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The Romantic agony

by *Anita Brookner*

A review of *Géricault: His Life and Work* by Lorenz E. A. Eitner

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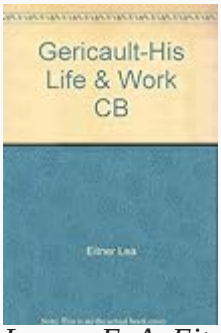

Lorenz E. A. Eitner

Géricault: His Life and Work

Orbis Pub, 376 pages,

"I have tried to bring together . . . what is now known about Géricault, dealing with his life and work in one continuous narrative, and putting the emphasis strongly on his artistic development . . . . Tracing the general line of his development and reconstructing the evolution of his main projects, I have searched the evidence of his artistic practice for clues to his habit of mind, his methods of work, and, ultimately, to his personality of which the written sources tell us so little." The exemplary clarity, the bon ton, of Lorenz Eitner's book on Géricault—its decorum fastidiously distant from the disingenuous and space-filling jargon that disfigures much modern art-historical scholarship—echo those of his urbane predecessor, Charles Clément, who wrote the first scholarly biography of Géricault in 1867. To read Clément is as steadying an experience as taking a restorative sojourn beside his native Lac Léman. To read Eitner is to feel the same reassurance, the same gravity, as if one were in the hands of a good doctor, and in view of Géricault's morbid propensities this is by no means inappropriate. Yet there remains, hovering in the air over both their books, and over their subject, and indeed over Géricault's terrible life, that startling and uncensored admission with which Clément opened his monograph: "C'est en

tremblant que j'ai commencé cette étude."
What made Clément tremble was the knowledge, which he kept secret, but which is now revealed, of Géricault's love affair with his aunt Alexandrine-Modeste Camel de Saint-Martin and the birth of their son, facts discovered almost by accident in 1976. But Clément may also have had knowledge of the insanity in Géricault's family and of his subject's own uneven and unnerving mental climate. There may have been one or more psychotic episodes; there was certainly an impulse to self-destruction. Much of this still remains unclear, and it is probable that Géricault's close-knit and relatively powerful family succeeded in suppressing much more evidence than was known even to Clément. But in a sense that evidence is supernumerary beside the evidence of the pictures themselves.

To the most unprejudiced spectator there begins to be something sinister and disturbing about the simplest of Géricault's pictorial undertakings. Here is a portrait of a child, Alfred Dedreux, aged five. With hair curled and an extremely adult expression on his face, he is cast adrift in a barren and undomesticated landscape, posing in an oddly seductive manner in tiny clothes of tarpaulin weight and thickness. Here are two veterans of the Napoleonic campaigns; they wear the brave moustaches made popular by that elite and the great gauntlets and the heavy breastplates; but they are young men grown horribly old, and around their sleeves and collars there winds a wavering line of pigment with a curious life of its own, like automatic writing. The effect is to implant a feeling of disquiet in the onlooker, as if some wordless, or indeed unpaintable, doubt had surfaced from the tight-lipped soldiers' experience. A trumpeter of hussars, in his gorgeous scarlet uniform, wields not only his trumpet, but a dispatch case and a huge unsheathed sword; yet the wide-angled perspective shows him backed into a corner and the brim of his plumed helmet casts a black shadow over his peevish face. In tiny drawings, hurried and intense copulations take place; slower and more voluptuous encounters must be shrouded by nightfall. Torture is hinted at, and corruption, and anxiety. On the raft of the *Medusa*, splendidly muscled nudes, untouched by emaciation or dehydration, toil under the equatorial sun as if they were the victims of some hypothetical mining disaster, inspiring one nervous critic to inquire, "Are they Greeks or Romans? Turks or Frenchmen? Under what skies do they navigate?"

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To the amateur of painting who knows nothing of Géricault's story but who is obliged to read the signs of his artistic personality solely through the images he chooses to paint and the way in which he chooses to paint them, two impressions are abundantly evident, and these two impressions may furnish the key to his most important and enduring characteristics as an artist. From the first he appears to be an entirely instinctive painter, entirely unsupported by theory, and this alone would make him remarkable at a time when painting was still officially under the Davidian aegis. Yet,

more than this, at times Géricault's style is even unsupported by choice of specific subject, an absence of which he was despairingly aware. Géricault's inability to find suitable subjects is extremely intriguing, and it can be noted that even when he thinks he has found one he leaves half of it out, so that we are presented with what amounts to a gallery of effects without causes. Why is this officer leaving the battlefield? He is not being pursued, and all is suspiciously quiet around him. What is the particular reproach being leveled against us by all those ornamental but costive hussars? What crime or indignity does that awful child, Louise Vernet, meditate as she clasps a huge cat tightly in her arms? What is the tragedy of the white horse, with his flaring nostrils and abraded muzzle? Why does the spectator feel doomed to clamber onto the raft of the *Medusa* and to strain for a sight of the brig *Argus*, when the whole affair has nothing to do with him? And those victims of obsession, those monomaniacs, with their oblique glances at someone who is not there, under what skies do they navigate? If the spectator of the present day is disconcerted, a thought may be spared for the Salon visitor, and, more, the artistic bureaucracy of the second decade of the nineteenth century, forced to recognize the vast talent, and the total unaccountability, of this embodiment of what was much later to be called the Romantic agony.

Of the vast talent there was no doubt. An ability to manipulate material, and indeed to nail down the materiality of his gloomy and threatening world, came to Géricault without benefit of teaching; it even came in the teeth of the orthodox teaching of his worldly and superficial masters, Vernet and Guérin. And the sheer grossness of Géricault's love of matter adds excitement and singularity to everything he touches. A gold glove clasping a steel sword, or a pair of crimson epaulettes swelling to carpet thickness, jolt the spectator into a recognition of this artist's extraordinary power. We are in the presence of someone who knows more than we do, who knows more than he should. This knowingness, which impelled him to manipulate a reclining female figure based on Michelangelo's Night into an orgasmic woman groaning under the attentions of an arching male (Jupiter and Antiope, according to the Rouen catalogue), deserves more than a little attention; not only does the style of this rough carving (and there may be more) leap over a few decades to prefigure the styles of late Carpeaux or early Dalou, but the subject matter spills forth the raw truth of a situation to which not one of his contemporaries could allude unless it were dressed up as Paris and Helen, Telemachus and Eucharis, Cephalus and Aurora, Pygmalion and Galatea, or Sappho and Phaon, and wearing the obligatory moral and physical fig leaves of helmets, tunics, and antique curls. Although these exercises, usually in the form of drawings, or ébauches, were never meant for public contemplation, Géricault, in dashing them down or chiseling them out, had no idea how disconcerting he was or would appear to the tired and circumspect members of his official entourage.

The second characteristic to be noted by the unprejudiced viewer is that although the subject may have a decipherable connection with objective reality, the varying states of the painter's consciousness not only alter the rate of his execution but even his perception of bodily proportions. There is no apparent explanation for the speed with which he dashed off his first masterpiece, the

Charging Chasseur—twelve days—and the heaviness that weighs down the sagging silent figure of the *Wounded Cuirassier*; or for the rapidity and concentration of the portraits of the insane—no underdrawing, no retouches, no pentiments—and the cotton-wool opacity of his view of the children Alfred Dedreux, Louise Vernet, Louis Bro, as if his vision of them were impeded by a drastically lowered receptivity, which in turn affects his handling and makes it thick, turbid, verging on paralysis. By the same token, there is no stability in his view of the world: men and horses, his most abiding obsession and his most durable theme, exchange their proportions from time to time. Horses, usually full of fire and fight, become, at the end of his life, so powerless and so tiny that they cannot even pull a farm cart through the opening of a cottage-sized building. The Brooklyn sketch for the *Wounded Cuirassier* shows a man defeated by the weight of his coat; the *Trumpeter of the Chasseurs*, in the Niarchos collection, is dwarfed by the size of his trousers. In all of these works, implications of tragedy are present, and they are extremely worrying, not least because there seems to be little reason for them to be present in such force and because there is such an exaggerated *décalage* between ostensible subject and immanent but untranslatable significance.

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Yet it was not meant to be so, and when all the factors have been reviewed it must be argued that the perpetual sabotage which Géricault invested in his own life was the result less of his unorthodox love affair than of the intermittent workings of what must be seen as dementia, alternately aiding and impeding a genius so unpredictable that none like it had been seen before in France and none like it was to be seen afterward. With the terrible example of Géricault's candor before him, Delacroix assumed a lifelong reticence. The ardor of Géricault makes Courbet look flabby and verbose. Yet this extraordinary man's life was set in genteel and decorous circumstances; he was rich, he was cherished by his friends, and even after the birth of his child he continued to live in his father's house. His curious paintings disrupted the entire platform on which late Neo-Classical and Napoleonic painting was predicated, but all he wanted to do was to follow the examples of David and Gros, whom he greatly admired. He made the Italian journey, although at his own expense, and he sent *The Raft of the Medusa* to the politically sensitive Salon of 1819, where it not unexpectedly made a number of people rather irritable. In nearly every respect

he made great efforts to paint in an entirely conventional manner, filling a notebook with careful outline drawings inspired by Flaxman's engravings, planning the symbolic masterpiece to be brought home from Italy, sending a modern history subject in the manner of Gros to the Salon, and even going to England, that most prestigious and up-to-date of countries, to learn the latest trends.

But in fact some native waywardness interfered with all of these commendable activities. Those outlines in the Zoubaloff sketchbook (which Eitner dates around 1815, that is, later than Clément) clearly contain far more drama and piquancy than Flaxman ever intended that they should. Italy confirmed Géricault's suspicion that he could turn any artist's conceits into something else without satisfying his own pictorial hunger; while the great intended masterpiece, the *Race of the Riderless Horses*, with its reminiscences of the Elgin marbles, and the giant thirty-foot canvas on which it was to be brushed, simply petered out. The *Raft of the Medusa* is the one instance of a carefully chosen subject carefully carried through; its effect is overwhelming, and, to some viewers, dreadful. On the way to its completion, Géricault found it helpful to fill his studio with unusual reminders of mortality—not casts, but guillotined heads or severed arms and legs brought back from the dissecting room of a nearby hospital, and these fragments, which he painted most beautifully, signal forth a stronger sense of identification than do those heroic nudes on the raft. And that visit to England, undertaken for commercial and no doubt therapeutic reasons, turned into a lingering experience of novelties, not all of them agreeable: Wilkie and Constable, certainly, but also the horrific world of the London poor, of which we get the first glimpse in Géricault's magnificent lithographs, before the novels of Dickens. And the portraits of the insane, which Eitner dates to 1822-23 (thus dismissing Mme Aimé-Azam's theory that they may have resulted from Géricault's confinement in a private clinic owing to a breakdown after the great effort of the *Medusa*), how is one to place these in any orthodox history of art? They reveal too much and explain too little, and they defeat everyone who comes near them.

In his last years Géricault took on something of the saint and martyr in his aspect, dying visibly of horrible and perhaps self-inflicted wounds, generous to the young, inspiring great devotion in his friends, speaking of pictures to be painted on immense surfaces with huge brushes, working out themes on the abolition of the slave trade or the opening of the doors of the Spanish Inquisition, that is, current or recent concerns, yet too weak to do more than make a drawing of his powerful left hand. On the cast that was made of this hand he wrote, "A tous ceux que j'aime. Adieu." He died, a shriveled old man, aged thirty-two.

Clearly, to write such a life, and to account for such pictures, demands unusual qualities. These Mr. Eitner has in abundance. Together with his ability to sustain this troubled and troubling narrative he has the gift of finding the quietly memorable turn of phrase: of Carle Vernet, he says, "he made himself conspicuous as the interpreter of a modern—which is to say English and middle-class—ideal of beauty"; of *The Raft of the Medusa*, "the few inches of canvas which separate the signaling men from the speck which signifies the *Argus* demand to be read as miles." He speaks of "the blustering grognards of Vernet and Charlet," of "sharp unsteady illumination," of a "hard, terse, economical" touch. There is also a sort of natural piety in the book, which is as agreeable as it

is refreshing. This is a fine and scholarly task, scrupulously carried out, an example to the self-assured, and a pleasure to readers at every stage of instruction.

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