



Delacroix, Art and Patrimony in Post-Revolutionary France



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Choosing Fathers:
Dante and Virgil

On Delacroix's "Origins": The Talleyrand Myth as Illustrative Family Romance

☞ Delacroix has a violent, fiery character, but he is full of self-control; he imprisons himself in his formation as a man of the world, which is perfect. A sly observer, attentive when one addresses him, he is prompt, sharp, and prudent in his replies. As he is well-schooled in the fencing match of life, he tidily defeats his partner without advancing an inch. Born in the heart of diplomacy, cradled on the knees of Talleyrand, who was his father's successor at the ministry of foreign affairs, he could fulfill the most brilliant ambassadorship even better than Rubens did.

Théophile Silvestre, 1856¹

☞ Eugène Delacroix, slim, of medium build, with a distinguished bearing, appeared delicate. [...] Should one repeat what used to be said in hushed tones, that his pallor with a yellow cast and his very peculiar slanting smile made one think of the prince de Talleyrand? Was this the effect of what one commonly calls an expression? At the time of the Directory, the prince contributed much to having Delacroix's father named as minister of foreign affairs. Delacroix's mother was charming. Is it necessary to say more to feed this bit of gossip?

Caroline Jaubert, 1881²

☞ It was hardly necessary for the future prince of Bénévent to intervene in the household of his colleague for this child, whose traits definitely offered a disquieting resemblance with the notorious personage, to feel the blood of a perfect diplomat coursing in his veins.

Etienne Moreau-Nélaton, 1916³

☞ The legend, according to which Eugène Delacroix was the son of Prince Talleyrand, has no more adherents today.⁴

Julius Maier-Graefe, 1922

☞ Madame Delacroix was charming and already of society. . . . It was from her that Delacroix had his refined manners and his air of the ancien régime, his good connections, and the sense of appearance that distinguished him his entire life.

Louis Gillet, 1925⁵

☞ All those who approached Eugène Delacroix were struck by his extreme distinction and by his seignorial manner. One must concede that he owed this innate manner to someone other than a son of a former steward of the Belvals; it is credible that he actually owed it to the great, very great seigneur who frequented Madame Charles Delacroix. [. . .] There is a good chance that Eugène Delacroix was one of those love children who are so often gifted with prestigious talents.

Raymond Escholier, 1926⁶

☞ The resemblance between Talleyrand's visage and Delacroix's, as they appear in portraits, still seems singularly troubling.

André Joubin, 1932⁷

☞ On his paternal side, as on his maternal side, the natural distinction of Eugène Delacroix is thus completely legitimate.

Paul Loppin, 1972⁸

☞ . . . his distant deportment, his proud and aristocratic carriage, his "slanted smile" and his "pallor with a yellow cast," his entire face, irresistibly evoke the illustrious diplomat. To convince oneself, it is only necessary to juxtapose their portraits. The low, pronounced brow, the deeply set eye with its heavy lid, the compressed and disdainful lips, the firm, round chin set within the collar and high cravat, all impose a comparison.

René Huyghe, 1990⁹

One of the first things one learns in a typical life-and-work treatment of the painter Eugène Delacroix is that his real father was probably not Charles Delacroix, but the notorious statesman Charles Maurice de Talleyrand. This story of illegitimacy has the effect of associating the painter from his very

beginnings with an intriguing scandal.¹⁰ Delacroix was born on 26 April 1798, suspiciously close in time to a debilitating illness, operation, and convalescence undergone by Charles Delacroix. His condition and the operation itself are well known because the doctor who performed it published the whole process, first in the *Moniteur universel* and then in brochure form (a copy of which, bizarrely, the artist Eugène owned). Ambassador Delacroix's name was emblazoned in the title, broadcasting his role in the historic operation and preserving it for prurient posterity.¹¹ On 13 September 1797, the surgeon Imbert-Delonnes removed a "monstrous tumor" of twenty-eight pounds, in which were tangled "the most delicate masculine organs," a tumor that apparently rendered him impotent. Charles Delacroix's subsequent absence from Paris, as French ambassador in The Hague, at the time of Eugène's birth, lent emotional credibility to the notion of the son's illegitimacy. The story involves lurid questions of sexual intrigue, fidelity and adultery, and deformity and virility and, as such, was irresistible to the nineteenth-century imagination.

Perhaps none of this would have aroused the attention of historians had arts commentator Théophile Silvestre not made a sly reference to Talleyrand in an early publication about Delacroix's life, in which he referred to the artist as having been "born in the heart of diplomacy, cradled on the knees of Talleyrand," who, he added, perhaps coyly, "was the successor of [Delacroix's] father in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs."¹² Since then, art historians and others padded this mere hint of a rapport between the artist and the diplomat, citing Eugène's facial resemblance in portraits to images of Talleyrand, and a full-blown artistic myth took shape, abetted by a surprising amount of passionate and even scholarly attention.¹³ (One twentieth-century French magistrate devoted his entire adult life to elaborating his position on the subject.)

Perhaps more important than its origins are the meaning this theory was invested with once invented and the amplitude and tenacity it acquired. Tellingly, even those who oppose the "legend" of Talleyrand's paternity concern themselves at some length with Delacroix's paternal origins. Given its pervasiveness in the Delacroix literature, unraveling the legend is probably fruitless: the legend persists. It is more meaningful, in the end, to determine what it portends than to attempt to banish it. In other words, some treatment of the problem of Delacroix's paternity has become a fixture, even a trope, in the scholarship and popular literature on the artist, so much so that it has become part of the unavoidable, collective burden of specialists. The very fact that so many people have felt compelled to comment one way or another on the issue shows the special status it has been accorded, unusual among myths about artists' personal lives: most are easy to ignore, dismiss, or sidestep in serious scholarship. Paradoxically, the additional fact that authors have had recourse to medical and scientific "proof" increases the mythic whiff of these

stories: when art historians consult doctor friends to diagnose an obscure medical condition dating back two hundred years, one can be sure that the result is not particularly reliable. But these medical footnotes also betray an insatiable suspicion that these are only stories; the multiplication of “hard” evidence to demonstrate one position or another paradoxically ensures the utter relativity of any position, producing an anxiety about truth that will never be appeased and the certainty that the problem will never be either solved or laid to rest.¹⁴

It is perhaps symptomatic that once Delacroix's life begins to be narrated, it is the question of his father's paternity that is the most recurrent of anecdotes. The strange and startling persistence of the question of Delacroix's biological father, although frequently dismissed, implies its perceived centrality and importance for handling aspects of Delacroix's art.¹⁵ For that is what artistic myths usually accomplish: they provide shorthand explanations for some aspect of the artist's work, taking condensed, mnemonic, and often fablelike form, as in Giorgio Vasari's famous tale about Cimabue's fortuitous discovery of young Giotto drawing expertly on stones while tending sheep. The story conveys the idea of the artist's astonishing talent, untrained, even as a rough shepherd, in quasi-allegorical form.¹⁶ No one examines *these* stories for their truth-content: their “reality effect” is entirely beside the point. The notion of origins as defining some essence of character, or predestination, is actually typical of artists' biographies; these ideas are often encapsulated in mythic anecdotes about artists' family backgrounds and childhoods.¹⁷

What, then, is explained by this particular myth?¹⁸

The notion of some possible explanation of an innate superiority underscores the stories about Delacroix's paternity: these accounts discern character distinctions in class and sexuality, signaling great adroitness and power. Delacroix is associated with Talleyrand's sexual capaciousness and virility, vividly contrasted with images of Charles's bodily deformation: he was reportedly so swollen by the tumor as to resemble a “pregnant woman.”¹⁹ Extensive discussions of the testicle operation Charles underwent invoke impotence; Charles's deformity and illness are contrasted with Talleyrand's great fertility. (This is underscored by the counterposition, which maintains Charles's manly stoicism during a long operation without anesthetic and his startlingly rapid recovery to impregnate his wife within fifteen days after the ordeal.) The stories also impute to Delacroix Talleyrand's rascally reputation and his coolness, diplomacy, and intelligence. Finally, Talleyrand is often made responsible for Delacroix's surprising (and otherwise presumably unfathomable) “*manières de grand seigneur*” and general class superiority. This is especially vivid in Raymond Escholier's 1926 version, in which he creates a new class profile for Charles's father as a kind of servant. This general

social distinction is made visible in various accounts of Delacroix's success, elegance, giftedness, distinctive carriage, and good looks. Escholier wrote, "There is a good chance that Eugène Delacroix was one of those love children who are so often gifted with prestigious talents."²⁰ Delacroix's elegant manners, his superciliousness, his taste and self-control, and his success with women have all been tied to Talleyrand's secret paternity. There is even a modern, careerist version of this notion that attributes a supposedly inexplicably early upswing in Delacroix's artistic prospects to his association with Talleyrand.

This elaborate yearning for an alternative and prestigious family affiliation for Delacroix, and the simultaneous excoriation of Charles Delacroix, seems to betoken a historical fantasy or myth, a kind of historical family romance. The family romance, as elaborated initially by Freud and more recently by literary critics and historians of nineteenth-century culture, features ascension from low roots to elegant circles through the vehicle of a secret or illegitimate family.²¹ This is particularly manifest in Escholier's account of Delacroix's grandfather as servant. Other accounts of the Talleyrand story, too, intimate that the artist's noble manners, distinction, and appearance come from this secret source. According to the Freudian notion of the family romance, fantasy stories that invent new families provide alternative social realities: special freedom and novel social possibilities. These fabrications typically take the form of "affairs between countesses and coachmen or chauffeurs, or between princesses and gypsies." The family romance includes the fantasies of the imagined illegitimacy of a sibling or of the celebrity of the parents, with the alternative version of imagining oneself actually belonging to a family of nomads or gypsies.²² The very form of these stories about Delacroix and Talleyrand likens them to family-romance fantasies: they highlight sensationally illicit passions and events that cannot be verified.

Not only is this an odd and intriguing string of projections, perhaps a mythic means of proclaiming the artist's predestination for his vocation, but it is also a list of attributes making up the essential ingredients of a central nineteenth-century literary form: a struggle with paternal authority and social ascension are key components of many nineteenth-century novels, derived from the earlier revolutionary unease about fathers and patriarchy. This unease is witnessed in the marginalization or absence of the father in late-eighteenth-century novels and in revolutionaries' own accounts of maternal influence in childhood.²³ Here is historian Lynn Hunt on Marthe Robert's theory of the novel:

In Robert's view, the novel marks the emergence of the Freudian family romance from the realm of individual daydreams into the

world of literature. What had been an individual fantasy that one's real parents were princes and ladies rather than the peasants or shopkeepers sitting at the family table *now becomes the literary trope of social ascension*. The novel as a genre is about the foundling and the bastard making a place for themselves in the social world; they do not simply imagine a better place for themselves. This emergence from the realm of daydreams was made possible, Robert argues, by the reality of greater social mobility in the 18th century; dreams of social mobility now became reality and hence could be written about.²⁴

The Delacroix paternity issue is not, however, entirely about an unaffiliated individual mobility; it provides mysterious guardianship (the Talleyrand thesis) or more conventional dynastic inheritance (the Charles Delacroix partisans) and is ultimately very concerned with provenance. For instance, much might be made of the fact that Delacroix was, in a real sense, orphaned: he was only seven years old when his father died in 1805 and sixteen when his mother died in 1814. Yet these circumstances have received little attention.

It is worth noting that the Talleyrand myth differs from the artistic myths of the later nineteenth century, with their modernist emphasis on lack of origins, on leaving behind the past and lineage. Famously defiant of their fathers' chosen careers for them in the law, the artists Gustave Courbet, Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, and Paul Cézanne are defined by myths that vaunt independence from any paternal authority in art: Claude Monet's desire for the innocence of blindness and his pranks at the expense of his teacher Charles Gleyre, Courbet's autodidacticism, Manet's resistance to the pedagogy of painter Thomas Couture.²⁵ These are typical midcentury masculine heroes: those who do not do what the fathers are good at, what good sense and bourgeois mores would dictate. By contrast, even while the rumors of Delacroix's filiation subvert one father, they supply him with another and attribute his very character and professional success to this paternity.

Janet Beizer finds a similar ambivalence in the novels of Delacroix's contemporary, Balzac, in which she sees a simultaneous overt desire to reinforce paternal authority and less explicitly to subvert it:

the rise of the literary form [the novel] which has been defined as a staging of the father is a response to a world wrenched away from traditional sources of authority and unable to fill or to accept the void. This helps to explain why Balzac, like so many of his novelist contemporaries, insistently plots family lines, why his family plots strive to recover the father's place, but tend instead to discover the

father's displacement and the resultant disruption of family order. More critically, it emphasizes the fact that the father being sought is an essentially symbolic figure, that is, a regulating power or an authorizing presence.²⁶

Beizer, in other words, links the ambivalence about the father figure to the larger issue of a post-revolutionary society that at once organizes itself around paternal authority and strives to undermine it.²⁷ As historians have argued, the loss of traditional sources of authority of the ancien régime, monarchy and church, had a broad impact on social and cultural life: the nineteenth century became the century of the father, who, replacing the king, now symbolized social order and control. Scholars have described the post-revolutionary period as "the century of paternal prerogative" and its culture as "dynastic, bound to source and origins, mimetic."²⁸ Likewise, I believe the story of Delacroix's filiation should not be taken in a literal, psychological way as a neurotic fantasy generated by the artist himself. Nor is it merely a literary trope, isolated to the heroes of the *Bildungsroman*. More significantly, we might argue with other cultural critics that the Oedipal story, underlying these tales of deposed fathers, is a basic organizing concept of post-revolutionary masculinity. In this sense, the Talleyrand legend locates Delacroix in a key nineteenth-century myth, symptomatically shaped in the form of a family story.

My point is how well the story of Delacroix's filiation matches the values of a specific historical period: formed by revolutionary views of paternity, yet predating the full-scale modernist rebellion of the nineteenth century. It is in this sense that I regard it as an illustrative family romance, as a mythic condensation of a particular social and cultural moment. The family romance surrounding Delacroix is symptomatic of Romanticism's historical origins and its crisis of authority.²⁹ Like the legitimating narratives of the Restoration monarchs that forged a mythic continuity with the royal past, the Talleyrand myth likewise assigns paternity rather than eliminates it. Delacroix's story both *reinforces* and *defies* a (fantasy) authority.

The Restoration's renewal of patriarchal authority cannot be separated from the thorny issue of inheritance and succession. In a period marked by intense historical self-consciousness, heated debates about the reform of revolutionary inheritance law (paternity, primogeniture, legitimacy) and the new laws of restitution of émigré property reveal a central preoccupation with the volatile subject of inheritance. These issues are also visible in the art-historical stories told about Delacroix. In broader artistic terms, this preoccupation is paralleled by the Restoration regime's desire to shape French artistic lineage: it censored David's presence in Paris and rewrote the meaning of his work, attempting to mold the history of French art in its own interests.³⁰

A concern for inheritance – a patrilineal authority bridging generations – can be traced, too, in artistic practices of the period.³¹ Like royal legitimacy, artistic authority had long been buttressed with dynastic metaphors until later in the nineteenth century, and the return to the throne of a legitimate monarch reinforced this tradition. With their associative rituals and hierarchies, these studio practices – and concomitant notions of ateliers, schools (écoles), masters (chefs d'école), pupils, assistants – invoke and reinforce a quasi-familial institutional authority. They contrast with the modernist trope of a boasted lack of affiliation, later upheld by Realist and Impressionist artists. Treatises of the period amply represent this patrilineal approach to art. The writings of arts commentator Alexandre Lenoir may serve as an example: his *Observations sur la Génie* (1824) organizes all artistic production into national “schools,” of which there is a male founder. Lenoir subdivided these national schools into generational schools, led by a master or “chef,” who passes on the baton to the next great male innovator of the subsequent generation. For the flavor of this, here is Lenoir:

The school of Vien was numerous, and his most distinguished students were Messieurs Peyron, Vincent, Ménageot, Barbier, Monsiau, Taillasson, Lemonnier, etc.; among them was also David, to whom we owe the complete restoration, not only of painting and of sculpture, but indeed of all of the industrial branches that belong to the arts of drawing; because Vien only prepared the way that was subsequently so gloriously traveled by David, and the honorable elderly Vien admitted as much himself. One day when he honored me with a visit, I spoke of the services he had rendered to his fatherland, in essaying a new restoration of the art of drawing and of painting; he replied modestly to me: “*I opened the door a crack, David pushed it wide open.*”³²

This masculine authority allowed certain painting practices to flourish, by which artists defined themselves in this premodernist generation. (The fanatical discipleship of David followers even while he lived in exile in Brussels bears witness to the ongoing life of this idea.)

Yet, on the very eve of Delacroix's public career, the masculine authority of the master painter, transmitting an artistic patrimony through students and disciples, was particularly unstable. David was in exile, and his famous students had arrived at periods of lower productivity. Antoine-Jean Gros, preoccupied with the large task of painting the cupola at Sainte-Geneviève, exhibited little. Guérin, appointed Director of the Rome Academy in 1822, was also sparingly represented in Paris exhibitions. Of the old guard, only François Gérard, now the first painter to the king, exhibited frequently.



1. Martin Drölling, *Kitchen Interior*, 1815. Oil on canvas, 65 × 80.8 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo: © Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York

A spate of deaths were soon to come. Pierre-Paul Prud'hon died in 1823 and Théodore Géricault and Anne-Louis Girodet in December 1824. David died in exile in 1825. The death of so many artists produced a kind of vacuum.

Institutions that in the past upheld the authority of tradition and continuity, the Academy and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, were weakened and marginalized in the larger process of artistic training and reward, as the Salon exhibitions acquired increasing precedence over training in Rome and Paris.³³ Furthermore, increasing numbers of women artists were active during the Restoration. To the dismay of many a contemporary commentator, large numbers of artists devoted their work to the marginalized areas of genre painting, portraiture, landscape, and interiors.³⁴ What was the kind of image that was receiving praise in the early Restoration Salons? Martin Drölling's *Kitchen Interior* (Fig. 1) was such a tremendous success at the Salon of 1817³⁵ that, after the artist's death, it remained on display in the Luxembourg, and

Charles Landon, for one, was still complaining about the amount of attention it was receiving in an account published in 1820. (Philibert Debucourt made a print of it in 1821.) The painting is representative of its type, a peaceful interior scene, much more about mood than figural mastery. With its evacuation of narrative and action, crisp *trompe-l'oeil* realism, quiet simplicity, unpretentiousness, slick miniaturist surface, and feminine preoccupation and tone,³⁶ Drölling's painting stood for a new kind of taste in the Restoration, one that seemed to menace the dominance of large-scale figural work. Neo-Classicism itself was under the sway of "anacreontic" modes that had the effect of undermining the masculine emphasis in traditional painting.³⁷

Given this deracinated state of the Restoration art world, it is of interest that Delacroix's first public painting, *Dante and Virgil*, deals with the theme of artistic paternity. In its embrace of the master genre, history painting, through an homage to masculine predecessors, it nonetheless simultaneously resists discipleship to David and other Neo-Classical "masters" and defies what could be seen as an incipient feminization of painting.



2. Eugène Delacroix, *Dante and Virgil*, 1822. Oil on canvas, 189 × 246 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo: © Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York

Dante and Virgil: Initiation

Unlike cases of later nineteenth-century modernism, Delacroix's first major work, *Dante and Virgil, Conducted by Phlegyas, Cross the Lake that Surrounds the Walls of the Infernal City of Dis*³⁸ (Fig. 2 and Plate I), advertises its artistic predecessors. Made for his public debut at the Salon of 1822, the painting explores the idea of artistic origins and descent, evoking the family romance of authority in the art world. The artist's delineation of a specific artistic terrain and a field of reception within which to be judged perhaps shows a strategy typical of a young artist. However, visual quotations, rather than mere subliminal allusions, make Delacroix's artistic "forefathers" explicit here, and critics readily perceived these borrowings. It is in part the identifiability of these artistic ancestors that gave his picture the look of ambition and the effect of controversy.

The register of Delacroix's solicitation of tradition is immediately evident in two aspects of the work. Based on Canto VIII of Dante's *Inferno*, the first part of the *Divine Comedy*, the literary subject signals the seriousness



3. Ary Scheffer, *Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta Appearing to Dante and Virgil*, 1855 (copy of version exhibited in 1822). Oil on canvas, 171 × 239 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo: © Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York



4. Eugène Delacroix, preliminary study of heads for *Dante and Virgil*. Pencil on paper, 27 × 20.1 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo: © Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York

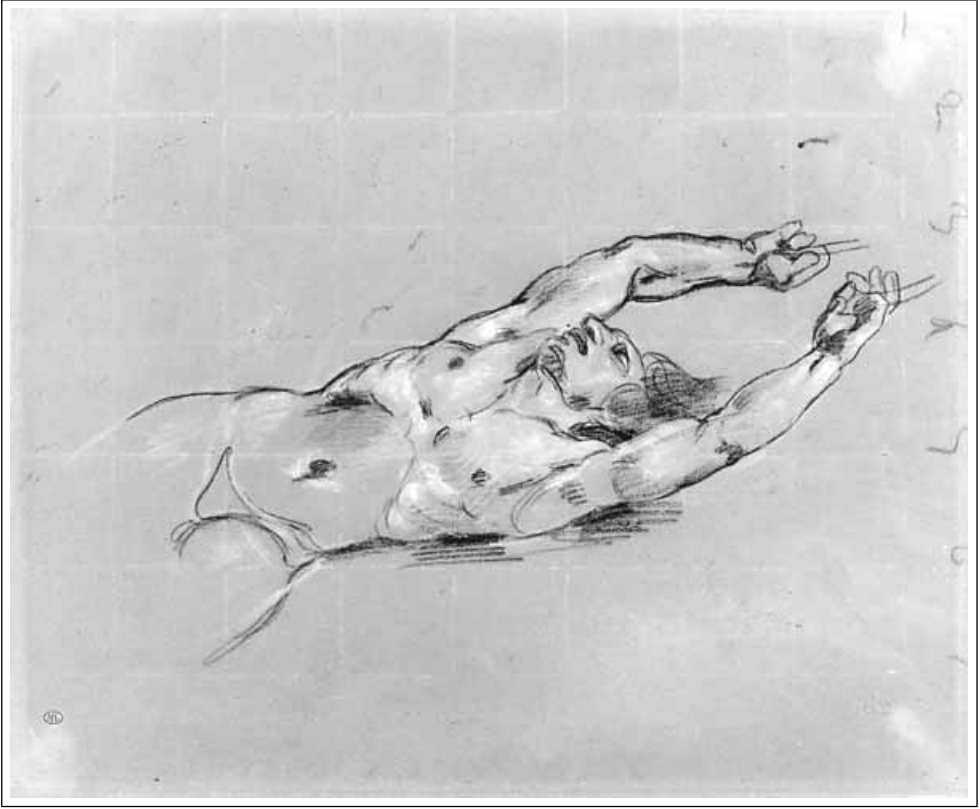
of Delacroix's painting and its claim to the status of history painting. Yet unlike Ary Scheffer's *Paolo and Francesca* (Fig. 3) of the same year, also drawn from the *Inferno*, Delacroix's evocation of the horrific atmosphere of the river Styx works as a kind of defiance, with its gloomy and unappealing mode. That is, it deals with the center of narratival history painting – tension, duress, challenge – not dream, reverie, and allegory, as does Scheffer's. (The difference of course has to do with the distinct passages chosen by each artist.) In Delacroix's image of the damned, tension in the bulging and twisted figures is appropriate to the theme of eternal hell and is brought out by grotesque gripping, clenching, and biting. The scene seems to pick up on what Chateaubriand described as Dante's "poetry of torture," building



5. Eugène Delacroix, early compositional sketch for *Dante and Virgil*, c. 1820. Pen, ink, and wash on paper, 31 × 39.6 cm. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, Bequest of Ruth L. Massey Tovell, Toronto, 1961. Photo: © National Gallery of Canada

visual intensity into the picture, whose impact contrasts with the “strained and brittle late neo-classicism of Guérin,” in the words of Lee Johnson.³⁹

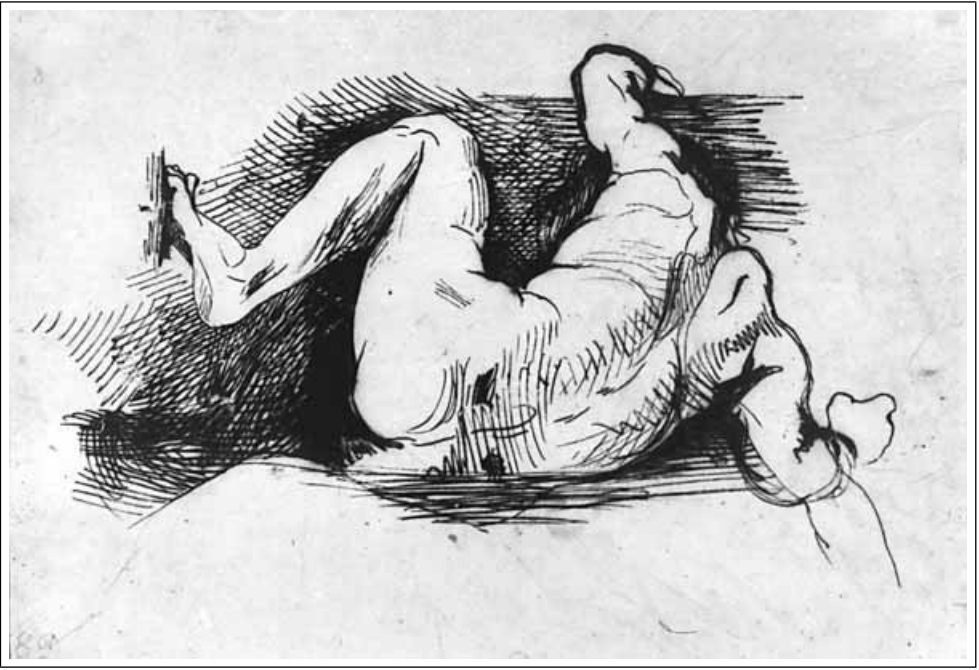
Apart from the dramatic subject and handling itself, the sheer profusion of muscular girth in his sculptural nudes clearly grounds Delacroix’s work within the most prestigious and time-honored pictorial tradition since the Renaissance, which centered on the figure. The dominance of these bulky, tensed forms marks a switch in direction as the artist worked toward the final painting. In an early sketch Delacroix had pictured the damned as floating heads, with bodies submerged in water (Fig. 4). In another, probably even earlier, compositional wash study in which Dante and Virgil are much more dominant, the figures of the damned are fewer and less prominent (Fig. 5). Most of the extant sketches for the final painting are repetitions of nude studies, apparently sketches done from life (see Figs. 6 and 7). These studies work through the figures’ placement of weight, contours, shading, and basic muscular structure. As such, they are anatomical studies of the kind an artist



6. Eugène Delacroix, study of nude man on back for *Dante and Virgil*. Conté crayon heightened with white chalk, squared, on paper, 23.7 × 28.5 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo: © Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York

following an academic path would be producing, for instance, as preparation for *envoi* paintings from the Rome Academy back to France. Typical of traditional procedure, too, even the clothed figure of Dante in Delacroix's final painting is apparently based on multiple studies after the live, nude model. (Only Virgil seems not to have been built up from such studies, and this shows in his curiously attenuated and unconvincing body, hidden in a conspicuous swathe of rather clumsy drapery.)

As has frequently been remarked, the art culture of this period still credited a particular prestige to the male body. As a young artist demonstrating his credentials, Delacroix was at pains to fill up his painting with as many as possible: large, sumptuous, muscled bodies in complicated and differing poses, all the more interesting because of their contrapuntal twisting and turning. So dominant are they in the painting that they tend to overpower the thematically more important figures of the two poets, whose indeterminate



7. Eugène Delacroix, study of nude man seen from behind for *Dante and Virgil*. Pen and brown ink on paper, 15.3 × 21.2 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo: © Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York

anatomies and insubstantial gestures and faces are dwarfed by the nudes. Achille Réveil's print reproduction of the painting, executed for Charles Landon's Salon review, confirms the distinctiveness of Delacroix's bodies (Fig. 8). Réveil so exaggerates and accentuates the musculature of the figures as to reveal that this was, for him, the salient and remarkable feature of the original painting by Delacroix. Furthermore, the fundamental departure of the reproduction – the stylization of decorative serpentine lines that cling to the picture surface of the contour drawing – indicates by its very distance from the original painting how important the focus on sculptural bulk is to the effect of the actual painting. (Interestingly, the strongly sculptural quality of this painting will eventually disappear from Delacroix's work, making it unusual in his oeuvre.) Within the painting's composition, the vagueness of the seascape and flaming town in the background also give particular emphasis to the tumbling foreground figures.

Given the context of a perceived decline in large history painting, Delacroix's painting represented a certain *parti pris*. For of course paintings refer to other works of art not only positively, in homage or imitation, but also negatively, in an overt distancing from them. Delacroix's nudes



8. Achille Réveil, after Delacroix's *Dante and Virgil*, 1822. Engraving from C. P. Landon, *Annales du Musée et de l'Ecole moderne des Beaux-Arts. Salon de 1822* (Paris, Imprimerie royale, 1822), Plate 55. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

contrast with the ephebic male nudes and the anacreontic classicism of the period. How turgid and intense are Delacroix's figures in comparison with the preternatural smoothness of Pierre-Claude-François Delorme's *Cephalus and Aurora* (Fig. 9), also of 1822! The comparison is more meaningful than immediately apparent, given the origins of Delorme's work: based overtly on Pierre-Narcisse Guérin's painting of the same subject from 1810, Delorme's painting appeared in the same Salon as Delacroix's. The *Dante* could, then, also be compared indirectly with the work of Delacroix's own teacher, Guérin. Recent research by Thomas Crow, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, and Carol Ockman shows that the practice and meaning of classicism were undergoing radical changes and reinterpretations in this period. In this circumstance, Delacroix's own engagement with tradition in this painting takes on specific import.



9. Pierre-Claude-François Delorme, *Cephalus and Aurora*, 1822. Oil on canvas, 225 × 152 cm. Sens, Musée Municipal. Photo: © Réunion des Musées Nationaux/ Art Resource, New York

In contrast to Delorme's and Guérin's classicism, Delacroix's painting is encoded with the signs of a hypervirility. (Indeed, Delacroix probably executed the sole female figure in the painting after a male model.⁴⁰) As I will argue, this virility is central to the renewal of painting tradition that the *Dante* proposes and is connected to the homage Delacroix pays to his predecessors. In the massive bodies, composition, and subject of his *Dante*, Delacroix was announcing his ambition through his affiliation with serious, prestigious artistic predecessors.

Critics recognized this bid then and art historians have ever since. The three artists most frequently related to the *Dante* are, in order of their



10. Eugène Delacroix, preliminary sketch of boat with oarsman for *Dante and Virgil*. Pen, pencil, sepia, and gray and brown wash on paper, 23.8 × 17.8 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo: © Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York

perceived importance for the work, Michelangelo, Rubens, and Géricault, all of whom haunt the early correspondence and journal of Delacroix, along with Dante himself. The painting, Thiers opined in the exaggerated rhetoric of art criticism of the period, showed the “boldness of Michelangelo and the fecundity of Rubens,” and Gros reportedly told Delacroix, in an oft-quoted expression, that the *Dante* was “du Rubens châtié” (a chastened version of Rubens).⁴¹ Figures from Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* and Sistine Chapel ceiling, in particular the *ignudi* body type, are frequently mentioned (Johnson, Rubin, and Sérullaz), and several writers relate a preliminary sketch of a boat with oarsman to the famous segment of the *Last Judgment* including Charon (Fig. 10).⁴² In the nineteenth century, Alfred Bruyas and Pierre Andrieu affirmed that



11. Théodore Géricault, *Raft of the Medusa*, 1819. Oil on canvas, 490 × 716 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo: © Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York

the female figure derives from Michelangelo's *Night* (whose studies were also done from male models).⁴³ In other words, there is a long association of Michelangelo and Delacroix in the interpretive history of the *Dante*.

In addition, French writers also associated the two other most frequently cited predecessors, Géricault and Rubens, with Michelangelo. The figures of the damned in the foreground of *Dante* vividly recall the lolling, corpulent sea nymphs in Rubens's *Disembarkation of Marie de Médicis at Marseille*.⁴⁴ (From 1816, Rubens's entire Médicis cycle was on public view in the Grande Galerie at the Louvre.) Delacroix would have known Michelangelo's works, for one, through sketches Géricault brought back with him from Italy, again connecting the two artists in the firmament of Delacroix's idols.⁴⁵ Modern writers have long pointed to Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (Fig. 11), seen in the Salon preceding Delacroix's debut, as a strong referent, a comparison made in the nineteenth century as well, for instance by Baudelaire and Clément de Ris. The link is clinched for some scholars by an early Delacroix sketch – which Maurice Sérullaz related to the boat in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* – that resembles particularly strongly the early, chaotic sketches by Géricault for his *Raft*. The lingering presence of Géricault in Delacroix's work can be measured by a “negative” comparison with another boat scene from the Salon



12. Horace Vernet, *Joseph Vernet Attached to a Mast Studying the Effects of a Storm*, 1822. Oil on canvas, 275 × 356 cm. Avignon, Musée Calvet. Photo: André Guerrand, courtesy of Musée Calvet, Avignon

of 1822, Horace Vernet's *Joseph Vernet Attached to a Mast Studying the Effects of a Storm* (Fig. 12),⁴⁶ a different type of painting altogether.

I think some scepticism should be exercised in considering exact sources for specific segments and figures of Delacroix's painting. The attribution of sources by virtue of resemblance may be endless and, finally, fruitless if no other criterion of plausibility than resemblance is applied. Without clear markers (evidence) of explicit copies, there is nothing to hold us more definitively to one reading or another. Even a proven source does not necessarily help us interpret the final work of art. Yet what does seem necessary to recognize is that Delacroix and his contemporaries perceived the general quality and presence of these artistic predecessors in his painting. And there is an interpretive tradition built around the *Dante* that secures these references. Once we recognize this, the question becomes: what did it mean to them to see the qualities of Michelangelo (or Rubens or Géricault) in a work of art? How did this identification play into a reading of the work?