

DELACROIX WAS PREOCCUPIED with the fate of civilizations, their origins, and, especially, their ends. The theme occurs already in works from early in his career, beginning with paintings from the 1820s such as *Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi* (fig. 1) and *The Death of Sardanapalus* (fig. 2). The monumental allegory of Greece standing atop the ruins of Greek civilization after the year long siege of Missolonghi by the Turks was a highly topical subject in the service of a highly visible liberal cause in Restoration France, the Greek War of Independence.¹ *The Death of Sardanapalus* of 1827, however literary its origin in Byron's play, and whatever occasion it may have presented for a virtuosic display of flesh, décor, and frenzied movement, also represents the destruction of civilization, this time at both a private and a public level: the monarch who, besieged within his palace at Nineveh by his rebel subjects, orders his own household, and notably everything that gave him pleasure—his wives and all his property—to be destroyed before his eyes, as he himself goes to his death.

While the theme is thus very much present in Delacroix's early work, it truly comes into its own during the "long" decade of the 1840s, around two important public commissions on which he worked from 1838 to 1847: the library of the Palais Bourbon, seat of the Chamber of Deputies (1838–47), and the

library of the Palais du Luxembourg, seat of the Chamber of Peers (1840–46). The theme was eminently appropriate for a library, the institution that represents, encompasses, and preserves civilizations, and it dominates spectacularly both of Delacroix's schemes. He filled sheets of paper with notes to himself of subjects appropriate to the theme: some of these were indeed included in one or other of the libraries, others were "recycled" into separate easel paintings, still others were abandoned altogether. Crucially, Delacroix's subjects reflect not only the preservation of cultures and civilizations but also their destruction, the threats that they face, the chance circumstances in which they either perish or survive. Orpheus bringing to the primitive Greeks the benefits of the arts and civilization, or Attila and his barbarian hordes overrunning Italy and the arts; Aristotle describing the animals sent by Alexander the Great, or Seneca condemned to death by Nero; Alexander preserving the poems of Homer in a precious casket taken on the battlefield after the defeat of the Persians, or Tarquin foolishly refusing the Sibylline books that are then delivered to the flames: these are just some of the subjects in and through which Delacroix explores the nature of civilization, its fragility, contingency, and vulnerability, the fortuitousness of its preservation, the barbarism that menaces it from both without and



FIG. 1. Eugène Delacroix, **GREECE ON THE RUINS OF MISSOLONGHI**, 1826. Oil on canvas, 209 × 147 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux (Bx E 439)

FIG. 2. Eugène Delacroix, **THE DEATH OF SARDANAPALUS**, 1827. Oil on canvas, 392 × 496 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (RF 2346)





FIG. 3. Eugène Delacroix, **LIBERTY LEADING THE PEOPLE**, 1831. Oil on canvas, 260 × 325 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (RF 129)

within. Deep within his treatment of these stories lies a philosophy of history that is complex, varied, and far from dogmatic, a philosophy that emphasizes both natural forces and human decisions, circumstance and intention, progress and regress, causation and unpredictability in the unfolding of history.

It is tempting to link these ideas, and their interaction, to one or other personal, political, or social situation. Delacroix lived through turbulent times at both the personal and national levels. He belonged to the generation that crossed the great threshold of 1815 dividing the Napoleonic Empire from the Restoration and that became the “Romantic” generation of the 1820s.² His father had been a member of the National Convention who had voted for the execution of Louis XVI in 1792 and had gone on to become minister of external relations under the Directory and later prefect of Marseille and finally of Bordeaux under Napoleon. Orphaned at seventeen, Delacroix was left virtually alone, his nearest sibling sixteen years his senior. A sense of personal fragility often pierces through the rather meditative detachment of his *Journal*. The inscription that he placed on the gravestone

of his brother Charles, his last remaining sibling, in 1846, is telling: “Eugène Delacroix, the last surviving member of his family, dedicated this simple monument of his sorrow to the dear remains of his father and his brother.”³

On a political level, too, the vulnerability of civilization was a recurrent theme in his thought and work. A supporter of liberal causes in the 1820s, the painter of that iconic emblem of the 1830 Revolution, *Liberty Leading the People* (fig. 3), Delacroix was nevertheless, even at this early period, intensely concerned with the costs, human and otherwise, of revolution. The *Liberty* itself is an eloquent example of this: the figure of Liberty strides atop the wreckage of battle and the corpses of the fallen, hardly an idealized image of the effects of revolution. As the preparatory drawings suggest (see figs. 4, 5), the figure of Liberty evolved out of that of Greece in the earlier *Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi*, and the two pictures share, despite their differences, a common conception: a female allegorical figure surrounded by the ruins of civilization.⁴

The February Revolution of 1848, the social and political turbulence that followed, and the violence of



FIG. 4. Eugène Delacroix, Preparatory drawing for **GREECE ON THE RUINS OF MISSOLONGHI**. Musée du Louvre, Paris (RF 9145, fol. 12r)

FIG. 5. Eugène Delacroix, Preparatory drawing for **LIBERTY LEADING THE PEOPLE**. Musée du Louvre, Paris (RF 4523)



the conflict between the workers and the government known as the June Days seemed to confirm for Delacroix his belief in the fragility of civilizations. While he took an active part in the artistic reforms instituted by the 1848 Revolution, he was manifestly uneasy about revolution itself, skeptical of its effectiveness, and unconvinced by the ideologies that drove it as much as by those that opposed it: “Knock down, slash and burn, pull up by the roots, that’s what a fanaticism for freedom can do just as much as religious fanaticism can”; elsewhere he bemoans the “stupidity of the demolishers, as much religious fanatics as revolutionary fanatics.”⁵ At the same time, and for all his desire for social stability, he had a deep distrust of the Second Empire and its free-market economic policies, and he frequently invoked, with high irony, the capriciousness of political and ideological allegiances of any type:

26 May 1855. At Prince Napoleon’s, for the first of his receptions. What a crowd, what faces! The republican Barye, the republican Rousseau, the republican

Français, the royalist so and so, the Orleanist somebody else, the whole lot pushing and jostling. [. . .] I had a bad night, at least at first. I got up in the early hours and walked about. That made me feel better. I enjoyed that solemn moment when Nature refreshes itself and royalists and republicans lie deep in a common sleep.⁶

In this regard, it is not surprising that the precariousness of civilization, the key moment that determines whether it survives or perishes, the opportune decision that spells its loss or survival, the single circumstance—haphazard or intentional—that creates or destroys it, should loom large in his work.

Around his work on the libraries, a number of subjects that Delacroix either considered or executed in other contexts also reflect the theme of the precariousness of civilization. In *The Entry of the Crusaders into Constantinople* (fig. 6), the capture of the Byzantine capital by the Crusaders brings death, chaos, and destruction: a woman in the lower right, stripped to the waist in an image of violation, cradles a dead



FIG. 6. Eugène Delacroix, **THE ENTRY OF THE CRUSADERS INTO CONSTANTINOPLE**, 1840. Oil on canvas, 411 × 497 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (3821)



FIG. 7. Eugène Delacroix, **APOLLO SLAYING PYTHON**, 1852.
Oil on canvas, 800 × 750 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre (3818)

woman in her arms; behind her a young man lies dying, and a woman is attacked by a Crusader; an old man in the middle left is brutally pulled from his palace by another Crusader; an old man in the lower left foreground, supported by a girl and a small child, pleads for mercy from the conquerors; the treasures of Constantinople spill onto the ground and are trampled underfoot; in the magnificent expanse of the city that spreads out in the background are the columns of soldiers, bursts of flame, and plumes of smoke signaling the sack and plunder of the capital of the great empire.⁷ In *The Last Words of Marcus Aurelius* (pl. 11), to be discussed in more detail below, the reign of the sage gives way to that of a dissolute tyrant. In even the mythological subject of *Apollo Slaying Python* (fig. 7), executed for the central panel of the ceiling of the Apollo Gallery in the Louvre, Apollo has reached

his last arrow in his elemental battle with the monster of the slime: a single arrow stands between the victory of light and the return of darkness. In both his writings and his paintings, Delacroix explores the tumultuous transition, and the often exceedingly narrow gap, between civilization and barbarism, presenting a complex reflection on and fascination with the idea of civilization, its fragility and tenuousness, its vulnerability to nature, man, and supernatural forces, its susceptibility to threats from both without and, more menacingly, within, the slender thread by which it may survive and perhaps reemerge in a different age and culture.

The poet and critic Charles Baudelaire understood well this aspect of Delacroix's work. In his essay *L'Oeuvre et la vie d'Eugène Delacroix*, published in 1863 after the painter's death, he reflects on the drama and violence of Delacroix's oeuvre overall:

The moral of these works [. . .] has a manifestly molochistic character. In his work, there is nothing but desolation, massacres, conflagrations; everything bears witness to the eternal, incorrigible barbarousness of mankind. Cities in flames and smoldering, victims with their throats cut, women raped, even children thrown under the hooves of horses or under the dagger of crazed mothers; this entire oeuvre, I say, is like some terrifying hymn in honor of fatality and irremediable suffering.⁸

More than simply a fascination with violence and destruction, however, the "molochistic" character of Delacroix's art reflected, as Baudelaire perceived, his concern with the precariousness of civilization and his suspicion of ideas of progress:

He believed that nothing changes, even though everything seems to change, and that certain tumultuous epochs in human history invariably reveal analogous phenomena. [. . .] If you carelessly mentioned in front of him the great chimera of modern times, the monstrous hot-air balloon of continuous perfectibility and progress, he would happily demand: "Where are your Phidiases? Where are your Raphaels?"⁹

Baudelaire was speaking from experience. As we know from Delacroix's *Journal*, on 5 February 1849 he had visited Delacroix and made the mistake of expressing his admiration for the socialist philosopher and politician Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Although Delacroix does not record his reply to the young poet, he notes

ironically: "His views seem to me thoroughly modern and completely progressive"; significantly, the visit leaves Delacroix feeling "really depressed."¹⁰

The rhetoric of history as a cyclical alternation between civilization and barbarism, progress and regress, was common in the post-Revolutionary context of nineteenth-century France. Delacroix shared this view to some extent, though with important distinctions, as we shall see. Nevertheless, he frequently expressed his rejection of the idea of indefinite progress:

I think that, after the experiences which have been staring us in the face for the past year, we can say that all progress must necessarily bring not an even greater progress, but in the end the negation of progress, a return to the point where we started. The history of humankind is there to prove it; but the blind faith of this generation and the preceding one in modern ideas, in the coming of some era of humanity that should bring complete change, [. . .] this bizarre faith that nothing in prior centuries justifies is basically the only guarantee of those future successes, those revolutions in human destiny that they so wish for. Isn't it obvious that progress, that is, the progressive evolution of things, toward both the good and the bad, has brought society in our own time to the edge of the abyss into which it could very well fall and give way to complete barbarism. [. . .] What is in the process of perishing in our society will undoubtedly be reconstituted or maintained elsewhere for some greater or lesser period.¹¹

Delacroix's own view of progress was of not a regular and cyclical process but rather a capricious and unpredictable one, susceptible at every moment to suspension, arrest, or regression. The overall movement of history is one of sometimes violent alternation, in which progress may lead one society to barbarism and reemerge in another one altogether.

Indeed, for Delacroix, the threats to civilization and the sources of decline come often from *within* civilization itself: "Barbarians are not found only among savages; how many savages there are in France, in England, in this Europe that is so proud of its enlightenment."¹² The presence, or threat, of barbarism within civilized society is a recurrent topic in his diary and his notes: "recent periods of dreaded memory have showed that the barbarian and even the savage still lived in civilized man."¹³ This is the



FIG. 8. Eugène Delacroix, **ORPHEUS COMES TO GOVERN THE STILL SAVAGE GREEKS AND TEACH THEM THE ARTS OF PEACE**, half-dome, 1845–47. Oil and wax medium on wall, 1098 × 735 cm. Bibliothèque du Palais Bourbon, Paris

FIG. 9. Eugène Delacroix, **ATTILA AND HIS BARBARIAN HORDES OVERRUNNING ITALY AND THE ARTS**, half-dome, 1843–47. Oil and wax medium on wall, 1098 × 735 cm. Bibliothèque du Palais Bourbon, Paris



case not only in times of social and political unrest but in society generally: “The savage always returns. The most extreme civilization cannot banish from our cities the atrocious crimes that seem the lot of people blinded by barbarism.”¹⁴ Envy, hatred, materialism, malice, dishonesty are only some of the forms of a barbarism that exists, indeed thrives, in “civilized” societies: “Crimes that we see committed by a host of scoundrals living in a state of society are more terrible than those committed by savages”;¹⁵ a “savage” may kill for reasons of survival, but “these perfidious intrigues that are carefully planned and are hidden behind all sorts of veils—of friendship, love, acts of kindness, etc.—are seen only among civilized people.”¹⁶

The fruits of civilization itself can weaken physical health or moral character, as in the materialism and commercialism of contemporary France:

I don’t need to point out how much certain so-called advances have been detrimental to morality, or even to well-being. One invention, by suppressing or diminishing work and effort, may have diminished our level of patience for enduring ills and our level of energy for surmounting them. [. . .] Some other improvement, by increasing luxury and a seeming well-being, may have exerted a fatal influence on the health of generations, on their physical state, and may have equally brought about a moral decline. Man borrows from nature poisons such as tobacco and opium so as to make them instruments of vulgar pleasures. He is punished by falling into a state of lethargy and insensibility.¹⁷

Delacroix returns to this point frequently:

So it is that after a century and a half almost of a more refined civilization which recalls the great age of antiquity—I mean the century of Louis XIV and a bit beyond—the human species [. . .] is again declining into the darkness of a wholly new barbarism. Mercantilism and the love of pleasure are, in this state of things, the most energetic motives of the human soul.¹⁸

These ideas organize and dominate the library of the Palais Bourbon, in which two massive hemicycles at either end of the room—one representing the origins of civilization in *Orpheus Comes to Govern the Still Savage Greeks and Teach Them the Arts of Peace* (fig. 8) and the other the destruction of that same civilization



FIG. 10. Eugène Delacroix, **THE DEATH OF SENECA**, pendantive, probably 1841. Oil on canvas, 221 × 291 cm. Bibliothèque du Palais Bourbon, Paris

in *Attila and His Barbarian Hordes Overrunning Italy and the Arts* (fig. 9)—frame a long series of twenty scenes representing various aspects of the history and mythology of European civilization. In between the two foundational stories of creation and destruction, Delacroix depicts the ongoing struggle against which civilization defines itself or with which it must contend at every point. For every image of serenity and virtue—the just lawgiver Lycurgus consulting the Pythia at Delphi and receiving the blessing of the gods (see pl. 6), Alexander preserving the poems of Homer, the poet Hesiod inspired by the Muse—there is either a corresponding one of violence or a suggestion, within the image itself, of the barbarism at its boundaries. Archimedes is killed by a “barbaric” Roman soldier (the term is Delacroix’s);¹⁹ Hippocrates refuses the gifts by which the king of Persia tries to tempt him to betray his own people, showing a virtue that resists, but cannot overcome, the barbarism that surrounds him; Seneca is condemned to death by his pupil, the cruel and corrupt emperor Nero (fig. 10); Cicero denounces Verres, the corrupt ruler of Sicily, who had confiscated through extortion the treasures

of his subjects; even *Socrates and His Genius* cannot fail to recall the most salient aspect of the story, the virtuous philosopher put to death by a “barbaric” society.

In other scenes, the barbarism of humanity joins forces with that of nature. For every example of nature contributing to civilization—the legendary Roman king Numa receiving instruction from the wood-nymph Egeria—Delacroix furnishes a counter-example, in which nature destroys civilization. In *The Death of Pliny the Elder*, for example (fig. 11), Pliny dictates his account of the eruption of Vesuvius as he is about to be buried in the burning flow of lava. Significantly, Delacroix employs the very terms of this story in a note in his *Journal* in which he sets out his narrative of history:

As soon as man sharpens his intelligence, expands his ideas and the means of expressing them, and acquires needs, nature thwarts him at every point. [. . .] If he suspends for a moment the labor that he has imposed upon himself, she reasserts her rights, she invades, she undermines, she destroys or disfigures his work; [. . .] What do the Parthenon, Saint Peter’s, and so many marvels of art matter to the progress of the seasons, to the course of the stars, rivers, and winds? An earthquake, *the lava of a volcano* will have their



FIG. 11. Eugène Delacroix, **THE DEATH OF PLINY THE ELDER**, pendentive, 1841. Oil on canvas, 221 × 291 cm. Bibliothèque du Palais Bourbon, Paris

FIG. 12. Eugène Delacroix, **ALEXANDER PRESERVING THE POEMS OF HOMER**, half-dome, 1846. Oil on canvas, diameter 680 cm. Bibliothèque du Palais du Luxembourg, Paris

way. [...] But man himself, when he abandons himself to the savage instinct that is the basis of his nature, does he not conspire with the elements to destroy fine works?²⁰

The destruction of fine works referred to here was more than rhetorical, since Delacroix had himself experienced this personally. On 24 February 1848, his painting *Richelieu Saying Mass* had been destroyed in the attack on the Palais Royal, a fact that he never discusses openly in the *Journal* but that surfaces in a quietly moving note in 1850: “—Mme Rang, *Richelieu Saying Mass*, sketch. The painting [itself] destroyed in the Palais Royal.”²¹ As Baudelaire reported, “the violence committed in 1848 against some of his works was not likely to convert him to the political sentimentalism of our age.”²²

Far from continuous progress, then, the march of history proceeds in fits and starts, with advances made at one moment disappearing at a later one, with gains counterbalanced by losses, marking “those endless alternations between grandeur and misery in which we see the weakness of mankind, as much as the singular power of human genius.”²³ In the library of the Palais du Luxembourg, we find a similar meditation on the origins and ends of civilization, and suggestions of the threats to it from within. A large hemicycle, *Alexander Preserving the Poems of Homer* (fig. 12), represents the salvation of civilization from within the destruction of war: the casket into which Alexander places the precious manuscript is taken on the battlefield after the defeat of the Persians. In the central dome of the library, the meeting of Dante, Virgil, and Homer recounted in Canto 4 of Dante’s *Inferno* sets in motion a parade of illustrious Greeks and Romans—soldiers, statesmen, philosophers, and poets who symbolize the union of the liberal arts and public life that Delacroix associated with a high civilization (fig. 13). Yet even here, we find somber reminders of the failure or destruction of these values. The group of Romans, for example (fig. 14), is dominated by the figure of Cato of Utica reading Plato’s *Phaedo* on the immortality of the soul before taking his own life, having refused to submit to Caesar’s tyranny. Another figure of Stoic resignation, Marcus Aurelius, listens attentively, seated along with Cato’s daughter Portia, who later, as the wife of Brutus, will follow her father’s example, swallowing the burning coals that here glow in front of her.



FIG. 13. Eugène Delacroix, DANTE AND THE SPIRITS OF THE GREAT, cupola, 1841–45. Oil on canvas, 350 × 680 cm. Bibliothèque du Palais du Luxembourg, Paris

FIG. 14. Eugène Delacroix, GROUP OF ROMANS; detail of DANTE AND THE SPIRITS OF THE GREAT. Bibliothèque du Palais du Luxembourg, Paris

The relationship between the figures and the stories of which they are part—in the hemicycle, Alexander preserving the poems of Homer, which then inspire Virgil's *Aeneid* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and ultimately the meeting of Homer, Virgil, and Dante depicted in the central dome—suggests the process by which civilization is continued, irregular and capricious, unpredictable and unforeseen:

Through what chance circumstance does a Dante or a Shakespeare appear, the latter among the still barbarous Anglo-Saxons, like a spring gushing forth in the midst of a desert, the former in mercantile Florence two hundred years before that elite of great minds of which he was the beacon? Each of these men arises suddenly and owes nothing to what preceded him, nor to what surrounds him: he is like that Indian god who engendered himself. [. . .] Dante and Shakespeare are two Homers [. . .] who arrive with a whole world of their own in which they move freely and without precedents.²⁴

Delacroix's vision is one of great individuals, "beacons" and "torches" lighting up the darkness of the ages, separate and different but "holding hands across the centuries,"²⁵ unique in themselves and proper to their times and culture, but equivalent—Dante or Virgil as a new Homer, but not an imitator of Homer.²⁶

The ability of illustrious personages to preserve or renew a culture from within its decline, or to save it from destruction, however, is hardly a given. As we have seen, Delacroix makes clear the force of the threat, the difficulty and sometimes futility of resistance, the mistaken judgment that leads to disaster. The idea for a literary project, which he never carried through, suggests this point:

Write the letters of a Roman from the time of Augustus or the emperors, demonstrating, with all the reasons that we would employ today, that the civilization of the ancient world cannot perish. The greatest minds of the time attack the soothsayers and priests, thinking that they will stop in time.²⁷

Failing to see the catastrophe and employing specious reasoning to deny it betray a self-deception that aids and abets the invaders.

One of the most salient manifestations of this was also one of Delacroix's most regularly recurrent subjects for reflecting on the ends of civilization: the story of the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius.

Delacroix had an enduring interest in this figure of the Stoic philosopher-ruler. As a young man, he had attempted to explicate the *Meditations*, a text that later may well have served as a model for the type of meditative private writing that characterizes his own journal.²⁸ The figure of the Stoic philosopher-ruler had a special appeal for a man who frequently invoked, with approval, the moral values associated with Stoicism: in Marcus Aurelius he admires the resignation of the sage, the willing submission to the laws of nature, the embrace of death as part of the cycle of life.²⁹

Within this overall affinity, the particular episode of the death of Marcus Aurelius occupied a special place. This story, recounted in Herodian's *History of the Empire* and repeated in the biography of Marcus Aurelius that figures at the start of the Daciers' translation of the *Meditations*, and that Delacroix would have known, features the emperor on his deathbed commending to his philosopher friends his son Commodus, who would prove to be a despotic, cruel, and corrupt ruler.³⁰ Delacroix was attracted to this subject from early on, as attested by a list that can be dated to 1824–25 in which it first appears: "M[arcus] A[urelius] Ant[oninus], on the verge of death, commends his son to his friends."³¹ Delacroix does not seem to have pursued the subject at that point, and he returned to it only in the 1840s, when it recurs in a particularly intense confluence of both his works and his writings. It looms large in his plans for the libraries of the Palais Bourbon and the Palais du Luxembourg; in 1844 he executed a major painting on the subject, now in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon (see p. 15, fig. 3). Finally, a note in the 1849 journal identifies a related subject—the auction of Pertinax—that is both a variation on, and the sequel to, the Marcus Aurelius story.

While Delacroix's attraction to the philosophical character of Marcus Aurelius is well known and perfectly consistent with conventional images of virtue, little attention has been paid to the fact that the deathbed story on which he concentrates constitutes another instance of his interest in the ends of civilizations. The reign of the virtuous philosopher, of the living example of Stoic ideals, will give way to that of his dissolute, brutal, and tyrannical son Commodus, who presided over a Nero-like reign of terror. The oddity of the subject is striking: not only is virtue powerless to prevent the destruction of civilization; it is seemingly blind to it as well. Marcus Aurelius

commends his son to his philosopher friends, in the ultimately vain hope that they will instruct and guide him. He is a very different type of hero from the tragic victim Socrates, for example—a contrast that the composition of the 1844 painting, so overtly reminiscent of David's *Death of Socrates* (see p. 14, fig. 2), cannot help but evoke. He is also very different from the figure of Cato of Utica discussed above, a Stoic who defies tyranny as he remains true to his philosophical beliefs. Instead, Delacroix's Marcus Aurelius seems helpless, bearing some responsibility for the disastrous future that awaits the empire, and the collapse of the civilized values that he has himself embodied. In his description of the subject, Delacroix calls attention to the fact that this future was already perfectly clear:

The Last Words of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. The perverse tendencies of Commodus had already clearly manifested themselves; with a dying voice, the emperor commends his son's youth and inexperience to some friends, philosophers and Stoics like himself; but their gloomy look only expresses the more the vanity of these recommendations and their bleak forebodings about the future of the Roman Empire.³²

The fragility of civilization is thus brought out starkly in this story in which the exemplar of civilized values is powerless to prevent their destruction and seems a passive instrument of fate. Marcus Aurelius represents another side of the Stoic's resignation: an inaction or inefficacy that gives way to, even enables, the disaster. Neither a victim of barbarism nor an agent of it, Marcus Aurelius is somewhere in the middle, an image of the futility of virtue, wisdom, and philosophy in the face of an irrevocable destiny or a greater force of evil.

Delacroix had considered this same subject for the library of the Palais Bourbon as well as for the Luxembourg: "Marcus Aurelius dying" figures on a sheet of subjects for the latter, and a list of subjects for the former contains "Death of Marcus Aurelius. He commends his son Commodus to his friends."³³ In the end, Marcus Aurelius appears in the Luxembourg simply listening to Cato. Perhaps the subject of his death was too overtly ambiguous for the message of a library: while Delacroix depicts the barbarism within civilization, and the barbarism that is always at its borders, in no other subject is the message so problematic, as civilized values appear, in their futility,

not heroic but curiously helpless and indifferent. The listless air of the emperor, the attitude of his disciples, the scroll lying carelessly on the floor, all reflect a sense of the futility of virtue and learning in the face of corruption, a message at odds with both heroic defiance and submission to a higher ideal.

This was not a final statement on the fate of civilization, however, as Delacroix's interest in the story of Marcus Aurelius took yet another turn. At the back of the 1847 diary we find the following note: "The auction of Pertinax. He sells off Commodus's court, objects and people, slaves, parasites. Vases, statues, etc. He presides over it, severe. See the preface of *Reason and Folly*."³⁴ The story of the virtuous emperor Pertinax auctioning off all the riches accumulated by his predecessor, Commodus, is recounted in the *Historia Augustae*: after the death of Commodus, Pertinax auctioned off all the latter's luxury possessions—silks and embroideries, chariots and slaves, gold and silver plate—so as to pay off the debts of the state and to provide a model of virtuous frugality. Delacroix's source, as he himself notes, was an obscure satirical work by Pierre-Édouard Lemontey, *Raison, folie: Petit cours de morale mis à la portée des vieux enfans*. In his preface to the third edition (1816), Lemontey writes that, after the first publication of his work in 1802, he had envisaged a depiction of the decadence of the Romans that was to be titled *The Auction of Pertinax*:

The authors of the *Historia Augustae* recount that, after the murder of the emperor Commodus, Pertinax had the whole court of his vile predecessor sold at auction, people as well as furnishings, citizens, foreigners and slaves alike. [. . .] What life, what a variety of scenes this vast story contained! What useful lessons could emerge from those unexpected scenes, that flagrant turpitude! Through the screen of the auction are filtered all the courtesans, the rogues and scoundrels, the philosophers, the pimps, the clowns, the soothsayers, the shameless magistrates, a thousand artisans of pleasure and crime, right up to those assassins and poisoners that the rough caustic pen of Tacitus called the *instruments of the reign*. It is, so to speak, the dismantlement of an entire tyranny that takes place in full daylight, under the eyes of an austere prince and a curious public; it is the tree of despotism suddenly pulled up and showing its roots devoured by insects.³⁵



FIG. 15. Eugène Delacroix, **OVID AMONG THE SCYTHIANS**, 1859.
Oil on canvas, 87.6 × 130.2 cm. National Gallery, London (NG 6262)

This subject, had Delacroix painted it, would have been a kind of response to the *Death of Marcus Aurelius*, the barbarism of Commodus's rule arrested and reversed, for a short time, at least, by the actions and example of a single individual.³⁶ The subject was never realized, but it suggests yet again Delacroix's belief in the ambiguities of history, the possibility of renewal as much as of decline.

This intense period of reflection, through his paintings and his writings, on the fate of civilizations would soon draw to a close. After the early 1850s and the decoration of the Apollo Gallery, Delacroix painted few works dealing with this theme, concentrating instead on literary, religious, and Oriental subjects. A notable exception is his *Ovid among the Scythians* of 1859 (fig. 15), a subject revived from the Palais Bourbon library: it represented the Roman poet exiled to the farthest reaches of the empire and finding shelter among the Scythians, who bring him milk from the mare standing in the foreground of the picture. Delacroix here suggests the barbarism of the

supposedly civilized Romans who banished the poet and the civilized actions of the "barbarians" who took him in; the scene is set against an immense landscape of wild and rugged mountains, a "savage" nature in which Ovid finds succor and refuge. Despite this magnificent example, the rich confluence of paintings, projects, and writings, notably around the subject of Marcus Aurelius, would not recur but remains as the testimony of one of the deepest and most thoughtful reflections on the idea of civilization in the history of Western art.

NOTES

- Translations from the French are my own.
- 1 On this painting and the philhellene cause, see Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, *French Images of the Greek War of Independence, 1821–1830: Art and Politics under the Restoration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 87–101; and Claire Constans, ed., *La Grèce en révolte: Delacroix et les peintres français, 1815–1848*, exh. cat., Musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux, Musée national Eugène Delacroix, Ethnike Pinakothek, Mouseion Alexandrou Soutsou, Athens (Paris: Réunion des Musées nationaux, 1996).
 - 2 On the concept of the “Romantic generation,” see Jean-Claude Caron, “‘Aux âmes bien nées . . .’ ou romantisme et génération(s),” in Sébastien Allard, ed., *Paris 1820: L’affirmation de la génération romantique* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), 29–45.
 - 3 “Eugène Delacroix resté seul de sa famille a consacré ce simple monument de sa douleur aux mânes chéris de son père et de son frère.” Quoted in Jean-Luc Stéphant, “Chili ou le frère ‘oublié’ d’Eugène Delacroix: Documents inédits,” *Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire de l’art français*, année 1990 (Paris, 1991), 173–205, here 190.
 - 4 On the relation between the two pictures in the early drawings, see Hélène Toussaint, *La Liberté guidant le peuple de Delacroix*, Musée du Louvre, Dossiers du département des peintures no. 26 (Paris: Réunion des Musées nationaux, 1982), 10–26.
 - 5 “Abattre, brûler, arracher, c’est ce que le fanatisme de liberté sait aussi bien faire que le fanatisme dévot.” Eugène Delacroix, *Journal*, ed. Michèle Hannoosh, 2 vols. (Paris: Éditions José Corti, 2009) [henceforth *Journal*], 1:654 (13 May 1853). “Stupidité des démolisseurs, tant fanatiques religieux que fanatiques révolutionnaires.” *Journal*, 2:1267 (9 January 1859).
 - 6 “[. . .] chez le P[rin]ce Napoléon pour le premier jour de ses soirées. Quelle foule, quels visages! Le républicain Barye, le républicain Rousseau, le républicain Français, le royaliste Un Tel, l’orléaniste Celui-ci, tout cela se pressant et se coudoyant. [. . .] Ma nuit a été mauvaise dans la première partie; je me suis relevé qu’il faisait petit jour et me suis promené. Cela m’a remis; j’ai joui de ce moment solennel où la nature reprend des forces, où royalistes et républicains sont endormis d’un commun sommeil.” *Journal*, 1:901 (26 May 1855).
 - 7 Delacroix did another version of the same subject in 1852 (J302).
 - 8 “La moralité de ces œuvres [. . .] porte aussi un caractère molochiste visible. Tout, dans son œuvre, n’est que désolation, massacres, incendies; tout porte témoignage contre l’éternelle et incorrigible barbarie de l’homme. Les villes incendiées et fumantes, les victimes égorgées, les femmes violées, les enfants eux-mêmes jetés sous les pieds des chevaux ou sous le poignard des mères délirantes; tout cet œuvre, dis-je, ressemble à un hymne terrible composé en l’honneur de la fatalité et de l’irréparable douleur.” Charles Baudelaire, “L’Oeuvre et la vie d’Eugène Delacroix,” in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 2:760.
 - 9 “Il croyait que rien ne change, bien que tout ait l’air de changer, et que certaines époques climatériques, dans l’histoire des peuples, ramènent invariablement des phénomènes analogues. [. . .] [S]i, imprudemment, on lançait devant lui la grande chimère des temps modernes, le ballon-monstre de la perfectibilité et du progrès indéfinis, volontiers il vous demandait: ‘Où sont vos Phidias? où sont vos Raphaël?’” Baudelaire, “L’Oeuvre et la vie d’Eugène Delacroix,” in *Oeuvres complètes*, 2:758.
 - 10 *Journal*, 1:416–17 (5 February 1849): “M. Baudelaire venu [. . .]. Il a sauté à Proudhon qu’il admire et qu’il dit l’idole du peuple. Ses vues me paraissent des plus modernes et tout à fait dans le progrès. [. . .] Situation d’esprit fort triste. [. . .]” On this episode, see T. J. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France, 1848–1851* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), chap. 5.
 - 11 “Je crois, d’après les expériences qui nous crèvent les yeux depuis un an, qu’on peut affirmer que tout progrès doit amener nécessairement non pas un progrès plus grand encore, mais à la fin négation du progrès, retour au point dont on est parti. L’histoire du genre humain est là pour le prouver; mais la confiance aveugle de cette génération et de celle qui l’a précédée dans les idées modernes, dans je ne sais quel avènement d’une ère dans l’humanité qui doit marquer un changement complet, [. . .] cette confiance bizarre que rien ne justifie dans les siècles qui nous ont précédés, demeure assurément le seul gage de ces succès futurs, de ces révolutions si désirées dans les destinées humaines. N’est-il pas évident que le progrès, c’est-à-dire la marche progressive des choses, en bien comme en mal, a amené à l’heure qu’il est la société sur le bord de l’abîme où elle peut très bien tomber pour faire place à une barbarie complète [. . .]. Ce qui est en train de périr chez nous se reformera sans doute ou se maintiendra ailleurs un temps plus ou moins long.” *Journal*, 1:443 (23 April 1849).
 - 12 “Les Barbares ne se trouvent pas seulement chez les sauvages: combien de sauvages en France, en Angleterre, dans cette Europe si fière de ses lumières.” *Journal*, 1:1203 (23 November 1857).
 - 13 “Des époques récentes et de redoutable mémoire ont montré que le barbare et même le sauvage vivaient toujours dans l’homme civilisé.” *Journal*, 2:1330 (3 March 1860).
 - 14 “Le sauvage revient toujours. La civilisation la plus outrée ne peut bannir de nos villes les crimes atroces qui semblent le partage des peuples aveuglés par la barbarie.” *Journal*, 1:402 (undated, probably 1847).
 - 15 “Les crimes auxquels on voit se porter une foule de malheureux en l’état de société sont plus affreux que ceux que commettent les sauvages.” *Journal*, 1:613 (17 November 1852).

- 16 “[...] ces trames perfides longtemps méditées, qui se cachent sous toutes sortes de voiles, d’amitié, de tendresse, de petits soins, ne se voient que chez les hommes civilisés.” *Journal*, 1:613 (17 November 1852).
- 17 “Je n’ai pas besoin de faire remarquer combien certains perfectionnements prétendus ont nui ou à la moralité, ou même au bien-être. Telle invention, en supprimant ou en diminuant le travail et l’effort, a diminué la dose de patience à endurer les maux et d’énergie à les surmonter [...]; tel autre perfectionnement, en augmentant le luxe et un bien-être apparent, a exercé une influence funeste sur la santé des générations, sur leur valeur physique, et a entraîné également une décadence morale. L’homme emprunte à la nature des poisons, tel que le tabac et l’opium, pour s’en faire des instruments de grossiers plaisirs. Il est puni par la perte de son énergie et par l’abrutissement.” *Journal*, 1:839–40 (21 September 1854).
- 18 “Voilà qu’après un siècle et demi à peu près d’une civilisation plus raffinée qui rappelle les beaux temps de l’antiquité—je parle du siècle de Louis XIV et un peu au-delà—le genre humain, [...] redescend dans les ténèbres d’une barbarie toute nouvelle. Le mercantilisme, l’amour des jouissances, sont, dans cet état des esprits, les mobiles de l’âme humaine les plus énergiques.” *Journal*, 1:1203 (23 November 1857).
- 19 A manuscript note reads: “Archimedes, wholly occupied with the solution to his problem, does not see the barbarian who is preparing to kill him.” Institut national d’histoire de l’art, Paris, ms. 250, fol. 116.
- 20 “Sitôt que l’homme aiguise son intelligence, augmente ses idées et les manières de les exprimer, acquiert des besoins, la nature le contrarie partout. [...] S’il suspend un moment le travail qu’il s’est imposé, elle reprend ses droits, elle envahit, elle mine, elle détruit ou défigure son ouvrage; [...] Qu’importent à la marche des saisons, au cours des astres, des fleuves et des vents, le Parthénon, Saint Pierre de Rome, et tant de miracles de l’art? Un tremblement de terre, *la lave d’un volcan* vont en faire justice. [...] Mais l’homme lui-même, quand il s’abandonne à l’instinct sauvage qui est le fond même de sa nature, ne conspire-t-il pas avec les éléments pour détruire les beaux ouvrages?” *Journal*, 1:504–5 (1 May 1854) (emphasis mine).
- 21 “A Mme Rang. Richelieu disant la messe, esquisse. Le tableau détruit au Palais Royal.” *Journal*, 2:1634 (1850), In 1870, his *Justinian Drafting His Laws*, as well as the entire scheme of the Salon de la Paix at the Paris Hôtel de Ville, would be destroyed in fires set by the Communards.
- 22 “[...] les violences commises en 1848 sur quelques-uns de ses ouvrages n’étaient pas faites pour le convertir au sentimentalisme politique de nos temps.” Baudelaire, “L’Oeuvre et la vie d’Eugène Delacroix,” in *Oeuvres complètes*, 2:757.
- 23 “[...] ces éternelles alternatives de grandeur et de misère dans lesquelles n’apparaît pas moins la faiblesse de l’homme, aussi bien que la singulière puissance de son génie.” *Journal*, 1:840 (21 September 1854).
- 24 “Quel est le caprice qui fait apparaître un Dante, un Shakespeare, celui-ci chez les Anglo-Saxons encore barbares, pareils à une source jaillissante au milieu d’un désert, celui-là dans la mercantile Florence, deux cents ans avant cette élite de beaux esprits dont il sera le flambeau? Chacun de ces hommes se montre tout à coup et ne doit rien à ce qui l’a précédé, ni à ce qui l’entoure: il est semblable à ce dieu de l’Inde qui s’est engendré lui-même. [...] Dante et Shakespeare sont deux Homère, [...] arrivés avec tout un monde qui est le leur, dans lequel ils se meuvent librement et sans précédents.” Delacroix, “Des variations du beau,” (1857), in *Écrits sur l’art*, ed. François-Marie Deyrolle and Christophe Denissel (Paris: Librairie Séguier, 1988), 48–49.
- 25 Delacroix, “Des variations du beau,” 39.
- 26 Delacroix, “Des variations du beau,” 48.
- 27 “Faire les lettres d’un Romain du siècle d’Auguste ou des empereurs, démontrant, par toutes les raisons que nous trouverions à présent, que la civilisation de l’ancien monde ne peut périr. Les esprits forts du temps attaquent les augures et les pontifes, croyant qu’ils s’arrêteront à temps.” *Journal*, 1:443 (22 April 1849).
- 28 See *Journal*, 1:960 (4 October 1855).
- 29 *Journal*, 1:363 (11 March 1847), 1:350 (20 February 1847), 1:903–4 (3 June 1855).
- 30 Herodian, *History of the Empire*, 1.4.3–6. The Dacier translation of the *Meditations* was the standard one; Delacroix notes it specifically on 5 February 1847. *Journal*, 1:344.
- 31 “M[arcus] A[urelius] Ant[oninus] recommande son fils à ses amis, au moment de mourir.” “Note sur le dessin,” *Journal*, 2:1451.
- 32 “Dernières paroles de l’empereur Marc-Aurèle. Les inclinations perverses de Commode s’étaient déjà manifestées; d’une voix mourante, l’empereur recommande la jeunesse de son fils à quelques amis, philosophes et stoïciens comme lui; mais leur morne attitude n’annonce que trop la vanité de ces recommandations et leurs funestes pressentiments sur l’avenir de l’empire romain.” Catalogue, Salon of 1845, quoted in J281.
- 33 “Notes pour les bibliothèques,” *Journal*, 2:1589; Maurice Sérullaz, *Les Peintures murales de Delacroix* (Paris: Les Éditions du temps, 1963), 52. Another list of subjects for the Palais Bourbon contains “Marc Aurèle mourant”: see *Delacroix à l’Assemblée Nationale*, ed. Arlette Sérullaz and Nicole Moulouguet, exh. cat., Paris: Assemblée Nationale (1995), 160.
- 34 “L’Encan de Pertinax. Il vend la cour de Commode, choses et hommes, esclaves, parasites. Vases, statues, etc. Lui, sévère, préside. Voir la préface de *Raison et folie*.” *Journal*, 1:401 (15 December 1847).
- 35 “Les auteurs de l’Histoire Auguste racontent qu’après le meurtre de l’empereur Commode, Pertinax fit vendre à l’encan toute la cour de son infâme prédécesseur, les personnes aussi

bien que les meubles, et les citoyens comme les étrangers et les esclaves. [...] Quelle chaleur, quelle variété de tableaux comportait ce vaste récit! que d'utiles leçons allaient sortir de ces scènes inattendues, de ces turpitudes flagrantes! Au crible des enchères, des courtisanes, des délateurs, des philosophes, des proxénètes, des histrions, des devins, des magistrats impudiques, mille artisans de voluptés et de crimes, et jusqu'à ces locustes et ces empoisonneuses que l'âpre causticité de Tacite appelle encore *instrumenta regni*. C'est, pour ainsi dire, le déménagement de toute une tyrannie qui se fait au grand jour, sous les yeux d'un prince austère et d'une multitude curieuse; c'est l'arbre du despotisme tout à coup arraché, et montrant ses racines rongées d'insectes." Quoted in *Journal*, 1:401 (15 December 1847).

- 36 For a short time only, however, since Commodus himself would be assassinated and the empire auctioned off after his death.