POSTURING POPINJAYS, WASTED WOMBS

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In Byron’s lifetime, while Europe’s female population mourned, helpless, the continent’s male population made one of its more spectacular attempts at destroying itself. It failed, as usual, and went on trying for another century and a half after Byron’s death. We have to hope it’s learned better by now, and that it’s worked out that fucking and football are better ways of getting one’s rocks off – that the World Cup is an improvement on Austerlitz, or Stalingrad. Say what you like about Eurobureaucracy, it’s still preferable to the First Day of the Somme.

These thoughts were inspired in me last weekend when I did what I’d been meaning to do for years, and spent the best part of a day in Denon, Salles 75 and 77, in the Louvre. I was a grateful guest in Paris of the Société français des Études Byroniennes. The walls are crowded with huge and impressive images of men posturing (not fighting) while around them women weep and babies die. The images become very frightening after a day’s inspection.

We start with Vigée le Brun’s Mme Vigée le Brun et sa fille Jeanne-Lucie-Louise, dite Julie, of 1789. This self-portrait (the only picture referred to in this essay which is painted by a woman) gives us the norm from which the collection at once starts to diverge. The artist and her young child are happy, and in loving physical harmony – society and history have allowed them the luxury of being normal. We then move on to David’s picture of his sister and her two-year-old son, Mme Pierre Sériéziat et un de ses fils, Emile, of 1795. Mme Sériéziat and her husband, David’s brother-in-law, assisted the painter on his release from jail, where he had been placed as an associate of Robespierre. Here we can see that things are starting to go wrong – for although the mother is smiling, there is something forced, sweet and sentimental about her smile, as there is about the sprig of flowers she has in her hand: and her son is giving the painter a hard stare, as if to say, “Two years later, or earlier, and you might not have been so lucky: I might not have survived.”

In each of these paintings, the woman stares at us, happy in that she has bred – she has fulfilled her part in nature’s scheme of things, and can relax. She has achieved her identity (marriage and motherhood were all most women had at that time), in her child. As we progress round and round the two galleries, however (following, not the order in which the works are hung, nor the order in which they’re painted) we see that identity, and that fulfilment, taken away.
In Paul Delaroche’s *Les Enfants d’Edouard* (1831) we see the fate which little Emile Sériziat perhaps congratulates himself on having missed, and fears, still, to encounter. The Princes in the Tower huddle together on a bed, one ill and looking prematurely old, trying to read an illuminated book to ward off their terror. Their small dog sniffs apprehensively at a light which has just appeared under the door. Being young and innocent will not save them. Tyrrell, Dyson and Lovell will soon be in there with them.

David: *Napoleon crowns Josephine in Notre Dame.*

The theme of woman’s identity finds it most huge question mark in David’s painting of Napoleon’s coronation in Notre Dame. Here David chooses, not the moment when the new emperor crowns himself (he’s already done that, for Caesar’s laurel is on his head), but the moment when he crowns Josephine. Before him she kneels, head bowed, and behind her stand Madame Mère, Hortense de Beauharnais, Caroline Murat, and Pauline Borghese – four women quite different in reality, but here, with identical heights, gowns, and jewellery, possessed, like Josephine, only of that identity which Napoleon’s newly-invented ritual, his act of fictitious imperial grace, confers upon them. Outside of his will, they have no identity: and his will is being demonstrated in a monumental, theatrical setting, the Notre Dame pillars giving it a seemingly divine sanction. Behind him, the most visible profile on the vast canvas, sits Pope Clement VII, his face thrown into relief by the belly of the fat cardinal behind him. Clement would take no part in the ceremony, but was compelled to witness it in public, and at close range. He stares intently at the kneeling Josephine, his calm adding Papal authority, willy-nilly, to Napoleon’s assertion of power over her, and over the rest of Europe.

“Comediante – tragediantel!” were all the words which Clement hissed at Napoleon in their only private interview. So says Alfred de Vigny, at least – and he shows an insight comparable to that demonstrated by many of the painters here, for Napoleon is always an
actor, a self-publicist, an artiste first, and a general and politician second and third. This gives a one-sided impression of his career: but it seems that his roles as initiator of new legal codes, as educational reformer, and as encourager of colossal engineering works, were not seen, in wartime, as having the same aesthetic interest – and Napoleon enjoyed very little peacetime.

His power is depicted as universal. Not only does he dominate the European, Christian ethos of Notre Dame, but he appears equally at home and in cool charge in Moslem countries, and in the near-barbarity of eastern Europe and Russia. The fact that he failed on each of those two fronts, being forced to flee from Egypt and leave his army behind, and making his biggest mistake of all in the invasion of Russia, is neither here nor there. The myth is untouched by such pedantries. “Out of town six days. On my return, found my poor little pagod, Napoleon, pushed off his pedestal; – the thieves are in Paris,” wrote Byron in his journal. Even in defeat, Bonaparte was to be worshipped, albeit with a shade of condescension.

Gros: Napoleon and the plague-victims at Jaffa.

In *Napoleon visitant les pestifères de Jaffa*, by Gros, Bonaparte stares a plague-victim in the eye, and touches him under the arm, where a bubo is developing. Behind him, by contrast, one of his officers holds a handkerchief to his nose to ward off infection and the smell of disease and death: but Napoleon, though unshaven and pale, shows no fear, any more than Princess Di did when she shook hands with the AIDS victims: is he effecting a faith-cure, we wonder? Can he work miracles? To the right, a professional-looking Arab doctor seems to be treating a bubo under someone else’s arm, so that cannot be. But Bonaparte and his plague-victim are made centre-piece by the light and the framing devices – not Christian ecclesiastical pillars this time, but the arches of Islam. Napoleon’s power transcends such piffling religious boundaries.
Gros: Napoleon at the Battle of Eylau.

He’s centre-stage too in Napoleon sur le champ de Bataille d’Eylau (9 fev. 1807), also by Gros. Here cold dominates, not heat, as in the Jaffa painting, and frozen corpses lay strewn all about: but Napoleon, though pale and in want of a razor as before, is subordinate neither to the temperature nor to any other power portrayed – not even to his brother-in-law Joachim Murat, who faces him on another horse with the usual white plume in his hat (see below), but whom the light does not bless in the same way. Just as the columns of the plague-house give Napoleon a theatrical framing at Jaffa, so does the winter desolation at Eylau – much of it is far away, as on a pantomime backcloth, with no interlinking perspective except two small cavalry figures at one point in the middle-distance.

There are no women in any of these paintings. Vivandières or no vivandières as there may have been (see La Chartreuse de Palme, opening chapter), they must be kept away from this, the ideal battlefield, which is always portrayed as a male preserve. Instead, as emblems of subordination, there are the horses. Horses here are always rolling their eyes in terror, yet are always obedient to their masters’ wills, just as women are. Even when its master is injured, as in Géricault’s Cuirassier blessé of 1814, the horse still stops where he stops, with a well-designed creative effect. It looks more concerned than he does, even though it’s he who is injured (where he’s injured isn’t clear).

Géricault: Cuirassier blessé.
The best-behaved horse (aptly, given its master’s equestrian ability) is that of Murat, in Gros’s picture of him. Small but tight clouds of dust rising from its hooves indicate the skill with which its rider has brought it to a sudden halt, and made it rear. Yet the rider is a buffoon: “Harlequin in uniform,” to use Byron’s phrase about Suvorov. Murat’s saddle is a tiger-skin, reversed, so that his horse appears to have a tiger’s mouth open just above its haunches. He wears parti-coloured breeches giving him the air of a court jester, and a white plume in his hat making him look like a circus-performer. He is too big for his horse – or rather, the horse as painted is too small for him, and the effect is comically disproportionate.

If Napoleon really is a tragediante, a Macbeth, then Murat is his Feste, or his Porter – the doppelgänger who brings out the essence of the protagonist, by caricature. Byron’s most famous horse is the one in Mazeppa, who takes the initiative, unlike those in the galleries, even though it’s an initiative he’d prefer not to take, for his gallop across the steppes with the man tied naked to his back ends in his death.

Other portraits by Gros also emphasise the soldier-as-dandy. Le général François Fournier-Sadovès, whose picture Gros did in 1812, stares boldly ahead, his hair immaculate in its curls and parting, even here, as it seems, in the midst of a battle. Lest we should suspect that Gros alone portrays soldiers thus, we have Officier de chasseur à cheval de la garde imperiale, done by the twenty-year-old Géricault in 1812. Though in action, nothing could be more graceful than the way the curve of the man, the curve of his sabre, and the curves of his horse, complement one another.

Warriors must be beautiful. And they don’t have to be contemporary French warriors, or even be clothed, to be beautiful. In David’s Leonidas at Thermopylae, the heroes, as they await death in the “bleak sepulchral strait” (as Byron named it), arrange themselves for maximum aesthetic and theatrical effect. Leonidas’s organ of generation is carefully concealed by a leather strap, lest we should misinterpret the Spartan insistence on fighting naked. Good thing Napoleon, who only had a little willy, always fought clothed (especially in Russia).
Women are rarely seen objecting to any of this, though it’s their sons, their fathers, and their brothers who are killing one another – the fruit of their labour which seems programmed to destroy itself. But the artists do not ignore them. David, especially, often gives them prominence. In his *Les Lecteurs rapportent à Brutus les corps de ses fils* (1789), Brutus himself sits stoically to the left, staring ahead, in a dark patch, a true tragediante: it’s his wife and daughters on whom David makes the light fall. One daughter has fainted, the other shields her eyes from the sight of what her father’s decree has done to her brothers. David creates the same effect in *Le Serment des Horaces* (1784). The men posture magnificently, the women huddle together and weep.

A very famous group of women do not weep, however, and do not just object, but take action. David’s *Les Sabines arrêtant le combat entre les Romains et les Sabins* (1799) is dominated by one female figure, thrusting herself bodily and boldly between two posturing males. David emphasises that the males are posing, rather than engaging in physical effort. They stand in positions designed neither to attack nor to defend, but to show off.
The young woman is the most memorable of all those depicted in the two galleries. Like all the rest, she is no stick insect, but is ripe for breeding, if only the men’s egos would allow them to concentrate on such an important matter. She’s even come prepared for it there and then, if need be: her dress billows up over her hip to reveal that she wears no undergarment. “Kill one another if you want to, but will one of you, at least, give me a baby first!” seems to be her cry. Behind her, other Sabine women, some mothers already, one at least a granny, throw themselves into postures just as theatrical as hers. The blush on her face indicates the humiliation involved in a gesture as seemingly unnecessary as the one in which she’s engaged. She’s being forced to play the men’s game, and it’s no fun for a girl.

Byron’s heroes posture in the presence of women, often when the women might legitimately expect a cuddle. Witness Conrad leaving Medora in The Corsair, or Selim’s ludicrous 339-line speech to Zuleika in The Bride of Abydos. Like a Woody Allen protagonist, their sexual energy deserts them just when you’d expect it to be at its strongest. Harold postures throughout — when he’s allowed into the poems named after him at all.

David’s Sabine women are alone. More often, women are portrayed as especially beautiful in death, as if the male artist was more interested in them as cadavers than as partners in love and breeding. Such are La jeune martyre, by Delaroche (1855), or Atala portée au tombeau by Girodet-Trioson (1800), where everything we think about the spiritually-pornographic tale by Chateaubriand is confirmed by the suspicion of necrophilia in the illustration.

Two of Byron’s most powerful heroines — Astarte in Manfred, and Francesca in The Siege of Corinth — are dead. Woman, can, when deceased, be accorded the moral authority which, when alive, Byron must deny her. Alive, Woman is too much of a threat.

The painting supposed in legend to be closest to Byron is Delacroix, La Mort de Sardanapale.
It is Napoleonic enough, in that where at Notre Dame Bonaparte, in triumph, dispensed meaning and identity, here a Napoleonic figure, in defeat, dispenses death to all – including especially, as we would expect, to his women and his horses. The Christian façade behind which the tyrant hid in Notre Dame is here revealed as the merest cover for his barbarism and megalomania. There, all triumphed in his triumph: here, all must suffer in his destruction.

Nothing could in fact be less Byronic. If Byron ever contemplated suicide (and he did once, when he heard that Teresa Guiccioli was fatally ill) he would never insist on everyone else following him to the grave – he wouldn’t want their company there; and his own Sardanapalus is, like him, far too much of a gentleman to insist on all his women dying with him (in fact he has only one, and she, loving him, elects to join him in death). The horses, for Byron’s Babylonian monarch, would neither be here nor there.

And Napoleon’s suicide attempt – done on the very day that Byron corrected the proof for his Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte – was a private affair, quite unlike that of Sardanapalus. Hardly anyone knew about it.

There are two other images of men in extremis, in situations not of their making but of nature’s. These are the two shipwreck pictures, Géricault’s The Raft of the Medusa, and La Naufrage de Don Juan (1841) by Delacroix. Because Napoleon can in no way be held responsible for what is happening on them (he was safe on St Helena by the time they arrived, and even if he had been about, not even Napoleon claimed power over the sea and wind), they form a digression to the main part of this essay.

The story of the wreck of the French frigate Méduse off the coast of West Africa was well-known: the officers had saved themselves in the only seaworthy boat, leaving the other ranks and passengers to fend for themselves on the raft. What Géricault leaves implicit is the horrible story of how this large remnant descended into what amounted to civil war on the raft, with incidents of fighting, murder and cannibalism to make the blood run cold. He concentrates instead on what we know to have been, but what the survivors whom he pictures can only hope to be, the moment when the rescue ship was sighted. He conveys the smallness of the hope they experienced by having the ship on the horizon so tiny that it has to be pointed out to the innocent beholder.
Géricault’s painting was made in 1819, during the same time that Byron was writing *Don Juan II*, in which his shipwreck occurs. Byron used the Medusa narrative by Savigny and Corréard (known also to Géricault) as a source for some of the authentic nautical details on which he prided himself. Delacroix, in his *Don Juan* picture, concentrates on the incident in which the crew draws lots, to determine which one of them shall be killed and eaten by the others. As with the Géricault, there is a narrative problem, for we who know the poem know who will lose the draw – but cannot determine which of the characters on Delacroix’s boat that is (it’s Pedrillo, Juan’s tutor). Delacroix also has to invent other characters – such as the one who holds the hat from which the scraps of paper are drawn, which Byron does not specify (logically it would be the senior sailor, but in *Don Juan* we don’t know even who that is). Byron manages to extract humour from the situation; not so Delacroix.

Both pictures are therefore unusual in the two galleries in that they depend on our having knowledge of a prior text for complete understanding (Atala being carried to her tomb is another). Géricault compensates by the extraordinary dynamic of his visual scheme, with the vertical of the mast crossed by the long string of limbs, traversing the raft in hope, from bottom left to top right, and dropping suddenly and bathetically to the “little speck” which is all the rescue vessel as yet is.

In neither picture is there a woman in sight. “… a Mother had not known her Son / Amidst the Skeletons of that gaunt Crew,” is Byron’s apt comment.
Elsewhere in the Louvre, women are isolated, with deliberation, as if to prevent their ever attaining motherhood. *La Grande Odalisque*, by Ingres, exists in a voyeuristic void; Delacroix’s *Femmes d’Alger dans leurs appartenements* have only a black female slave – not even a Baba-type eunuch – for company, unlike Lolah, Kattinka and Dudù in *Don Juan*.

*Les deux sœurs (Portrait de Mlles Chasseriaze)*, of 1848, look out at the world nervously, lest there be by now no men left for them at all!

Not even having an active social life will help, nor being the greatest beauty of your day: David gives Julie Recamier a sad, lonely look, and puts her in an under-furnished social vacuum.

More common is the terrible image, either of a child trying to suckle from the breast of a mother who is dead, or of a mother whose child is dead or about to die. The most Byronic of them all is *Les Souliotes* by Ary Scheffer (1827) which shows a group of Souliote women – whether Souliotes are Greek or Albanian, who cares? – huddled together at the top of a mountain, having failed to escape from the barbarian hordes of Ali Pasha, whom we see raging below. Soon, we know from the tale, the women – several hundred of them – will decide to jump from the cliffs, arm-in-arm, to escape the ravages of Ali’s men. One maternal figure clasps a younger woman, whom we suppose to be her daughter. Her own breeding has come to this, and her daughter is now doomed never to be a mother at all. Another mother is in a state of collapse over her own baby, who is dead.
Much more celebrated is *Scenes des massacres de Scio*, exhibited by Delacroix in 1824, and a primary icon for the Greek War of Independence. It goes interestingly with a lesser-known work, *Le Déluge*, by Girodet-Trioson, painted between 1806 and 1814. The two seem at first to be unrelated, for the subject of one is from recent history and that of the other from the Old Testament; but I believe *Le Déluge* is an allegory of the times: families were destroyed, and fathers were doomed never to keep them together, whether by the will of God, or by the wills of Napoleon and of the Allies, or by the will of the Grand Turk.

There seems to me a family in the Delacroix painting, in that the gaunt near-naked man who dominates the group in the foreground appears related to the woman who rests her head on his shoulder, and the elderly woman who raises her eyes heavenwards is perhaps of the generation previous to them. But the family is doomed: the man is severely wounded and perhaps dying, the woman may be his despairing wife, and the old woman his mother – the Turks (one of whom is at work with his scimitar in the near-background) will soon kill them.
all. In the same way, the father/husband/son in _Le Déluge_ has his father on his back in the manner of Aeneas carrying Anchises, but has also to keep hold of his wife and children, who are perilously near falling from his grasp – the artificially long stretch of his arm and that of his wife showing how near the whole group is to collapse and catastrophe. On his face is a stare of unheroic terror, reminiscent of those in Michaelangelo’s _Last Judgement_ who at last know themselves damned.

In both pictures we see the ultimate pathos of a child in need of sustenance from its mother’s breast, but no longer able to obtain it, for the mother is either dead or dying. They are on the bottom right-hand corner of the Delacroix, and at the centre of _Le Déluge_.

Byron differs from Shakespeare in rarely portraying children, with or without mothers. No Prince Arthurs or Young Macduffs (or Edward Vs, of course!) for him. Haidee _would_ have had a child had she lived, and Byron (never the staunchest of Daddies) expends a safe and sentimental stanza on it. The Byronic hero, whether early or late, can never be a father. Harold as a father would be a failure, for he exists in a self-imposed familial void; and for Juan to have children, he would have to cease to be Juan. Juan must always partake of the Boy rather than the Man.

It took some time for all this mythologising (positive in intention, negative by implication) of the Man who Tried to Rid Europe of People to fade away – but fade away it did. My last picture is Delaroche’s _Bonaparte franchissant les Alpes_ (1848). It seems an answer to David’s famous version of the same event (which, not being in the Louvre, is not part of this essay). There, Bonaparte is master of his own fate and of the fates of everyone else, including that of his rearing horse, as outlined above. He needs no guide over the Alps – his Homeric stature ensures that he will cross them by intuition alone.

Delaroche, by 1848, will have none of this. His Bonaparte rides (as did the real one) an ass, with an alpine guide to lead him. He neither dresses nor looks heroic; but wears his usual grey overcoat, and stares out at the observer, appearing lost and miserable. Who knows whether Hannibal looked any better in the same circumstances? Where David gives Bonaparte speed and dynamism, Delaroche shows him to be slow and passive. David would have us think that Bonaparte had history at his feet. By 1848 (though not for long after that, for his great-nephew would soon take over, and try to create a new empire) it was just possible to see that he had been at the feet of history: but he had destroyed many men, and cut off many women in their fertile prime, in his endeavour to prove otherwise.
Byron takes part in the huge drama illustrated by Galleries 73 and 75 of Denon; but his works don’t encompass the full weight and scope of its central dialectic.