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A great fiery explosion called Delacroix

Julian Barnes asks if the artist succeeded in being honest with himself in his Journal – and what else he did with this extraordinary work

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Recommend (8)

In 1937, the American art critic Walter Pach edited and translated the first English-language version of Eugène Delacroix's Journal. In his introduction he recorded a story told him decades previously by Odilon Redon. In 1861, the young Redon, yet to make his name, had gone to a ball at the Hôtel de Ville in Paris with his musician brother Ernest. When presented to Delacroix, the two hardly dared speak, so instead followed him round the room "from group to group in order to hear every word he had to say". Famous men and women fell silent at the approach of the famous painter who, though not handsome, carried himself like "a prince". When Delacroix left the ball, the two Redons followed him:

We walked behind him through the streets. He went slowly and seemed to be meditating, so we kept at a distance in order not to disturb him. There had been rain, and I remember how he picked his steps to avoid the wet places. But when he reached the house on the Right Bank where he had lived for so many years, he seemed to realize that he had taken his way toward it out of habit, and he turned back and walked, still slowly and pensively, through the city and across the river, to the Rue de Furstenberg where he was to die, two years afterwards.

Redon himself, in *À Soi-même*, also left an account of the incident, which he dated to 1859. Though theoretically more authentic, this version feels more written-up. Thus, instead of the young men simply being introduced to Delacroix, Ernest "by instinct" points out the great man. The two youngsters shuffle up to him, whereupon

He cast on us this blinking, unique glance that darted more sharply than the light of the chandelier. He was very distinguished. He had

the grand'croix on his high stand-up collar and from time to time he looked down at it. He was accosted by Auber who introduced him to a very young Princesse Bonaparte, "anxious", Auber said, "to see a great artist". He shivered, leaned over smiling, and said: "You see, he is not very big."

Redon's account makes Delacroix both the heroic myth that the younger man's imagination required and the ordinary human who engages our sympathy. Thus: "When I saw Delacroix . . . he was magnificent as a tiger; same pride, same finesse, same power". Yet at the same time he had "sloping shoulders, bent posture" and "was of medium height, thin and nervous" (some tiger). Crossing nocturnal Paris alone, the artist was "walking like a cat on the most narrow sidewalks". And then this moment, absent from the version Redon gave to Pach – perhaps because it sounds too good to be true:

A poster, which read "Tableaux" ("Paintings") attracted his eye; he approached, read, and went away with his dream – I would say, with his obsession.

The story was clearly one of Redon's party pieces, and perhaps exists elsewhere with other variations. But for all that, it contains much of Delacroix: pride and self-doubt, social success and solitude, an intense presence and a dreaminess, a love of honours and a shrinkingness, a feline ability to negotiate Paris and a lostness. And though fans might trail this great Romantic figure, the artist himself had few followers. He arrived, performed, and left to walk damp streets alone.

Delacroix was twenty-four when he began the Journal on September 3, 1822. It opens with a simple declaration and an alluring promise:

I am carrying out my plan, so often formulated, of keeping a journal. What I most keenly wish is not to forget that I am writing for myself alone. Thus I shall always tell the truth, I hope, and thus I shall improve myself. These pages will reproach me for my changes of mind. I am starting out in a good humour.

You can quite see why some believe all journals are written to be read by others. Despite the excludingness of that second sentence, the paragraph as a whole invites us in. If this were a novel, the

narrative hook would have already been inserted: we want and need to know whether the diarist does tell the truth, whether he improves himself as a result, whether he changes his mind, and whether or not his initial good humour dissipates. Furthermore, Delacroix has chosen a particularly auspicious day on which to begin writing, one which commands him, and allows us, to look to both the past – it is the anniversary of his mother's death – and the future: his first important painting, "Dante and Virgil", has just been bought by the French government and hung at the Luxembourg. In addition, his heart has recently been excited by a girl – somehow it is inevitable that she is called Lisette – who has "a quality that Raphael understood so well: arms like bronze and a form both delicate and robust". He has kissed her for the first time, in some dark passage of the house, after returning from the village by the garden. How can all this not turn out to be a Stendhalian story of love and ambition, the more so since the painter-hero's origins are novelistically mysterious? (There were rumours, even in his lifetime, that Delacroix was the natural son of Talleyrand.) But if Lisette's expectations were to be disappointed – her young pursuer was already dreaming of looking back at her from the future as "a lovely flower on the road of life and in my memory" – so too may be the diary reader's. For a start, the Journal contains an early, huge gap from 1824 to 1847, so that the diarist leaps from his mid-twenties to his late forties. Further, and more tellingly, that expected Stendhalian narrative fails to unfold. The Romantic artist's life was not especially Romantic. Much as Delacroix admired Byron, he did not imitate the Englishman's passions or transgressions. Apart from a formative trip to Morocco in 1832, he rarely left Paris; he did not even go to Italy, as so many of his colleagues did, to admire the originals of what he knew in reproduction. And though he had sexual entanglements, there are no great amours to be anatomized and celebrated. He thought love was time-consuming, and despite briefly deluding himself with the dream of a wife who might be his equal, or even his superior, he soon settles into the complacency that "a woman is only a woman, always basically very like the next one". Delacroix well knew – and partly chose – "this inevitable solitude to which our hearts are condemned", but recognized its artistic advantages: "things you experience when alone are much stronger and more virgin". So he faced the world with an exquisite cold courtesy. Only a year into his habit of diary-keeping, he writes of it as "a way of calming the emotions that have troubled me for so long". The diary was about self-mastery, and the purpose of self-

mastery was the better to become a great artist. The Lisettes of this world stood no chance against that dominant passion. “Neglect nothing that will serve to make you great”, Stendhal advised Delacroix, who also noted down Voltaire’s opinion that laziness was a sign of mediocrity.

So although the *Diary of a Romantic Artist* contains some of what we might expect, it also served as many other things: work journal, travel notebook, jotter for the proposed *Dictionnaire des Beaux-Arts*, aide-memoire, file of sent letters, chrestomathy, address book, and so on; there are train and omnibus timetables interspersed, along with press cuttings and receipts. Delacroix left no testamentary instructions about these “*écrits intimes*”. In 1853 he had allowed his friend Théophile Silvestre to see the manuscript and quote a few extracts from it; however, we know that he didn’t want the *Journal* published in his lifetime (or in the lifetimes of those about whom he had written disobliging comments); further, his long-time femme de charge Jenny le Guillou claimed that the painter had tried to burn the manuscript a few days before his death, but that she had saved it from the flames. As Michèle Hannoosh observes, in her introduction to the first new French edition of the *Journal* since 1932, a “perfect ambiguity” hangs over Delacroix’s intentions. Nor are the limits of the “work” itself at all clear. Previous editors have chosen to prioritize certain volumes of notes over others, in order to make something that most resembles what we might call a *Journal* – though there is little evidence that Delacroix was more interested in the jottings that make up the main corpus than in those relegated to the appendix. Hannoosh calls it “un document étonnamment complexe, hybride, chaotique, labyrinthique”. The artist wrote it “on the run”, as he put it, using whatever piece of paper or notebook was at hand; so that narrative progression and even chronological order are often lacking. He returns to his text and corrects it, or adds to it; sometimes there are multiple entries assembled under the same nominal date. For stretches the text resembles less a diary than a rough working draft for something akin to Montaigne’s *Essais* or Voltaire’s *Dictionnaire philosophique*, works Delacroix much admired.

Walter Pach, despite declaring thirty-five years of devotion to “the great artist”, was not in the least regretful or abashed about cutting “pages of dross” for his edition:

I have met but few persons who have even tried to get through the three solid volumes of the French editions. Most of those who have begun, with whatever pious intentions, to read the famous work have given up after floundering among allusions to permanently forgotten people, among pages of expense accounts . . . and among interminable lists of colours – the data from which the master’s assistants worked on the great decorations – but of no use to artists today when Delacroix is no longer here to direct the proportion of colours used in one combination or another.

Now Michèle Hannoosh has expanded on those “three solid volumes”. The original manuscripts have been entirely re-examined, new supporting documentation added, while sumptuous annotation pushes the original text higher and higher up the page as those “permanently forgotten people” are given fresh temporary life, and those “interminable lists of colours” restored to favour. It is a prodigious piece of editorial work and may set a whole new generation of readers floundering. It could also be the basis for a new abbreviated English edition (the Phaidon one currently in print here goes back to 1951). Nor would two such editions really be in competition. The short version serves readers who know in advance what parts of a Romantic artist’s life they are interested in – and those readers might genially quote Delacroix’s entry of 1857 that “Lengthiness in a book is a capital defect”. The full version serves those who are interested not just in the stories and the opinions and the self-portraiture, but in everything that the artist himself is interested in, including all the necessary professional drudgery and trudging. The complete Journal might be a hard read at times, but it brings you much closer to the daily truth about an artist’s life.

And the more truth you get, the harder Delacroix becomes to pigeonhole. He belonged to that generation of French Romantics who were inspired by Shakespeare and Byron, Scott and Goethe; yet he also held tight to Voltaire as an exemplar. He seems to share a kinship with Berlioz and Stendhal, yet is frequently harsh in the Journal on the “insupportable” composer whose work was as slapdash as that of Alexandre Dumas, and whose Damnation of Faust is “a heroic mess”. And though Stendhal was one of the first to recognize Delacroix, calling him “a pupil of Tintoretto” in 1824, that was the very year in which Delacroix writes in his diary that “Stendhal is rude, arrogant when he is right, and often nonsensical”. Unlike Berlioz, Delacroix does not welcome Beethoven as the great

musical liberator; he admires him, often greatly, but also finds him fatiguing and uneven, and prefers Mozart, who “breathes the calm of a well-ordered period”. Like many who are strikingly original in their own art, he is less accepting of new forms and methods in the other arts: so he is instinctively distrustful of Wagner – without having heard a note of his music – on the grounds that the composer wants to be “innovative” both in music and in politics. “He thinks he has reached the truth; he suppresses a great many of the conventions of music, believing that conventions are not founded on necessary laws.” (Ironically, Nietzsche was later to conclude, in the course of a largely negative judgement, that “Delacroix is a sort of Wagner”.) Nor is there any normal easy association, as with other Romantic artists, between the art and the life. Delacroix’s art speaks of extravagance, passion, violence, excess; yet his life was that of a self-defended man who feared passion and valued above all tranquillity, hoping and believing that man was “destined one day to find out that calm stands above all else”. He qualified as a dandy, not by outer garb but by inner superiority of spirit. He was, in Anita Brookner’s words, “perhaps the most glamorous artistic personality since Rubens”; but he was also (still in her words) of a “fastidious and somewhat miserly temperament”, and “a recluse and an ascetic” in “everything but his pictorial imagination”. He disliked voluptuaries, and was suspicious of the “terrifying luxury” on display at the salon of the demi-mondaine La Paiva, whose dinners left him “still feeling heavy the next morning”. He lacked Romantic optimism, believing that the arts had been in a “perpetual decadence” since the sixteenth century, when all the great problems of painting had been solved. He also disliked the way those who took his side “have enlisted me, whether I would or no, in the Romantic coterie”. When some attempted flatterer praised him as “The Victor Hugo of painting”, he replied coldly, “Vous vous trompez, Monsieur, je suis un pur classique”. Though his most popular painting was probably “Liberty Guiding the People” (which many nowadays misread as referring to 1789 rather than 1830), its author’s instincts were generally reactionary. He judged man an “ignoble and horrible animal”, whose natural condition was mediocrity. He thought truth existed only among superior individuals, not among the masses. He disapproved of agricultural machinery because its introduction might give the peasant too much idleness (though one of his own working dicta, as reported by Redon, was “Rest often”). Like Flaubert and Ruskin he hated the railways, and pessimistically imagined that the future

would contain “a world of brokers”, with cities full of ex-peasants checking their stocks and shares, “human cattle fattened by philosophers”. He judged sentimentality a great defect, and humanitarianism an even greater one (this from a man who adored George Sand). There are times when it seems sensible not to think of him as a Romantic at all, but rather to consider him as some great fiery explosion happening at the same time as Romanticism.

And he is constantly surprising. He admired Holman Hunt’s work. He thought the women of Périgueux more beautiful than those of Paris. He claimed he had just as good a time talking to “imbeciles” as to “thinking men”. He was convinced (and it was a “blasphemy” for his time) that Rembrandt was “a far greater painter than Raphael”. In 1851 he became a founder member of the Société héliographique – the first learned society to devote itself to photography – and thus one of the earliest painters to consider the processes and likely consequences of the new art. No “From today painting is dead” for him. In May 1853 he examines a set of photographs by Eugène Durieu of nude models, “some of them poorly built, overdeveloped in places and producing a disagreeable effect”. But a more disagreeable effect is produced by comparing this living evidence with some engravings of Marcantonio: an “effect of repulsion, almost disgust, at their incorrectness, their mannerism, and their lack of naturalness”. The benefits of photography are not, however, straightforward: on the one hand, Delacroix believes that “a man of genius” might use the daguerreotype to “raise himself to a height that we do not know”; but for the moment this “machine-art” has only managed to “spoil masterpieces”, without “completely satisfying us”. The following year, though, in August, he is again making drawings from Durieu’s daguerreotypes, and by October 1855 he is much less ambiguous, considering “with passion and without fatigue those photographs of nude men, that admirable poem, that human body from which I am learning to read”.

Alongside such open-mindedness ran a great fear of tying himself down – either artistically or personally – and an even greater fear of being tied down. He allowed himself to be fond of Jenny Le Guillou, and enjoyed her devotion to him, no doubt because such emotions were calm and calming. Yet despite not wanting to be beholden to anyone, he also wanted that grand’croix around his neck. And as with many other original French artists and writers, repeated

rejection by the Institut merely increased his determination to belong (he was finally elected at the eighth attempt in 1857). Baudelaire was puzzled by such conformism, and in a letter to Sainte-Beuve three years after Delacroix's death recalled asking the painter to justify such "obstinate persistence" when "many young people would prefer to see him as a pariah and a rebel". Delacroix replied:

My dear sir, if my right arm were struck with paralysis, membership of the Institut would give me the right to teach, and providing I were still well enough, the Institut would serve to pay for my coffee and cigars.

This is reminiscent of our contemporary artistic knights and lordlings who with mock self-deprecation explain that the main point of a gong is that it makes restaurant-booking easier.

At the same time – and there is a lot of "at the same time" with Delacroix – the painter had little desire to be viewed as "a pariah and a rebel". That was how Baudelaire wanted young people to see him, and much of the complicated relationship between the two men consisted of Baudelaire seeking to co-opt Delacroix and the painter declining co-option. This was partly fastidiousness, but also a pride which demanded that he be praised for the correct reasons. Baudelaire may have puffed him as "emphatically the most original painter of ancient and modern times", but the poet also sought to lay on him what Anita Brookner has called "his deathless and morbid imprint". Delacroix did not want "The Death of Sardanapalus" or "Les Femmes d'Alger" interpreted according to the brooding necessities of Baudelaire's private temperament. There are revealingly few references to Baudelaire in the Journal, the most telling of which seems at first sight prosaic, indeed calm:

M. Baudelaire came in as I was starting to work anew on a little figure of a woman in Oriental costume lying on a sofa, undertaken for Thomas of the rue du Bac. He told me of the difficulties that Daumier experiences in finishing. He ran on to Proudhon, whom he admires and whom he calls the idol of the people. His views seem to be of the most modern, and altogether in the line of progress. Continued with the little figure after his departure, and then went back to the Femmes d'Alger.



This is the literary equivalent of that catlike figure on the narrow pavement, keeping perfect balance. The critic comes to see the artist. He talks of this and that. He is modern and progressive; the artist is not. The critic leaves, and the artist goes back to work, first on a “little figure”, then on a masterpiece.

Walter Pach may have excised those “interminable lists of colours” from his English-language edition, but such colours and their terminable variations were what Delacroix devoted his life to. Maxime Du Camp, in his *Souvenirs littéraires*, remembered the artist sitting one evening near a table on which was a basket full of skeins of wool. He kept picking up the skeins, grouping them, placing them one across the other, separating them shade by shade, and producing extraordinary effects of colour. I also recall hearing him say, “Some of the finest pictures I have seen are certain Persian carpets”.

French art in the nineteenth century was, in broadest terms, a struggle between colour and line. So an additional reason why Delacroix sought the imprimatur of the Institut was that, in a society where the arts have always been highly politicized, it would officially endorse his kind of painting. At the start of the century, line held sway through David and his school; at the century’s end, colour triumphed through Impressionism; in between, the mid-century was taken up with a combat between the champion of line and the champion of colour (in the square corner, Ingres, in the round corner, Delacroix). Nor was this confrontation always high-minded: once, after Delacroix had visited the Louvre, Ingres pointedly had the windows opened to dispel “the smell of sulphur”. Du Camp tells the story of a banker who, innocent of artistic politics, managed mistakenly to invite both painters to dinner on the same evening. After much glowering, Ingres could no longer restrain himself. Cup of coffee in hand, he accosted his rival by a mantelpiece. “Sir!” he declared, “Drawing means honesty! Drawing means honour!”. Becoming over-choleric in the face of the cool Delacroix, Ingres upset his coffee down his own shirt and waistcoat, then seized his hat and made for the door, where he turned and repeated, “Yes, sir! It is honour! It is honesty!”.

From the comfort of posterity, we may declare them both practitioners of honour and honesty, and sometimes closer to one another than they might either bear or recognize. Both grounded

their work in that of the Old Masters; both believed that “conventions are founded on necessary laws” and looked to literature and the Bible for subject matter; while in the murals and ceilings Delacroix painted in public buildings throughout his working life – from “Orpheus Bringing Civilization” or “Virgil Presenting Dante to Homer” to “Jacob Wrestling with the Angel” and “Heliodorus driven from the Temple” – it is not just the titles that suggest the two rivals were approaching similar truths and declarations by merely different paths. At the time, however, their quarrel seemed to be both vital and mortal: one form of high seriousness would perish and the other survive. If colour offered immediate appeal — vigour, movement, passion, life – this was also its tactical disadvantage. Delacroix wrote sarcastically in his Journal on January 4, 1857:

I know well that the title of colorist is more of an obstacle than a recommendation . . . . The opinion is that a colorist busies himself only with inferior and, so to speak, earthly phases of painting: that a fine drawing is much finer when it is accompanied by tedious colour, and that the main function of colour is to distract attention from the more sublime quality, which can get along very easily without any prestige that colour can give.

On the other hand, as he points out in one of the notes for his Dictionnaire, the “superiority” of colour, “or its exquisiteness, if you prefer”, comes from its effect upon the imagination. In a Delacroix, colour leads: it directs the eye and the heart before the mind addresses the question of line and subject. Looking back from the end of the nineteenth century, when colour had seemingly triumphed (before Cubism restored the balance between colour and line), Odilon Redon wrote of Delacroix finding “his true way, which is expressive colour, colour one might call moral colour”. This, Redon declares, had constituted a new raising of the stakes: “Venice, Parma, Verona have seen colour only from the material side. Delacroix touches at moral colour; this is his oeuvre and his claim to posterity”.

When he lay dying at the age of sixty-five, Delacroix lamented the fact that he still had another forty years of work in him. As for posterity, he several times expressed the wistful hope that he might be allowed to return in a hundred years’ time and find out what was thought of him then. When he mentioned this desire to Du Camp,

the latter stopped himself from saying what he really felt: “They will place you between Tiepolo and Jouvenet”. This unspoken remark tells us much about the taste and opinion of the time, which Delacroix had spent so many decades trying to overcome.

Eugène Delacroix

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Julian Barnes’s most recent book, *Nothing To Be Frightened Of* (2008), was reissued in paperback last year.