series of severed heads and limbs, the "models" for which were taken from a nearby hospital (1818; see figs. 42, 43); these remain among the most intense and original canvases of the first decades of the nineteenth century. Eventually he produced the stupendous picture that today hangs in the Louvre. In the Salon of 1819, however, it was at best a moderate success, in part because Géricault, who was allowed to determine its placement, made the mistake of having it hung too high, greatly diminishing its effect.⁴ Partway through the exhibition it was lowered, which helped considerably. When awards were distributed Géricault received a gold medal, and an offer was made to buy the *Raft* by the state, but he seems to have been disappointed by the offer, despite the fact that he must have known that the subject could only have been regarded as a provocation. In the wake of these events he is said to have been seriously depressed, though as so often we know much less about this than we would like. In any case, there was to be no subsequent submission by him to the Salon.

In April 1820 Géricault traveled to London to exhibit the *Raft* at the Egyptian Hall on Piccadilly; the exhibition ran from June to December 1820 and was a financial triumph. As already mentioned, facts about his London adventure are scarce, though we do know that he was recognized as a significant figure by the British art establishment, that he enjoyed at least one gratifying "conquest," and that he produced a series of magnificent lithographs, taking advantage (he wrote a friend) of the British taste for



33 Théodore Géricault, *Epsom Derby*, 1821. Oil on canvas. 92 × 122.5 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

that relatively new medium.⁵ The outstanding painting to come out of his London stay is the haunting *Epsom Derby* (1821; fig. 33), which makes something new and unforgettable – an image of time-consciousness unlike any other in pictorial art – out of the all-four-legs-outstretched schema of traditional British racing prints. One additional meaningful fact is that in November 1820, on their way back to Paris, Géricault and Horace Vernet stopped in Brussels to pay their respects to David. The older artist was deeply gratified by this, as he made clear in letters to no less than four of his former students.

In December 1821 Géricault returned for good to Paris, and probably some time after that painted a series of “Portraits of the Insane” (1821–2; see figs. 74–6) – supposedly there were ten, of which five survive – about which once again we know

nothing certain (not even whether originally there were indeed ten). Possibly, they were done at the suggestion of the celebrated psychiatrist Jean-Etienne-Dominique Esquirol, a reformer in the treatment of the mentally disturbed and a pioneer in the study of what he called "monomania." But this is speculation. Géricault also made several series of lithographs largely based on images of horses, as well as a number of smaller paintings in oil, including the unforgettable *Lime Kiln* (1822; see fig. 73) about which I shall have more to say. In the spring of 1822 he suffered the first of several horseback accidents that gravely wounded his spine; infection followed, eating away at the spine itself; he spent much of 1823 in bed in great pain, stoically enduring terrible operations, attended by devoted friends who watched in horror as their handsome, muscular, athletic friend wasted away before their eyes. He died on January 26, 1824, in his thirty-third year. His death mask is skeletal.

Géricault himself felt that he had failed to make good on his immense talents. "If I had only made five *tableaux*," his assistant Antoine Montfort reports he said toward the end, "but I've done nothing."⁶ This is much too harsh – Géricault accomplished more than enough to secure his position as one of the great painters, draftsmen, print makers, and indeed sculptors of the nineteenth century – but not completely unreasonable. By *tableaux* he would have meant ambitious, large-size, fully realized paintings, capable of commanding attention at the Salon, and this he rightly understood he had failed to do. (The *Raft*, Montfort adds, no longer satisfied him.) More broadly, Géricault was prodigiously gifted – in fact one could defend the view that no painter or draftsman in all of modern art was more richly endowed.⁷ And yet in the end his achievement, for all its range, originality, overwhelming vitality, and moments of exceptional grandeur – also, I shall suggest, its philosophical profundity – was, one cannot help feeling, nothing like what it might have been under other circumstances. But what circumstances, exactly, does one have in mind? This question among others will concern me in what follows.

2

In the last pages of his informative book, *Géricault in Italy* (1997), the art historian Wheelock Whitney writes, "The whole of Géricault's brief, brilliant career can be viewed as an intense and ultimately fruitless quest for satisfactory subject matter." This is an interesting claim, though the terms in which it is phrased are far too limited. "[Géricault's] dilemma," Whitney goes on to say, "resulted in large measure from the times in which he lived, a period of transition and uncertainty in the history of art. He

found himself torn between the conventional values of his early academic training, with its reverence for the antique and the great masters, and his own distinctly naturalist tendencies, his precocious thirst for the real . . .”⁸ Such an account issues naturally from Whitney’s survey of the Riderless Horses project, which on the one hand was based on an actual event and on the other continually veered toward a kind of classicism, with heroic male nudes (or near-nudes) struggling with magnificent horses in “timeless” settings: thus the culminating canvas in the Louvre (1817; see fig. 46) places men and horses before ancient temple architecture, though the principal figure wears green tights that end mid-calf – a concession to actuality. (But he is barefoot and his upper body is bare, while the figure at the left wears a short tunic that is unabashedly classical in inspiration.) Nor was the Riderless Horses project unique in this regard: at some point in 1818, shortly before or after embarking on the *Raft*, Géricault made a series of ink-and-wash drawings based on a sensational murder that had recently taken place, the so-called Fualdès affair, and in these too the participants and victim are depicted both clothed and naked (in one they wear “transparent” tunics). The further implication of Whitney’s remarks seems to be that Géricault could neither break free of his classical training nor – presumably because the time was not yet ripe – move directly into a forthright realism.

No doubt I am putting more pressure on a few sentences than they were meant to bear. My point, in any case, is that Whitney is on to something important but also that far more than considerations of subject matter or indeed “style” (in the sense of classifying tendencies versus an incipient realism) must be kept in mind if we are to grasp the true nature of Géricault’s difficulties. One way of framing the issue is to glance ahead at the first ambitious paintings by Géricault’s junior by seven years, Eugène Delacroix, who not only knew and admired Géricault but actually posed for one of the figures in the foreground of the *Raft*. (Looking back roughly thirty-five years later Delacroix reports that after seeing the not yet completed *Raft* he was so excited that he ran like a madman all the way home.⁹) In the *Barque of Dante* (fig. 34), for example, exhibited in the Salon of 1822 – Delacroix was then just twenty-four – there is, as has always been recognized, a canny reference to the *Raft* of three years before, both in the depiction of a “marine” theme and in the extremity of the subject, with five figures of the damned threatening to swamp the barque and two others grappling fiercely in the boiling Styx. But in the first place the *Barque* is much smaller and more concentrated than the *Raft*; in the second, the subject is entirely literary and imaginative, without the least reference to actuality. Beyond that, Delacroix has succeeded in shifting the emphasis strongly toward “aesthetic” or say “stylistic” considerations in and through the marriage of vigorous brushwork and extraordinary colorism, reminiscent in some



34 Eugène Delacroix, *The Barque of Dante*, 1822. Oil on canvas. 189 × 241.5 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

respects of the *Charging Chasseur* but even more “Rubensian” in its freedom from strictly descriptive concerns (the famous drops of water, consisting of separate touches of red and green, are an emblem of this). In the same “aesthetic” spirit, the painting declares its independence from the laws of verisimilitude, as in its treatment of the barque itself, an implausible vessel for any purpose much less for navigating the waters of Hell (such a declaration would reach its *ne plus ultra* in the extravagant *Death of Sardanapalus* of 1827), and the hyper-expressive physiognomies and extreme behavior of several of the damned either struggling with each other or assaulting the bark. Finally, most important from my point of view, the two protagonists, Dante and Virgil, although looking off to the viewer’s left, have been depicted from the front (in fact the entire composition faces the beholder without reservations of any kind), which is to say that Delacroix felt under no obligation to seek to comply with the antitheatrical animus of the Diderotian *tableau* – indeed I would say that the deepest originality of the *Barque*,

and more broadly of Delacroix's career-launching canvases of the 1820s, is the way in which, from the very first, he brilliantly contrived not to resolve or even to confront but rather to circumvent the entire Diderotian problematic, as if the latter were simply no longer an issue for ambitious painting.¹⁰ Something of the sort also holds for the seemingly antithetical art of Delacroix's arch-rival, the older Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, in that throughout his production too what I have just called imaginative and "aesthetic" considerations, in his case keyed to the genres of the nude and the portrait, an ornamental, Raphaellesque mastery of line, a highly original taste for large areas of decorative color, an "orientalist" fascination with minutely wrought, glittering metallic objects such as women's jewelry, and an adamant refusal of stylistic consistency, take precedence over dramaturgical concerns, which seem almost incidental in comparison.¹¹

All this is given particular significance by the fact that by 1822 or indeed 1827 (the year of the *Sardanapalus*) the Diderotian problematic had by no means run its course. On the contrary, as mentioned in "David / Manet," the persuasive representation of absorption subsequently emerged as the central aim of Millet's peasant pictures of the 1850s and 60s, even as sophisticated contemporaries, as exemplified by art critics such as Baudelaire, Gautier, and Duranty, were sharply divided as to the success of his efforts.¹² And in *Courbet's Realism* I have presented Courbet's art, starting with his earliest self-portraits of the 1840s and including all his Realist canvases of the late 1840s and 1850s from the *After Dinner at Ornans* to the magnificent *Painter's Studio* of 1855, as consistently antitheatrical in intent, based on a hyperbolic project of seeking to paint himself all but corporeally into the painting being realized at the end of his brush, my thought being that if this could be brought about – though of course it could not – at least one beholder, the painter-beholder, would no longer be present before the painting. (In that quite limited albeit ontologically charged sense the painting would escape being beheld.) And, as is rehearsed in the first essay in this book, I understand Manet's breakthrough paintings of the 1860s as signaling the ultimate "failure" of Courbet's project as well as a momentous crisis for the Diderotian undertaking generally, the supreme fiction or metaphysical illusion that the beholder does not exist having become no longer tenable – hence the turn to facingness, strikingness, and in other respects too the radical acknowledgment that paintings are indeed made to be beheld.

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3

What of Géricault? To begin with, how are we to understand his situation with regard to the Diderotian critique of theatricality? More particularly, in the light of the claims and arguments put forward in "David/Manet," what relation if any exists between the abrupt and total abandonment of the antitheatrical project in David's figure paintings from the *Sappho, Phaon, and Cupid* to the *Mars Disarmed by Venus and the Graces* (exhibited in Paris the year of Géricault's death) and, for example, the *Raft of the "Medusa"*?

What makes the latter question tricky to answer is the fact that the outpouring of large-scale, formally and stylistically inventive Napoleonic painting that dominated French culture during the first decade of the nineteenth century appears on the face of it to have nothing to do with David's resort to "Anacreonic" subject matter and concomitant counter-Diderotian "turning" toward the beholder. But this is only partly true. Take, for example, Antoine-Jean Gros's celebrated canvases, *Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken at Jaffa* (1804; fig. 35) and *Napoleon Visiting the Battlefield of Eylau the Morning after the Battle* (1808; fig. 36), both of which, I want to say, reveal an unqualified acceptance of action and expression as *already* wholly theatrical – an acceptance of the theatrical as not merely pervasive but normative, a universal condition of action and expression rather than an inferior and in principle overcomeable modality of these.¹³ Simply put, in Gros's Napoleonic canvases, as in Napoleonic painting generally, action and expression were intended to be beheld by viewers inside and outside the representation. Questions about the relation of inner meaning to outward manifestation are thus rendered moot (the notion of absorption seems no longer to have any purchase), or at any rate they are continually displaced in ways that make them impossible to resolve (although one might think to say of Napoleon in the *Jaffa* that he appears absorbed not in touching the sick man's plague sore but rather in being seen to do so, the painting's political effectiveness would not have been compromised by such a reading, which in any case seems artificial, importing a distinction where one does not apply). Understood in this way, the rise of Napoleon and the call for propagandistic painting not only mobilized a younger generation of painters – Géricault's immediate predecessors – but also placed in abeyance, effectively suspended, the entire Diderotian project. That David himself was less than comfortable with this development is suggested by his spectacularly unpersuasive *Distribution of the Eagles* (1810; see fig. 20); fortunately for him, the immense *Coronation of Napoleon* (1805–7) gave him a static, group-portrait-like subject he could treat in a straightforward yet richly painterly manner, without having to deal with physical movement or ostensible displays of emotion.



35 Antoine-Jean Gros, *Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken at Jaffa*, 1804. Oil on canvas. 523 × 715 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

36 Antoine-Jean Gros, *Napoleon Visiting the Battlefield of Eylau the Morning after the Battle*, 1808. Oil on canvas. 521 × 784 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.





37 Jacques-Louis David, *Napoleon Crowning Himself*, ca. 1804-7. Pencil on paper. 29.2 × 25.2 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

(Nothing could be less to the point than what any of the 150 men and women in the *Coronation* might be thinking or feeling. All this notwithstanding, however, David's original conception of a Horatii-like Napoleon crowning himself [1804-7; fig. 37] – a notion he was forced to abandon – bears witness to the persistence of a desire for dramatic force that by 1806 was all but completely foreclosed to him.) Indeed it well may be that an apprehension of the pervasive “default-setting” theatricality of Napoleonic culture, at least as it applied to ambitious painting, contributed to his decision to seek an alternative pictorial aesthetic, one that featured a special class of classical subject matter (the “Anacreonic”) and at the same time positively embraced theatricality but on his own, proto-Manet-like terms.

Once more, what of Géricault? My basic claim is this: reaching early maturity during the last years of the Empire, Géricault from the first was drawn to values of action and expression such as had inspired David's history paintings of the 1780s – of painting as drama in the Diderotian sense of the term – under conditions that made the actualization of those values very nearly impossible. Not that he was critical of Gros and other Napoleonic painters. On the contrary, he admired Gros enormously, and of course the stylistic resources that the young Géricault deployed with astonishing panache – the painterliness and colorism that make the *Charging Chasseur* so dazzling to the eye – owe far more to the painter of the *Jaffa* and the *Eylau* than they do to David. But what sets Géricault apart from Gros or any other artist of the Napoleonic generation (also from his teacher Guérin) is the overriding ambition, manifest in every stroke of his brush, to reclaim for painting certain powers that it was on the verge of losing (more strongly, that it had in effect already lost) – above all the power of representing dramatic and expressive action of a Diderotian stamp, action that not only was not primarily intended to be beheld but would on the contrary be so directed toward, so caught up in the accomplishment of its impassioned purpose as to refute the very possibility that the beholder had been taken into account. And what in my view largely determined the course of Géricault's baffled and in the end tragically frustrated and incomplete career was an inherent tension or contradiction between that radically antitheatrical ambition and what had become the extreme difficulty, the near-impossibility, of realizing such an ambition in large-scale, multifigure, narratively coherent *tableaux* that would in effect undo or reverse the retreat from action and expression that I have traced in the *Sabines* and *Leonidas* and beyond them in the "Anacreonic" works. (Considerations of subject matter are relevant but far from being the whole story.) One might even say – I want to say – that precisely the ambition and the near-impossibility together form the core of Géricault's romanticism, as if he intuited in the theatrical an ever-present existential threat not only to his art but also to his humanity, not that from our vantage point the two are separable other than in principle. It is that "existential" aspect of Géricault's artistic vision that sets him largely apart from other French Romantics, and indeed establishes a sort of commonality between his art and that of poets and writers such as Hölderlin, Leopardi, Kleist, Lermontov. (And leaping ahead in time, a special affinity, Stephen Crane.¹⁴)

For example, Géricault from the outset seems to have found it all but impossible to organize entire paintings around manifestly dramatic situations, as though the least hint of dramatic staging, of *mise-en-scène*, was felt by him to be irremediably tainted by

theatricality. In David's *Horatii*, as we have seen, the vibrant figure group of the three brothers swearing their mortal oath becomes fully meaningful only in the context of the larger scene, the total composition, of which they are a part – and beyond that composition, in the context of the still larger narrative or rather web of narratives that constitutes the painting's imaginative frame. (Also, I have suggested, in relation to Poussin's *Eudamidas* and ultimately to Diderot's reflections on the latter in the *Discours* and various writings on painting.) In contrast, we have in the *Charging Chasseur* (fig. 38) a single figure mounted on a fiery horse, and although it is clear that they are to be understood as in the midst of a battle, the fact remains that they have been portrayed in a manner that isolates them from their surroundings (Régis Michel speaks aptly of a structure of "synecdoche"¹⁵), or at least does not make the meaning of their actions dependent either on those surroundings or on a framing *récit* in any way. In this connection Michel emphasizes the importance of the fact that the *chasseur*, a Lieutenant Dieudonné who would not survive the Russian campaign (the painting was presented in the Salon *livret* as a portrait), pivots in the saddle and that his expression with its deflected gaze is one of absorption in thought (as the historian Jules Michelet had earlier remarked).¹⁶ So that the burden of violent action and passionate expression mostly falls on the horse, which is shown simultaneously rearing (if we look at his front legs) and striding diagonally into the picture space (if we focus on his rear legs), a physically impossible feat which we do not quite register as such, perhaps because it combines the equine and the human and so perfectly embodies the conjunction, almost the fusion, of horse and rider that the painting dramatizes. (Is it merely fanciful to compare the action of the horse with that of the nearest of three oath-swearing brothers in the *Horatii*? As we shall see, Géricault seems to have been imaginatively possessed by that figure throughout his career.) Moreover, the horse's position within the painting confers primary importance on his massive haunches, which here as elsewhere in Géricault's oeuvre are felt to be the seat of power, including sexual power, for horse and man alike (more on this further on). All this is to say nothing of the horse's magnificent head with its flaring mane, an emblem of extreme if unspecific emotion that assumes even greater authority than would otherwise be the case by virtue of its presentation in profile. (The privileging of profile views is of course a basic tenet of Davidian Neoclassicism. All in all, it is easy to see why David would have been stopped in his tracks in the Salon of 1812. Let me add that Géricault's inimitable touch is nowhere more evident than in the horse's streaming, one might almost say "erect" tail.)

The relative isolation as well as intensification of apparently self-sufficient dramatic and expressive motifs are characteristic of Géricault's art. To take an extreme example,



38 Théodore Géricault, *Charging Chasseur*, 1812. Oil on canvas. 349 × 266 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.



39 (top) Théodore Géricault, *Executioner Strangling a Prisoner*, ca. 1815. Watercolor and gouache on paper. 11.6 × 23.9 cm. Bayonne, Musée Bonnat.



40 (above) Théodore Géricault, *The Embrace*, ca. 1815. Pencil, ink, and gouache on blue paper. 13.5 × 21.3 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques.

in the Michelangesque wash drawing in Bayonne, *Executioner Strangling a Prisoner* (ca. 1815; fig. 39), the straining, grotesquely muscled figures cannot be identified with any literary or historical subject but instead seem virtual personifications of titanic physical effort countered by heroic, tragic suffering, if not of the principle of opposition, of dramatic conflict, itself. The effect is compounded by stark contrasts of light and



39 (*top*) Théodore Géricault, *Executioner Strangling a Prisoner*, ca. 1815. Watercolor and gouache on paper. 11.6 × 23.9 cm. Bayonne, Musée Bonnat.

40 (*above*) Théodore Géricault, *The Embrace*, ca. 1815. Pencil, ink, and gouache on blue paper. 13.5 × 21.3 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques.

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dark that at once evoke the tormented physicality of the antagonists' bodies and impart a lurid atmosphere to the otherwise minimal scene. In a related drawing in the Louvre, the *Embrace* (ca. 1815; fig. 40), a male and a female figure are depicted in the act of coitus; the kneeling man rocks far back on his haunches as an equally powerful-seeming woman violently embraces him, presumably impaled on his sex.¹⁷ It is an image to make one gasp, but what I want to stress is less its overt sexual content, however one understands that, than the sense it conveys of almost superhuman opposing (or should one say mutually attracting?) forces simultaneously cancelling each other out and maintaining each other in a perpetual state of the highest imaginable tension – no sexual climax at the end of this encounter, in other words – the result being that, as in the *Executioner Strangling a Prisoner*, the very issue of theatricality seems as if outstripped, made inoperative, by the sheer extremity of the proceedings. Moreover, the character of the drawing in these and similar pre-Rome images – their tendency to geometricize



41 Théodore Géricault, *Nymph and Satyr*, 1820. Stone, colored brown. 28 × 36 cm. Rouen, Musée des Beaux-Arts.

and abbreviate the forms they enclose – suggests an equally fierce struggle between contour and matter, as if that too provided an arena in which theatricality could be exceeded and thereby undone (as Géricault remarked, he would have liked to draw with “a steel wire” [“un fil de fer”]¹⁸). Viewed in this light, Géricault’s problem was not only how to keep such insensate dramatic energies within the realm of the pictorial but more precisely how to make paintings of recognizably major ambition on the basis of a predilection for pictorial drama that found its ideal expression in implosively condensed scenes of hyperbolic opposition.*

No wonder Géricault in his career completed just one large-scale multifigure composition and that some of his most mem-

* In this connection something should be said about several surviving sculptures by Géricault, above all the sublime *Nymph and Satyr* (1820; fig. 41) in Rouen, a small *tour de force* of carving in stone. I suppose what most grips me is not simply the utter mastery of what Roger Fry will call “form” but the palpable emotion, a kind of postcoital sadness – even though the sexual act is yet to take place; though it occurs to me that the satyr might just be seen as withdrawing – that radiates from the two figures with tragic force.



42 (above left) Théodore Géricault, *Study of Severed Limbs*, 1818. Oil on canvas. 52 × 64 cm. Montpellier, Musée Fabre.



43 (above right) Théodore Géricault, *Study of Two Severed Heads*, 1818. Oil on canvas. 50 × 61 cm. Stockholm, Nationalmuseum.

orable and unprecedented works are ones in which opposition and contrast structure virtually every aspect of the image. In the Montpellier *Study of Severed Limbs* (1818; fig. 42), for example, one of a number of studies of severed heads and limbs painted in connection with the project of the *Raft*, death-dealing violence of the sort depicted in the *Executioner Strangling a Prisoner* is manifest only through its effects but is far more horrific for that; the dramatic chiaroscuro of the earlier work is made the vehicle of a pathos-charged realism; and the juxtaposition of an arm cut through at the shoulder and two legs severed around the knee involves by inadvertent synecdoche the fatal dénouements of countless history paintings and of the narratives on which they are based (not least David's *Brutus*). This last impression is all the more indelible in that the Montpellier canvas suggests sexual difference – the contrast of male and female – without in any way stating it, though in other works of the same moment, notably the Stockholm *Study of Two Severed Heads* (1818; fig. 43), both male–female opposition and the intimation of an erotic scenario, hence of sexual violence, come piercingly to the fore. (The autobiographical implications of all this scarcely need elaborating.)

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In fact one way of framing the entire Riderless Horses undertaking is as an attempt to find an other than strongly conflictual – in that sense other than Davidian – basis for an ambitious *tableau*.¹⁹ That is, on the one hand the subject seems to involve a continual struggle between the unruly horses and the strapping grooms seeking to control them, and indeed in many of the drawings and paintings (of the fifteen that survive) this is what one finds, the energetic oil on paper in Lille (1817; fig. 44) being a particularly impressive example. On the other, numerous works also convey a sense of at least partial harmony or accord between men and horses, a kind of parallelism of the sort more than

44 Théodore Géricault, *Start of the Race of the Barberi Horses*, 1817. Oil on paper mounted on canvas. 45 × 60 cm. Lille, Palais des Beaux-Arts.





45 Théodore Géricault, *Start of the Race of the Barberi Horses*, 1817. Pen and ink and pencil on paper. 29.5 × 46 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques.

hinted at in the *Charging Chasseur* as well as numerous other pre-Rome works in Géricault's oeuvre, and as the project advanced this became at least equally important. I shall have more to say about Géricault and horses before I am done, but it is as if in Rome he realized that his profound, virtually identificatory feeling for the latter held out the possibility of a new sort of large-scale *tableau*, one that would be unidirectional (from left to right in its final versions), not a clash of opposing vectors, and in which the total absorption in vigorous muscular effort on the part of the grooms would be not so much contrasted with as complemented by the magnificent, inherently untheatrical physicality of the straining animals. An outline drawing in the Louvre (1817; fig. 45) perhaps represents such a conception at its most developed, while *Start of the Race of the Barberi Horses*, also in the Louvre (1817; fig. 46), which draws back from the horizontal expansiveness of the latter, is usually considered the culminating work in the series. I have already mentioned its classical setting, which effectively removes it from its popular source, the annual race; now I want to focus attention on the marvelous pairing of the man in green tights and the (slightly too compressed) brown and white horse he is controlling, with particular emphasis, first, on the unmistakable sense of



46 Théodore Géricault, *Start of the Race of the Barberi Horses*, 1817. Oil on paper mounted on canvas. 45 × 60 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

physical rapport between man and animal (again, the parallelism between their haunches could not be more evident), and second, on the moving juxtaposition of the former's absorbed, downward-looking profile (partly obscured by his right shoulder) and the febrile, straining, almost frightened-seeming head of the partly rearing horse, the effect once more being one not so much of simple contrast as of a single compound subjectivity, with neither man nor horse primary. (Note, by the way, the continued "presence" of the nearest of the three Horatii. I should mention, too, that according to Géricault's friend Dedreux-Dorcy the artist's legs were much like those of the man in tights.²⁰) It may be that it was at this stage that Géricault abandoned the notion of treating the subject on a monumental scale, exactly why we shall never know. Perhaps the

question of whether he was depicting an actual event or a timeless scene, with its attendant uncertainties as to costume and setting, proved unresolvable; perhaps in the end the (in itself brilliant) notion of a unidirectional composition involving separate groupings of life-size men and horses seemed to him not sufficiently dramatic to provide the basis for an effective *tableau*; or perhaps after months of strenuous effort and reflection he had reached the end of his interest in the subject. (Whitney's book illustrates pretty much all the paintings and drawings associated with the project.) One sign of trouble in the Louvre picture is the strange dark architectural element or group of elements that in effect closes the composition at the extreme right, as if otherwise the painting's energies threatened to dissipate there, to stray beyond the right-hand framing edge. Or perhaps the point of those elements is to acknowledge that the work in question is only a vestige of the larger, laterally more extensive composition that various drawings show he had been contemplating. In any case, the large canvas went unused and in late September 1817 he left Rome for Siena, Florence, and, by the first half of November, Paris.

That compositional considerations of the sort just outlined were in fact at stake in the Riderless Horses project is suggested by an oil on paper made shortly after Géricault's return, the gripping and enigmatic *Cattle Market* (1817; fig. 47) in the Fogg Museum, which Whitney acutely notes (86) amounts to an adaptation – also a transformation – of David's *Sabines* (see fig. 6) then on view along with the *Leonidas* in the large Cluny studio that remained open to the public during these years. (We know from Montfort that Géricault visited the studio and came back in a state of enthusiasm.²¹) No doubt in Géricault's mind the *Cattle Market* involved an act of homage to the older master. But in another sense it is also a critique, the “posing” figures of Romulus and Tatius facing off against one another – already viewed by critics as theatrical in the pejorative sense of the term²² – having been replaced by powerfully muscular, indisputably engaged personages all of whose attention is directed toward the struggling, pathos-charged bulls whom they are in the act of subduing, beating, and, not quite yet, killing. The setting, Whitney notes, appears to be outside the walls of Rome (at any rate, the landscape seems plainly Italian), and in fact two of the three butchers, if that is what they are, are essentially naked. Furthermore, again as Whitney remarks, the diverse groups of women and children in the *Sabines* – instruments of peace-making, as the Salon *livret* makes clear – have been replaced by the dense mass of terrified and struggling cattle, a substitution that has the seemingly paradoxical result of giving far greater expressive weight to the responses of two of the bulls – the ones being grasped by the horns – than is the case with respect to any of the figures in the *Sabines*. In fact the only “brutes” on view are the butcher at the left and perhaps the dogs. (A closely related work from the Roman



47 Théodore Géricault, *Cattle Market*, 1817. Oil on paper mounted on canvas. 59.5 × 50 cm. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, 1943.242.

year is the astonishing drawing called *Ancient Sacrifice* [1817; fig. 48], one of the most complex, brutal, and moving images in all Géricault's oeuvre. Also, despite the complexity, one of the most urgently communicative: there is something uncanny and electrifying in the hoisted-up, seemingly helpless bull's gaze directly out of the drawing. The men, in contrast, seem mere killing machines.)

From the point of view of execution, too, the *Cattle Market* is a marvel: the oil pigment has been applied confidently but not exactly thickly, the treatment of the men and animals is at once sculptural and full of textural nuance, the interplay of light and dark is combined with a feeling for strong local color (one of Géricault's perennial strengths), and the landscape and sky – it is near dusk – are masterly in their breadth and illumination. The touch everywhere is beyond praise. At the same time, a point of special interest for the present essay, the composition as such feels, in the end, almost painfully divided, the men and animals forming a compact frieze without meaningful connection to the empty middle ground or the mountain and sky beyond it. True, the dark wall receding at left is a brilliant makeshift, taking the eye back at least some of the

48 Théodore Géricault, *Ancient Sacrifice*, 1817. Ink and gouache on oiled paper. 28.5 × 42.2 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques.



way and providing a vibrant coloristic foil for the man and beast silhouetted against it. But the laterally disposed walls and the building seen end-on in the middle distance appear virtually to enact a structural severing or blocking of the principal action from its larger context, which gives the total scene with its suggestion of imminent sunset an added poignance but as much as concedes that the Davidian solution will be without further usefulness.

6

Appropriately, it is Géricault's one grandly large-scale multifigure painting, the *Raft of the "Medusa"* (1819; fig. 49), that most powerfully exemplifies his antagonism to the theatrical – put more strongly, his adherence, whether he was aware of it or not, to the values, though not the strategies, advocated by Diderot in his writings of the 1750s and 60s.²³ The subject of the *Raft*, as already mentioned, was based on an actual event, the shipwreck of the French frigate *Medusa* off Cap Blanc in West Africa and the atrocious sufferings of almost 150 officers and passengers on a makeshift raft that was supposed to be towed by lifeboats but was shamefully abandoned to its fate. And the specific phase of the subject that Géricault, after much deliberation, chose to represent took place when, after two weeks on the open sea, the last survivors, now just fifteen men, discerned a ship (the British brig *Argus*, which had been part of the initial expedition) on the far horizon and mounted a desperate collective effort to attract its attention. In fact the *Argus* failed to spot the frantically signaling men and sailed out of sight; but later the same day, having changed direction, it bore down on the raft and rescued its occupants. (Géricault considered but rejected depicting the actual rescue.) The subject finally selected thus implies an exceedingly drawn-out “moment” – at that distance the minuscule brig would have appeared to be moving with extreme slowness – and yet, unlike the dilated, deliberately suspensive “moment” of the *Sabines*, one that could hardly have been more racking, physically and psychologically. It is worth emphasizing that the strategy of singling out an absorptive “moment” in a definite narrative ties Géricault to the Davidian (and Diderotian) paradigm; significantly, Delacroix would soon break with this, nowhere more perspicuously than in the *Scenes from the Massacre at Scio* (1824; fig. 50), whose internal structure might be likened to a gathering of stanzas in a poem, each devoted to a particular cluster of motifs, with only a thematic connection among them. (Another declaration of his “aesthetic” approach.) The genius of Géricault's choice of “moment,” in other words, is that it justifies, indeed motivates, a sustained collective effort of truly colossal proportions, one however that feels



49 Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the "Medusa,"* 1819. Oil on canvas. 491 × 716 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

entirely plausible – for all the artful construction of the pyramid of bodies culminating in the two men waving bolts of cloth – within the overall logic of the composition.

Moreover, the total absorption (for such it appears to be) of the straining, climbing, waving *naufragés* in their efforts to draw attention to the raft is underscored not only by the desperateness of their situation and the presumed feebleness of their physical condition (as has often been remarked, however, they look far too strong for what they are supposed to have gone through), but also by the fact that they have been depicted largely from the rear (the faces of four of the most active figures are turned away from us), which further emphasizes their ostensible obliviousness to our presence. This in itself was a major compositional innovation, a radical alternative to the lateral mode of organization basic to the Diderotian *tableau* as well as to David's history paintings of the 1780s and, as we have just seen, to Géricault's *Riderless Horses* project and *Cattle Market*. (And to the art of Poussin and other classical seventeenth-century masters.)



50 Eugène Delacroix, *Scenes from the Massacre at Scio*, 1824. Oil on canvas. 419 × 354 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

Not only that: one way of describing the “moment” represented in the *Raft* might be to say that the figures of the victims – all those in the right-hand half of the composition, at any rate – are striving to be beheld by a potential source of vision, the *Argus*, located at the farthest limit of illusionistic space, a source that, if it could be activated, would rescue them at last *from being beheld by us* – as if our presence before the paint-

ing were the ultimate cause of their plight, or, less luridly, as if the primordial convention that paintings are made to be beheld, or perhaps the progressive coming to the fore of that convention, threatened to make theatrical even their sufferings. (I advanced the core of this argument in print for the first time in the opening chapter of my book *Courbet's Realism* in 1990. My impression is that almost no one then found it believable; such an account of Géricault's intentions was simply too far removed from the norms of disciplinary consensus. How things stand now I do not presume to say – probably much the same. For myself, I am more convinced than ever that the composition of the *Raft* amounts to the strongest imaginable proof of the centrality of the issue of beholding to Géricault's art and career.)

In this regard one feature of Géricault's composition deserves particular emphasis – the minuteness of the brig on the horizon (fig. 51), or rather the enormous, distinctly unclassical disparity in scale between the brig and the colossal figures on the raft. On the one hand, a great deal – almost everything – depended on the ability of the painting's viewers to notice the *Argus* and so grasp the meaning of the actions of the straining *naufragés*. On the other, Géricault's desire to render those actions as desperate and as extreme as could be imagined also compelled him to make the brig so minuscule and far-removed as to be very nearly imperceptible at even a moderate distance from the canvas. There can be little doubt that when the *Raft* was first exhibited at the Salon of 1819, many viewers failed to realize that the *Argus* was there: not only is this implicit in certain descriptions of the painting by contemporary critics, the *Argus* is significantly missing from the engraving of the *Raft* that accompanied C. P. Landon's account of the Salon.²⁴ Presumably, the situation was improved when the painting was lowered; as Delacroix remarked in a letter, "[O]ne is on the same footing with it, so to speak. So much so that one believes one already has a foot in the water. It has to be seen close up in order to feel all its merit."²⁵

A related point: the need to view the *Raft* from up close also reflects the conditions of its execution – the physical circumstances of Géricault himself at work on the painting. And this suggests that the dominant orientation of the men on the raft (facing into the picture) as well as the actions of the uppermost personages tirelessly waving scraps of cloth are also finally to be referred back to the orientation and actions of the painter: as if Géricault not only identified imaginatively with the sufferings of the shipwrecked men but also, in and by the act of painting, identified physically with their efforts to make themselves seen by the *Argus* and so bring about their eventual rescue. Such a reading of the *Raft* goes in the direction of what I have argued is the meaning of Courbet's Realism as exemplified in works such as *After Dinner at Ornans*, the *Stonebreakers*, and the *Wheat Sifters*, to mention just three of his major works.²⁶ In those



paintings the dominant orientation of personages (at least of the central personage) is to a greater or lesser degree congruent with that of the painter (or painter-beholder, as I call him); the actions they depict may be read as figuring the act of painting; and the ultimate intention I attribute to the painter-beholder is that of seeking to transport himself quasi-corporeally into the picture on which he is working and by so doing to remove himself as a potentially theatricalizing presence from in front of it. But although in this sense the *Raft* may perhaps be said to contain the germ of Courbet's later "solution" to the problem of theatricality, it resolutely refuses the basic condition of that "solution," namely the restriction of the painter's effective field of action to a single beholder, the painter himself.

Finally, it might be noted that the uppermost figure in the *Raft* bears a certain formal resemblance to the Spartan at the upper left engraving Simonides's lines into the rock wall in the *Leonidas* (see fig. 7), which Montfort tells us Géricault saw and admired while at work on the *Raft*.²⁷ Interestingly, as Eitner shows, it was only very late in the process of determining the final composition that Géricault introduced the uppermost figure, whose "torso stands out against the sky high above the horizon, [as] the cloth unfurling in the wind from his uplifted arm gives the scene a splendid climax."²⁸ And is there not also an affinity of sorts between the three Spartan warriors with their arms around each other raising wreaths toward the carving figure in the *Leonidas* and the *naufragés* reaching upwards as if in support of the men waving their scraps of cloth in the *Raft*? Granted the two paintings could not be more disparate stylistically, expressively, imaginatively, corporeally. But might this not have been precisely Géricault's point, even as the connection with David's last major history painting would have had something positive in it for him as well? (The connection would amount to a much more monumental version of Géricault's adaptation of the composition of the *Sabines* in his *Cattle Market* of 1817.)

All this leaves unmentioned two other obviously important figures, the older bearded man seated to the left of the mast with his head supported by his right arm and hand and the naked and presumably lifeless young man sprawled between his legs (the pair are often misleadingly described as a father and son; fig. 31). In effect the older man faces us, though he does not do so directly – his body is slightly angled to the left (his right) – and his gaze seems inward (this was already true of the *chasseur* pivoting in his saddle); the impression conveyed is that rescue, if that is on offer, has come too late, that the worst has already happened – and indeed the actual events that transpired on the raft (starvation, extreme thirst, combat, murder, cannibalism, bouts of madness) could not have been more dire. Art-historically speaking, the older man's sources are clear: David's *The Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons* (1789; fig. 52) and

51 (facing page) Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the "Medusa"* (detail of fig. 49).



52 Jacques-Louis David, *The Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*, 1789. Oil on canvas. 323 × 422 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

Géricault's teacher Guérin's *The Return of Marcus Sextus* (1799; fig. 53).²⁹ To begin with the *Brutus*: the "father of his country," seated facing outward in the shadowy left foreground of the large canvas that today hangs alongside the *Horatii* in the Louvre, struggles to contain his emotions as the lictors return the headless bodies of his sons to the family home (because they had been found plotting against the Republic, Brutus had obeyed the laws and ordered them killed).³⁰ The basic organization of the canvas is lateral with a vengeance – sightlines leap across the picture space to tremendous effect – but the figure of Brutus is clearly intended to compound the sense of obliviousness to being beheld by virtue of the fact that although he occupies the extreme left foreground and faces outward he is entirely consumed by his own tormented thoughts. (There is also the hint that he has just been jolted from those thoughts by the outcry of the women of the household as they see the lictors arrive.) Guérin's Marcus Sextus, another stricken, outward-facing figure, in this case having just returned to Rome from



53 Pierre-Narcisse Guérin, *The Return of Marcus Sextus*, 1799. Oil on canvas. 217 × 243 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

exile only to find that his wife had died, is in turn plainly based on the figure of Brutus. In other words, while the large-scale organization of the *Raft* goes beyond anything in the *Brutus*, the tragic figure of the older man wrapped up in his thoughts unmistakably acknowledges that precedent.³¹ Also Davidian in its way is the non-communication between the pair of the old man and dead youth and the men straining to be seen; as Michel notes, the two groups turn their backs to one another,³² a formulation that recalls, once again, the basic structure of the *Eudamidas* and its variants in the *Horatii* and the *Socrates*, here inflected away from the lateral axis. (Also in the *Brutus*, with its empty chair turning its back on the anguished protagonist.) Pure Géricault, however, is the beautiful, realistic lifeless epebe with his extended left arm and partly open left hand in magisterial foreshortening, a figure that went on to inspire French painters for generations to come.³³

Earlier I said that Géricault's art from the outset is marked by the ambition to reclaim for painting the capacity to depict dramatic action and expression in a manner consistent with, though also going on from, David's history paintings of the 1780s, but that the evolution of French painting in the 1790s and after, as manifested in the art both of David himself and of the Napoleonic painters (Gros and others), was such as to make the realization of that ambition all but impossible – "all but" being in the nature of an understatement. Now I want to enlarge on this by suggesting that what more than anything else enabled or indeed drove Géricault to thrust himself with such resolve against the limits of his situation was nothing other than an extraordinarily acute sense of his own embodied physicality, about which we can of course know nothing firsthand but which on the evidence especially of the profusion of drawings that have come down to us must have been altogether out of the ordinary, issuing in often rapidly sketched images of immense muscular effort, struggles but also moments of deep accord between men and animals, sexual relations (including sexual combat), and various forms of unbridled violence. (The sheer kinetic quality of many of the drawings bears further witness to his transcendent physical gifts.) In an essay of 1994, Norman Bryson analyses what he called the construction of "masculinity" in Géricault's art, emphasizing, on psychoanalytic grounds, its necessarily divided character, which the pervasive muscularity, to the point virtually of caricature, of many of the artist's male personages at once expresses and masks.³⁴ And in "Le Nom de Géricault" introducing two volumes of essays based on the Louvre colloquium of 1991 (published in 1996), Régis Michel seconds Bryson's point, finding in the "super-virility" of many of Géricault's figures evidence of a "fixation," understood, again in Freudian terms, as a "defense reaction against the anguish of castration," and further claiming that although the artist knew very well that the handful of men left alive on the raft at the end of their ordeal were anything but robust, his unconscious "*could not renounce* that stubborn postulate of his libidinal economy, the cult of virility" – hence the often remarked conflict in the final painting between historical fact and artistic representation (23–4; Michel's emphasis).

Such a line of argument is fine so long as it takes nothing away, as indeed it need not, from the basic fact of Géricault's commitment to a bodily energetics as extreme as any in the history of art. And now I want to make a further suggestion: that one way, a productive way, of recasting Géricault's predicament – of explicating what I have called his romanticism – is to think of him as seeking to find a place for that commitment – for the direct expression of the instinctual but also the ardently imagined and passionately

willed life of the physically highly developed male body – within the parameters and possibilities of the art of painting as he conceived it; which is also to say – thinking of my discussion of the later David – as seeking to represent a *world* in which that commitment and all that went with it might be exercised freely, in a manner (this is the crucial point) that emphatically did not seem merely destined to be beheld. In later David, as we have seen, worldhood as such becomes increasingly problematic, increasingly a matter of what following Diderot I have called theater, and as this comes about embodiment itself loses its “inwardness” and turns into mere appearance, until, in the *Anger of Achilles*, that most “outward” of paintings, all sense of lived bodily reality – in the contemporaneous terminology of the French philosopher Maine de Biran, all hint of any “sensation of effort” – almost palpably goes by the board.³⁵ (The late “aporetic” drawings are in their way still more extreme, but to what extent they bear directly on our topic is an open question.) It is as though from the very first Géricault sought to reverse this state of affairs by force, *to make a world for the body by way of the body*, to the extent that such a project can even be imagined. How difficult it was for Géricault himself to imagine is shown by his predilection for summarily visualized scenes of warfare, in which a generalized destructiveness provides the framework for not quite believable but nevertheless gripping images of superhuman effort and exertion. (Let three works, *Mameluke Unhorsed by a Charge of Grenadiers* [ca. 1818], *Cavalry Battle* [ca. 1818], both drawings on bistre-colored paper with wash and gouache, and *Horse Artillery of the Guard in Action* [ca. 1818], a lithograph with watercolor, stand for many in this connection [figs. 54–6].) Even more extreme are the elaborated drawings of the mutiny on the raft, above all the version at the Fogg Museum at Harvard (1818; fig. 57), another work I came to know intimately – to sit in awe of in the Fogg Museum Drawing Room – during my graduate student years.*

I am aware, of course, that to speak of world and worldhood in this manner, although prepared for in crucial respects by my discussion of late David, has no precedent in accounts of Géricault's life and career. Or for that matter in art-historical writing generally. But several sets of (necessarily brief) observations will perhaps go at least some of the way toward justifying my choice of concepts.

* In neither this essay nor “David / Marat” do I make more than incidental use of the critical and art-historical literature of the nineteenth century by way of showing the extent to which considerations of drama and theatricality (and of course antitheatricality) played a role in the art writing of the period. But here for example are some remarks on Géricault by Ernest Chesneau, a leading French critic of the 1860s and 1870s, from his book *La Peinture française au XIXe siècle: Les chefs d'école* (Paris, 1862): “Apt to experience all the violent and unmeasurable emotions, the artist was equally apt in rendering them. He sought and he succeeded in specifying the violence of his emotion with a skill the secret of which seems lost today. The



54 (above left) Théodore Géricault, *Mameluke Unhorsed by a Charge of Grenadiers*, ca. 1818. Pencil, ink, and gouache on beige paper. 20.6 × 28.2 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques.

55 (above right) Théodore Géricault, *Cavalry Battle*, ca. 1818. Pencil, ink, and gouache on beige paper. 19 × 27 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques.

56 (left) Théodore Géricault, *Artillery of the Guard in Action*, ca. 1818. Black chalk, wash, and gouache on bistre paper. 21 × 28.3 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques.

(1) Géricault's preoccupation with animals, especially horses, has an obvious basis in his often reckless passion for riding.³⁶ But much more than this seems to have been at stake: in the first place, as has already emerged, a vision of powerful and straining horses as in some elemental sense complementing, one might say amplifying, the (male) human form. There are several aspects to this, none more compelling than the accord

figures that animate his paintings are not there so that one can watch their suffering; they have no care for the public, they do not know that the public exists; they are there only because they suffer, and in order to suffer. Very few masters, even among the greatest, have known how to avoid the restraints of [theatrical] *mise-en-scène*" (176; translation mine). (The emphasis on suffering shows that Chesneau is thinking chiefly of the *Raft*.) Several pages later he adds that had Géricault lived longer he would have been the "David of romanticism" (183), and shortly after that he characterizes him as "the painter of human drama" (185). Of course, the same pro-drama, anti-theatricality mind-set that led Chesneau to admire Géricault put him at a disadvantage in front of early Manet (see Fried, *MM*, 283-4, 565 n. 45).



57 Théodore Géricault, *Mutiny on the Raft*, 1818. Black chalk, black crayon, white chalk, brown and blue-green watercolor, and white gouache on brown modern laid paper. 40.5 × 51 cm. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, 1943.824.

already noted between horses' and men's respective haunches, the former lending something of their immense power to the latter, not to mention casually exposing male sexual organs in a way that inevitably colors our perception of the men as well.³⁷ (One has the impression that Géricault thinks of men's haunches as the seat of masculine force, which is true only for certain actions; in drawing after drawing they are *clenched* in a way that does not appear to be strictly accurate but nevertheless conveys an impression of tremendous force, the ink drawing *Man Throwing a Bull* in the Louvre [1817; fig. 58] being a particularly vivid case in point.) Then there is the febrile,



58 Théodore Géricault, *Man Throwing a Bull*, 1817. Ink on paper. 24 × 30 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques.

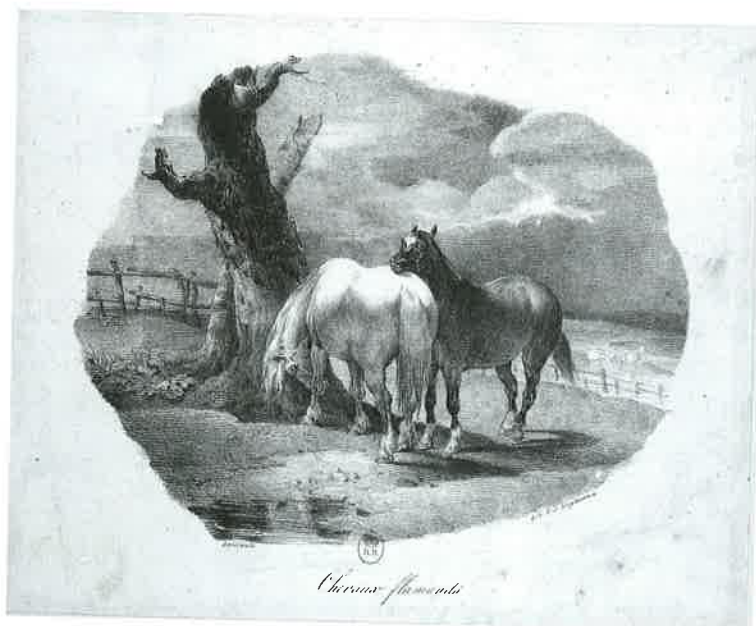
“feminine” expressiveness of the horses’ heads in scenes of violence and excitement, such as the *Charging Chasseur* and many of the *Riderless Horses* drawings and paintings (the most prominent horse in the Baltimore *Start of the Race of the Barberi Horses* [see fig. 32] being a singularly affecting instance of this); especially when placed in close conjunction with the more impassive and contained heads of the companion men (as in the *Chasseur* and the Louvre *Start of the Race of the Barberi Horses* [see fig. 45]), the effect, as already suggested, is of a psychic doubleness or, better, *completeness* unlike anything in Davidian painting, with its consistent emphasis on male/female differentiation. (We touch here on a feature of Géricault’s art fundamentally different from the flawed “masculinity” evoked by Bryson.)³⁸

But there is something else I have in mind, which more directly concerns the issue of worldhood and which can perhaps best be broached by way of Martin Heidegger’s contentious but suggestive three-part distinction: “The stone is worldless; the animal is poor in world; man is world-forming.” The crucial discussion of these propositions is found in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*,³⁹ where Heidegger is careful to specify that “poor in world” involves a notion not of hierarchy but rather of a kind of “deprivation,” in comparison with “man” whose essence gives him a fullness of “access to beings” that animals are said to lack (192–3). Needless to say, this hardly resolves all

the problems such a formulation raises, not that Heidegger thinks it does – his discussion of animals is characteristically circuitous and difficult (one section of chapter four is titled “Being open in captivation as a not-having of world in having that which disinhibits” [268]), much too circuitous and difficult for me to try to summarize it here. Rather, my suggestion – a historical-ontological rather than a metaphysical one – is that an intuition of something like “world-poverty” or “world-deprivation” – I am in effect hijacking Heidegger’s language for my own simpler purposes – can be said to attend Géricault’s images of horses, especially in the many superb lithographs, where it is felt to be in keeping with, even so to speak to compensate for, the unavailability of world that I have suggested marks his art generally. Put slightly differently, it is as though the men – and occasional women and children – in Géricault’s lithographs inhabit the restricted albeit profoundly imagined and, as already remarked, inherently untheatrical world of the horses, not the other way round. (Heidegger would not be comfortable with this, though he does write at one point, “No animal can become deprived in the same way as man” [194]. And he speaks of animals as “absorbed” in their condition [238–40]. But he also states that as far as household animals are concerned, “we enable them to move within our world” [210] – whereas with respect to horses and Géricault I am suggesting rather the reverse.⁴⁰)

So for example in the strongly mooded *Les Boueux* (1822; fig. 59) a trio of yoked and blinkered draft horses on a cobbled urban street wait patiently for a laborer, much less clearly defined than they, to finish shoveling waste into a wooden cart, which they will then pull to its next destination. But even in the tonally quite different *Flemish Farrier* (1821; fig. 60) with its muscular Horatii-like blacksmith attaching a horseshoe to a large, piebald horse’s rear left hoof, the impression conveyed is less of the horse being under the protection of the man than of the latter being given purpose and meaning by his relation to the horse – indeed the copious white smoke presumably rising from an unseen forge seems the very image of the blacksmith’s “subjectivity,” here explicitly presented as a product of his task. (Note too the man in a smock leaning back against a post and looking off toward the right, the small boy reaching up toward the horse’s muzzle, and a further figure, a youth, laboring in the shadows: it is as if the horse unknowingly but effectively provides the basis for a fragile, impermanent, unselfconscious community.)

In still another register, the wonderful *Flemish Horses* (1822; fig. 61) in the French series “Suite de douze petites pièces,” depicts two splendid animals, one white or gray, the other dark, the former possibly male (his thick tail blocks a view of his sex), the latter probably female (no genitals are visible), fitting their rounded, substantial bodies into a rhythmic relation that could serve as an ideal image of friendship or marriage;



59 (above, left) Théodore Géricault, *Les Boueux*, 1822. Lithograph. 19.5 × 24.6 cm. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Département des Estampes et de la Photographie.

60 (above, right) Théodore Géricault, *The Flemish Farrier*, 1821. Lithograph. 22.7 × 31.5 cm. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Département des Estampes et de la Photographie.

61 (left) Théodore Géricault, *Flemish Horses*, 1822. Lithograph. 17.1 × 21.4 cm. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Département des Estampes et de la Photographie.

the harmony between them is as moving as any male/female pairing in Poussin (the obvious comparison). The hour seems to be late – is there a hint of moonlight? – and next to the horses are two trees, the smaller of which is stunted, dead (we are not shown enough of the larger one to know whether it is in leaf or not). Here as elsewhere in Géricault's images of horses the strength of a certain ineffable mood – in this case tender if not entirely reassuring – is as impressive as his mastery of equine physique and physiognomy.



62 Théodore Géricault, *Head of a White Horse*, ca. 1810–12. Oil on canvas. 65 × 54 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

But beyond question the most compelling instance of the general phenomenon I am trying to evoke is the large *Head of a White Horse* in the Louvre (of uncertain date: the consensus places it before the Italian trip but I find that hard to believe; fig. 62⁴¹), a work that goes a long way toward envisioning the replacement of persons by horses – as if in this strangely compelling canvas Géricault explores to what extent a magnificent horse's head, seen at close range and almost exactly from the front, might not just be adaptable to the schema of the human portrait but might exceed and revise, not to say improve, that schema as if from within. Thus *Head of a White Horse* minimizes the horse's "gaze" (the eyes are too much to the side) and elides the mouth and chin while emphasizing the magnificent forehead, the long and exquisitely sculpted "bridge" of the nose, and the flaring, rose-tinged nostrils; the result is a shift away from confrontation, not to say aggression towards sensitivity, attentiveness, receptivity. That there is no way of knowing whether the subject of the portrait is male or female is also to the point. (I do not say that the extraordinary animal in Géricault's painting is imagined as "world-forming" – but almost. In any case, to stand for a length of time in contemplation of the *Head of a White Horse* is positively chastening.)

Much more could be said about specific works if there were space to do so; I shall simply add that the "vignette" format of many of the French lithographs, such as the "Flemish Horses," perfectly expresses the notion of a deprived or reduced – but not fragmentary; rather, intact, even concentrated – world in visual terms.⁴²

(2) The London lithographs raise another possibility – that "world-poverty" or "world-deprivation" in Géricault might be understood, at least up to a point, in social and political terms. Significantly, David once again is the presiding genius of three of the most memorable of the London images. Thus *The Piper* (1821; fig. 63) with its blind musician in profile harks back to the *Belisarius* (and beyond that to Jean-Baptiste Chardin's *Blind Man* of 1753, one of the last of his genre inventions). *Pity the Sorrows of a Poor Old Man* (1821; fig. 64) recycles the "father" in the *Raft*, which is also to say that it returns to the *Brutus*-invention of the oblivious facing figure, in this case a surprisingly robust-seeming beggar whose averted gaze is hidden under the brim of his hat (there is also something of the "son" in the *Raft* in his sprawling legs and half-open right hand). A dusky street scene recedes to the right, and immediately to the old man's left (his right) a woman serving in a bakery is seen through a partly open window on whose sloping ledge several loaves or rolls are practically within the old man's reach. The quiet drama of the scene (is there a suggestion in it, too, of the *Belisarius*?) concerns the relation of the loaves or rolls or indeed of the woman to the old man – are we to imagine that she is on the verge of slipping him a gift of food? Or



63 (above, left) Théodore Géricault, *The Piper*, 1821. Lithograph. 31.5 × 23.3 cm. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Département des Estampes et de la Photographie.

64 (above, right) Théodore Géricault, *Pity the Sorrows of a Poor Old Man*, 1821. Lithograph. 31.7 × 37.6 cm. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Département des Estampes et de la Photographie.

is the point that she is oblivious to his existence? The latter seems more likely, but our attention keeps being drawn to the partly open window and to her hand holding a roll that just might be intended for the old man – to what extent Géricault intended the viewer to be thus in doubt is impossible to say. Note too the affecting dogs in both lithographs, no “poorer in world” than are their owners.

Then there is the stunning, somber lithograph, *A Paraleytic [sic] Woman* (1821; fig. 65), which is rigorously Davidian in its layout, with the back-to-back pair of the older woman and her brutish servant providing still another variant of the *Eudamidas* motif of the *Horatii*, *Socrates*, and *Brutus*. I take the deep structure of the *Paraleytic Woman* to express a certain dread of looking, though here as often dread goes with fascination – at any rate, I take the young woman’s haunted, backward stare across the empty middle of the composition (compare the *Brutus*) as expressing a mixture of fear of contagion-through-looking and something like guilt for what she sees: as if for Géricault in 1820–21 vision as such were essentially two-way, at once a source of vulnerability or fatal chink in the body’s armor and a channel of (potentially malign) power, and as if

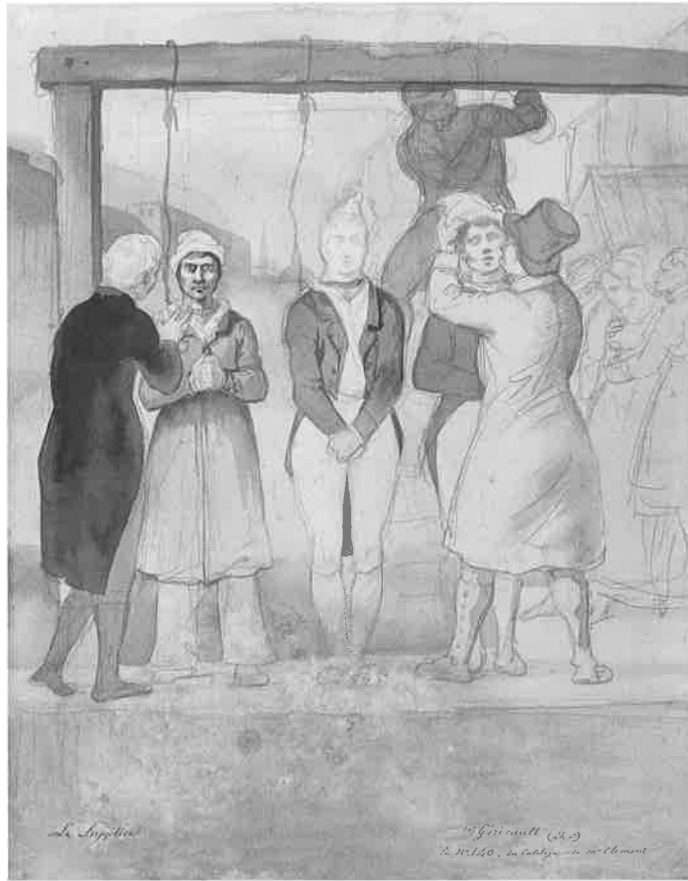


65 (above) and 66 (below) Theodore Géricault, *A Paraleytic* [sic] *Woman*, 1821. Lithograph. 22.2 × 31.5 cm. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Département des Estampes et de la Photographie.

the effects of seeing were therefore incalculable, contradictory, out of control. All this may seem to go pretty far, but consider the implications of the tattered handbill attached to the brickwork at the upper center of the image (fig. 66). It reads in English: “FOR ALL SICKNESS AND THE E . . . E . . .” – which leads me to propose that the disfigured words are “EVIL EYE.” If this is right, it amounts to a further thematization of the *topos* of the evil eye – the disfiguring gaze – just as the literal disfiguring, the tearing almost to unreadability, of the handbill itself, may be seen as epitomizing, even allegorizing, the disfiguring power of one such gaze: the viewer’s own (compare my reading of the *Rafi*).



(In a related work apparently made shortly after Géricault’s arrival in London, the large and harrowing wash drawing *Public Hanging in London* [1820; fig. 67],



67 Théodore Géricault, *Public Hanging in London*, 1820. Watercolor and pencil on paper. 40.8 × 32.2 cm. Rouen, Musée des Beaux-Arts.

probably depicting the execution of the so-called Cato Street conspirators, a realism that has no equal in its age and has often been viewed as simply breaking with current artistic norms turns out to be grounded in issues of absorption and beholding *in extremis*. Thus the prisoner standing with clasped hands at the left, whose face and in particular whose staring eyes are the focal point of the image, appears so terrified at the prospect of execution as to be capable of seeing nothing, a condition literalized in the figure of the hooded man at his left. Should one be looking on or not? Is there a price to be paid for one's inability (mine anyway) to avert one's fascinated gaze? And what about the artist – where exactly is he in all this? Here too the *Brutus* motif may well be reflected in Géricault's treatment of his theme and point of view.)

(3) In perhaps the greatest of the London lithographs, the quietly monumental *Entrance to the Adelphi Wharf* (1821; fig. 68), three draft horses accompanied by two drovers with long, flexible whips walk slowly and directly away from the viewer into the low, deeply shadowed, indeed perfectly black brick tunnel of the Wharf. Light falls diagonally across both the cobbleled ground and the tunnel face; Géricault's mastery of the still relatively new medium is evident in his treatment of a range of textures, including the gleaming coats of the horses, the overgarment of the man nearest us, and

68 Théodore Géricault, *Entrance to the Adelphi Wharf*, 1821. Lithograph. 25.3 × 31 cm. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Département des Estampes et de la Photographie.





69 Théodore Géricault, *Scene of a Deluge*, ca. 1815–18. Oil on canvas. 97 × 130 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

the worn brickwork. In an obvious sense, the structure of the *Adelphi Wharf* amounts to a radicalization of that of the *Raft* – horses and men not only turned away but actually retreating from our gaze. (Into blackness. Or nothingness. Without repeal. Also without drama: whatever world remained to Géricault is receding at a steady pace.)

Some years before, it is unclear exactly when, Géricault painted a devastating *Deluge* (ca. 1815–18; fig. 69), explicitly an image of the end of the world – of his world, which comes to the same thing. (It is hard to say whether the woman handing a small child to a male figure clinging to a rock at the left or the swimming horse and horseman rescuing a figure who may or may not be a woman to the right strikes a more personal note.) And a further suggestion: that the three similarly stylized large landscapes with figures, obviously meant to be part of a single decorative scheme, painted during the summer



70 Théodore Géricault, *Landscape with a Roman Tomb*, 1818. Oil on canvas. 250 × 219 cm. Paris, Musée du Petit Palais.

and early fall of 1818 – *Landscape with a Roman Tomb* (Paris, Petit Palais; fig. 70), *Landscape with Fishermen* (Munich, Neue Pinakothek), and *Landscape with an Aqueduct* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art) – seem less like depictions of a credible world (even making allowance for their ostensible purpose) than something like painted screens beyond which there is to be imagined . . . nothing at all.⁴³

And of course the *Raft* itself, with its implied dismissal of the very possibility of rescue, can be, should be, seen in this light.* Another sort of image of the end of the world is found in the large drawings for an earlier moment in the *Raft* narrative, the *Mutiny* (see fig. 57), which in addition to being a scene of almost unimaginable violence is largely based on Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, as conveyed by Rubens's so-called *Little Last Judgment*, an etching. Then there are two late paintings that seem to bear on the topic: *Le Haquet in Providence*, Rhode Island (date uncertain but probably 1821–3; fig. 72), a scene of glacial stasis, two horses and their two-wheeled dray loaded with barrels in the absence of humans and framed by an architectural ensemble, a rounded arch with buildings closing off the space beyond, that speaks of nothing but blockage and frustration (the only note of “hope,” a small one, is the dog); and one of Géricault's defining canvases, *The Lime Kiln* (1822; fig. 73), almost devoid of human presence and with four unattended yoked and burdened horses feeding in the left foreground. The point of view is curiously elevated, as if to stress the fact of separation, and from within the nearer of the two buildings in the



71 *Laocoön*, Roman copy, perhaps after Agesander, Athenodorus, and Polydorus of Rhodes. First century CE. Marble. H. 208 cm. Vatican State, Museo Pio Clementino, Vatican Museums.

* All the more so in that (again, to my eye) the *Raft* almost fantasmatically evokes the famous Hellenistic statue, a copy of a Greek original, of *Laocoön and His Sons* (fig. 71), brought by Napoleon in 1799 to Paris where Géricault would have had ample opportunity to study it before its return to Italy in 1816. What makes this especially intriguing is that the statue has often been seen as distinguishing between the two sons, the younger one on the beholder's left dead or dying, the older one on the beholder's right in the act of escaping from the serpent's coils. Translated into the terms of the *Raft*, the younger son would be the dead young man, which is perfectly straightforward, while the older one would be the pyramid of *naufragés* straining to be beheld – in other words, no longer looking toward the father's face but away from him toward the far horizon where the *Argus* sails on by – a radical, ultimately *less hopeful*, variation on the sculpture. These brief remarks are indebted to Allen Grossman's magnificent essay, “The Passion of Laocoön,” which defies summary but which I have found invaluable for thinking about the *Raft* (*True-Love: Essays on Poetry and Valuing* [Chicago and London, 2009], 71–125). (The theme of world-destruction figures prominently in that essay.) See also Thomas Crow, “Géricault: The Heroic Single Figure,” in *Géricault* 1996, where it is suggested that “[t]he chain of mingled bodies, uniting the races of Europe and Africa, becomes the equivalent of one single body in a state of transformation” (1: 53); the suggestion is elaborated in Crow, *Emulation*, 291–2.



72 (left) Théodore Géricault, *Le Haquet*, 1821-3. Oil on canvas. 60 × 73 cm. Providence, Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Works of Art Reserve Fund, 43.539.

73 (below) Théodore Géricault, *The Lime Kiln*, 1822. Oil on canvas. 50 × 61 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.



middle distance a cloud of white smoke issues and rises, in this case, Michel specifies, from the burning of gypsum to make plaster ("Mythe de l'oeuvre," 220). The hour seems late, the scene as a whole is deeply shadowed, though gleams of light fall on the horses, on the floor of a wagon, on the ridge of earth in the right foreground. The interior spaces, viewed through a broad doorway and two cut-off windows, are black; the horses and wagon partly within and partly just outside the doorway seem oddly far away. The dense smoke, once again, conveys a sense of subjectivity but a subjectivity that has become unmoored, orphaned, cut loose from the world, or from all but the last remnants of the world. The painter's touch is masterly but subdued; this is tragic painting, tragic *lyric* painting, a canvas to put alongside the second stanza of Hölderlin's "Hälfte des Lebens" . . . And yet the horses have been fed, they are not wholly beyond the realm of care. (Logically the horses can have been fed only by persons such as those loading the wagon in the doorway. But the impression conveyed is of a small society for all intents and purposes on its own.)

(4) Not quite forty years after Géricault's death, five "Portraits of the Insane" were discovered by chance in Baden-Baden; as mentioned earlier we know nothing solid about them, including exactly when they were painted (1821-2 seems a reasonable guess; figs. 74-6).⁴⁴ Tradition holds that the portraits are of *monomanes*, monomaniacs, that is, persons wholly absorbed in one or another delusion or obsession but otherwise normal. (Géricault's sitters - three men, two women - are said to be monomaniacs of theft, the stealing of children, gambling, envy, and delusions of military grandeur.) All five paintings are incontestably among the most compelling portraits ever made, masterpieces at once of hyperacute objective observation and of unimpeded sympathetic identification (but how can this be?). Each facial expression is utterly individual in its suggestion of mental disturbance but without the least hint of exaggeration, much less of caricature. The gazes are oblique, not so much vacant as haunted-seeming (each in its own way), and one has the sense that this or rather the absorption or distraction that the gazes signify allowed the painter to scrutinize each sitter with a closeness and an intensity - also, as I have said, a sympathy - that ordinary interaction between social peers would have made inconceivable. The brushwork is vigorous but impasto has mostly been eschewed in an attempt to record the actual texture and condition of the sitters' skin - again, scarcely a feature of conventional portraiture even at its most distinguished. And as Michel remarks, attention also is paid to the individual subjects' dress (also to their *tenue* or bearing), which he rightly sees as conferring on them a dignity that implicitly argues for their humane treatment ("Mythe de l'oeuvre," 244). To all this I will simply add that one way of characterizing their general condition



74 (above, left) Théodore Géricault, *Monomaniac of Envy*, 1821–2. Oil on canvas. 72 × 58 cm. Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts.

75 (above, right) Théodore Géricault, *Monomaniac of Military Command*, 1821–2. Oil on canvas. 81 × 65 cm. Winterthur, Collection Oskar Reinhart am Römerholz.

as portrayed by Géricault might well be as self-evidently “poor in world,” if not indeed as very nearly worldless – a basis, perhaps, for the rapport between painter and sitter that can be felt in every touch of the brush.⁴⁵

(5) As Géricault’s condition worsened, his world, in the ordinary sense of the term, was constricted to a single room, a bed of pain. Still, he did what he could, and among the results is the Louvre’s superlative drawing with watercolor of his left hand (1824; fig. 77).

8

I am painfully conscious of not having had the space to discuss numerous works – paintings, drawings, lithographs, sculptures – that would further support my argument (and which in any case I would have relished evoking), but I hope that at least the



76 Théodore Géricault, *Monomaniac of Gambling*, 1821–2 Oil on canvas. 77 × 64 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.



77 Théodore Géricault, *Study of Artist's Left Hand*, 1824. Pencil and watercolor or sanguine wash on paper. 22.5 × 29.5 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques.

outlines of what I have been trying to suggest are by now clear. In this final section I want to leave Géricault behind and leap ahead . . . to Honoré de Balzac (b. 1799), specifically, to his early story “Le Colonel Chabert.”⁴⁶ On the following grounds: what we have been tracking in the present essay and its predecessor, “David/Manet,” is the progressive exclusion from ambitious painting in France between the 1790s and the 1820s of the very possibility of dramatic action and expression. In later David this exclusion is as it were embraced in works of surprising originality and strangeness. In Géricault it is fought, resisted, every inch of the way, with the artistic consequences – immense but also tragic – that I have tried to evoke. With Delacroix, Géricault’s younger successor and a “romantic” artist of a different stamp, the Diderotian project is replaced by what might be described as the transposition of dramatic values and effects into an explicitly “aesthetic” or “poetic” register, so that Baudelaire will later say of

Delacroix that he has the merit of being “supremely literary.”⁴⁷ And then all at once in the early 1830s dramatic action and expression, based on themes of violent opposition and involving antagonists depicted in intensely corporeal terms, positively surge to the fore in early Balzac, who understands perfectly well that this is what is happening – see for example the repeated invocation of the notion of drama (*drame*) in “Le Colonel Chabert” or indeed the first pages of *Le Père Goriot*, the decisive early novel. (From the latter: “These boarders [at Madame Vauquer’s] hinted at dramas past or present; not the dramas performed in the glare of the footlights, against painted backcloths, but living, wordless dramas, icy dramas to stir and sear the heart, dramas without end.”⁴⁸) Put slightly differently, it is as if in Balzac the Diderotian ideal is given new life, with two vital differences or indeed advantages: first, literally nothing in the realm of human action or desire or sheer will is inherently too excessive to be dramatically credible (hence the understandable invocation by modern commentators of the notion of melodrama to characterize his narratives⁴⁹); and second, a related point, the problematic of theatricality such as was developed by Diderot in response to the theater and painting of his time has only limited application to prose fiction, the dynamics of reading stories and novels being fundamentally different from that of beholding stage plays and paintings (needless to say, I am simplifying a complex topic, which deserves further treatment). The result is a new representational freedom with regard to the issues I have been tracing, personified, in a certain sense, in the superhuman Vautrin (real name Jacques Collin, also known as the Abbé Carlos Herrera), who among other powers enjoys an almost total mastery of his appearance to others – along with an almost total ocular ability to see through others’ pretenses and disguises.⁵⁰

What of worldhood, which I have been suggesting is something like a necessary condition for the accomplishment of Diderotian aims? The answer seems to be this: it is only in the relatively new medium of “realistic” prose fiction that it becomes possible to portray the economic and political reality of the time – more precisely, of the immediately preceding period, the Bourbon Restoration (Balzac’s favored field of operation) – and by so doing to depict, almost stone by stone to construct, a social world in which action and expression of the most passionate and determined sort turn out to have pride of place. Not that the Restoration as a period was other than theatrical in the broadest sense of the notion. Recent historians have shown that even the widespread resistance to the Bourbon regime resorted to theatrical means – specifically to repeated performances of Molière’s *Tartuffe*, understood as laying bare the hypocrisy of contemporary Jesuits, themselves involved in another kind of theater, the so-called “missions” to the interior of France – to make its political point.⁵¹ But it was also then that a new phase in the emergence of early capitalism took shape, wealth, not glory as

under Napoleon, becoming the decisive factor. (Is this oversimple? No doubt. Is it basically true? Yes.) And this meant that the artistic reconstruction of worldhood could only be accomplished in political and economic terms – just as the depiction of Géricault-intensity conflict turned out to involve the sustained and often tortuous efforts of characters like Vautrin or Rastignac (each “a weapon charged with willpower to the muzzle,” in Baudelaire’s memorable phrase⁵²) to overcome their limited beginnings and achieve a position of mastery with respect to the moneyed and class forces arrayed against them – a project altogether beyond the representational capabilities of even the most resourceful and ambitious painting. (Toward the end of his life Géricault made several drawings toward possible paintings on the slave trade and the freeing of the prisoners of the Inquisition by French troops; the compositions, tentative as they are, show the limit of his imagination in this regard.) A partial exception should perhaps be made for the “lesser” art of political caricature as practiced by the young Honoré Daumier in 1834–5, but then came the anti-caricature laws of September 1835, which in effect put an end to his first exceptionally creative period. Through no fault of his, the *caricatures de mœurs* that followed are of lesser quality and significance.⁵³

In other words, I am claiming to see in Balzac starting in the early 1830s what might be called the rebirth of drama through prose fiction, to paraphrase a later thinker. And of all Balzac’s early texts, the one that bears most closely on the concerns of the present essay is “Le Colonel Chabert,” a long short story (sometimes, however, called a “roman”) published for the first time in *L’Artiste* in 1832.

The narrative, most of which is set in 1819, begins in the Paris office of M. Derville, a young and ambitious lawyer who will go on to figure importantly in the *Comédie humaine*. It is lunchtime and a team of his clerks is present; looking out the window one spots a ghastly-looking wreck of a man in an aged “carrick,” an overcoat that had long since gone out of style, who has come there before; he arrives and asks to see Derville but is told to return at 1 A.M., when Derville typically begins to plan the day’s battles, if he wishes to speak with him. (The youngest clerk in particular treats the visitor with disrespect.) This the old man does, and in the course of a conversation with Derville reveals that he is Colonel Hyacinthe Chabert, the supposedly dead hero of the Battle of Eylau (1807), one of the bloodiest in Napoleon’s career. Briefly, Chabert played a leading role in the decisive cavalry charge against the Russians, but returning to the French lines was struck from his horse by a saber-blow that opened his skull and then was ridden over by 1500 horses; left for dead, he was buried in a mass grave, but in fact was still alive and with the aid of a severed arm (“of a Hercules,” he tells Derville) managed by dint of fierce exertion to dig himself partly out. He was rescued by a German couple and eventually was taken to a hospital, where under the care of a

sympathetic doctor he made a difficult recovery; there were relapses, and in Stuttgart he was interned in a madhouse for two years because he insisted that he was Chabert, the famous hero who was known to be dead; finally he gave up the claim and was released. At first in the company of a fellow soldier and then alone, he painfully made his way back to Paris, arriving, he tells Derville, with the Cossacks in 1815 – a horribly scarred, bald, toothless, prematurely aged, impecunious, and psychologically shattered remnant of his former handsome and heroic self.

Now, Chabert in 1799 had married a beautiful prostitute, Rose Chapotel, picked up in the gardens of the Palais Royal. When his death was announced she was free to remarry, which after Napoleon's fall she did to a returned émigré, the Count Ferraud. Chabert himself had been made a Count of the Empire by Napoleon, which also meant that he had left his wife a rich woman; as the Countess Ferraud in the first years of the Restoration she worked closely with a factotum named Delbecq to increase her funds vastly (Delbecq plays an important role in what follows). Understandably, the news that Chabert was still alive was unwelcome, and in fact she ignored letters from him and made sure that he was not received when once he tried to call on her at home. Derville decides to take Chabert's part, and having secured proof of his identity confronts the Countess and threatens to expose her, brilliantly intuiting (the brilliance of course is all Balzac's) that the Countess herself lived in terror of being abandoned by Ferraud, to whom under the Bourbon regime she brought nothing by way of social connections. (Once shed of her, we are told, he could aspire to marry an only daughter of a peer of France; the Restoration world involved the coming together of hereditary rank and considerable fortunes; by 1819 the importance of the former was on the increase; the Countess's hope is to make so much money through Delbecq's machinations that Ferraud would never leave her.) Derville hopes to persuade her to sign a document attesting that Chabert is still alive; in return Chabert would legally pursue the dissolution of their marriage; and she would grant him an annual bequest of 24,000 francs, considerably less than what in fact ought to have been coming to him. The crucial scene takes place in Derville's office, where Chabert, having semi-miraculously recovered his physical well-being, is waiting in an adjoining room. The plan was for him not to reveal himself, but when he hears the Countess protest that the sum in question is too large, he bursts in angrily and denounces her, at which point she leaves in haste.

Chabert, too, departs, but the Countess, a consummate actress, intercepts him and without difficulty carries him off to her country house in Groslay, where she succeeds in persuading him that while she loves her new husband and the two children she has had by him, she still has strong feelings for Chabert, who in turn gallantly proposes to disappear from her life, becoming "dead" once more. (Significantly, from my point of

view, the tipping point occurs when the two young children approach their mother and naïvely ask why she is crying, creating a Greuze-like “sudden and delicious painting” [128].) Sensing that she has won, the countess sends for Delbecq, who draws up a statement for Chabert to sign, effectively declaring himself to be a fraud; this goes too far; Chabert angrily refuses and takes a long, solitary walk that ends up at a pavilion in the grounds, where he comes upon the Countess and Delbecq in conversation. Neither is aware that he is there, and their cynical exchange reveals to him that he has been duped, that his former wife has no feelings for him whatsoever and would be glad to see him committed to an asylum. The scales fall from his eyes; he declares that he feels nothing for her but contempt but that she has nothing more to fear from him; the new world of Restoration society is beyond enduring and he disappears. (Balzac writes, “The colonel had known the countess of the Empire, he now saw a countess of the Restoration” [125], and the difference proves crushing. As Chabert said to Derville earlier, “I was buried under corpses, but now I am buried under the living, under legal acts, under facts, under the entire society, which wants me to return to under the ground” [80].) Six months later, not having heard from Chabert, Derville writes to the Countess, whom he also represents, asking to be reimbursed for various modest expenses incurred on Chabert’s behalf but receives a frosty letter of refusal from the Count. And some time after that, in a courtroom, he comes across Chabert himself, arrested for vagrancy under the name Hyacinthe; when the latter learns that Derville has not been paid, he sends a note to the Countess, no doubt threatening to make public his identity, and the lawyer is quickly recompensed.

The story is over except for a further dénouement that takes place in 1840 (changed in a later edition from the initial 1830). Derville and Godeschal, his former clerk and now his successor, are walking together outside of Paris, when, approaching the grounds of the asylum Bicêtre, Derville recognizes Chabert, now obviously an inmate, sitting on a milestone. Two days later, returning to Paris, they come on him again, sitting on the stump of a tree and tracing lines in the sand with a staff. Derville greets him as Chabert but the old man refuses the name (“Not Chabert! not Chabert!” [138]), saying that he is not a name but simply number 164, seventh room – his official designation. The two men give him money for tobacco; he calls them “Brave troopers,” mimes the firing of a musket as he cries “vive Napoléon,” and “describes in the air with his cane an imaginary arabesque” (139). (A delusion of military grandeur? Or something more?) The story ends with Derville making a short speech that includes the famous remark that there are three men, all dressed in black, perhaps to mark their mourning for all the virtues – the Priest, the Doctor, and the Man of Justice – who are capable of estimating correctly the world in which they live, and that of these the most

unhappy is the lawyer, because his profession exposes him the most to human depravity. From now on he will live in the country with his wife. His closing words: "Paris horrifies me" (141).

There is no evidence that Balzac in 1832 had Géricault in mind, though he could not have lived through the first years of the Restoration without being aware of the scandal of the *Medusa* and probably of the lesser scandal of the *Raft*, and in fact Géricault is mentioned a number of times in the *Comédie humaine*.⁵⁴ Moreover, a year before, in 1831, Balzac had published in *L'Artiste* the story "Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu," arguably the greatest work of prose fiction ever on the subject of painting. (He had also published "Sarrasine," another story about the arts, which happens to feature a painting by David's teacher, Joseph-Marie Vien.) So painting was by no means foreign to his concerns. Be this as it may, there is to my mind something keenly suggestive in the fact that in "Le Colonel Chabert," one of his earliest "mature" fictions, he chose to tell the story of a heroic commander of cavalry under Napoleon – a character who might have stepped (more likely, ridden) out of one of Géricault's battle scenes – who "dies" at Eylau (the subject of one of Gros's two masterpieces, admired by Géricault) but then after much suffering survives into the Restoration (the crucial year being 1819, the year of the *Raft*), which he soon concludes is not a world for him – hence his decision to "die" to that world by retreating to the Hospice de la Vieillesse at Bicêtre, where Derville discovers him and brings the story to an end. It is as though Balzac at this critical juncture in his career found himself compelled to demonstrate, to spell out almost didactically, that the heroic values of the previous period had no purchase in the new era, and that whatever place there turned out to be in his writing for action, expression, and passion – in short for "drame"⁵⁵ – and place for these there was in abundance – required to be constructed on a different basis, in keeping with the new and from an earlier perspective grossly amoral social realities he saw emerging around him. That in the end Chabert – who helped save the Empire at Eylau, who after the battle dug himself out of a mass grave with the aid of a severed limb, who with the awakening of hope recovers something of his former exceptional physicality, who at Grosley in the clutches of his scheming wife is moved against his own advantage by a "painting of a family," and who having been disabused of his illusions then willingly accepts a status not unlike that of one of Géricault's monomaniacs – is described drawing in the sand with his staff – he also waves the staff in the air, as if it were a paintbrush, limning "an imaginary arabesque"⁵⁶ – only makes the absence of any reference to the painter of the *Raft* all the more striking. In any case, Balzac's brilliant, searing story provides a fitting epilogue to Géricault's inspired but ultimately doomed endeavor.⁵⁷