Without there being any known dissenting intentions on the part of the artist, that overriding allegiance to tradition upset the normal ethnic hierarchies of Napoleonic battle painting. The private, contemplative themes encouraged by new patrons like Sommariva represented by contrast a narrowed and comparatively impoverished version of the Classical tradition; for Girodet it meant having little to draw upon but a futile recollection of past youthful glory.

During the second decade of the nineteenth century, the most convincing revival of the larger ambitions of Davidian Classicism likewise came from the exploitation of marginal possibilities allowed within contemporary Imperial subject matter. Its author, Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), was an unconventional outsider in the increasingly professionalized ranks of younger artists. He has come down to us as the first great Romantic, and of his startling singularity as an artist and personality there can be no dispute. But singularity is itself a quality that must be put together from bits and pieces of already existing models. And the more one knows about the ambitious young artists who came immediately before him, the less idiosyncratic Géricault’s impulses seem. One can begin to see him constructing his own autobiography, re-enacting the myths of artistic individuality current in his own time. In an environment awash with mercenary temptations, he managed convincingly to revive the Revolutionary ideal of the independent, public-minded artist, impatient for glory and indifferent to merely monetary rewards.

Under the Empire, the biography of Drouais was increasingly taken to exemplify this ideal. His legend falsely condensed the objective circumstances of a precocious career into an enduring mythology of a miraculously singular talent sweeping all before it. And Géricault, who possessed similar financial and social advantages but none of Drouais’s professional pedigree, formed his ambitions in the shape of that legend in 1812 and 1814. He believed in it to the point of rejecting any sustained application to learning his craft; during brief stints in the studios of Carle Vernet and Guérin, he attempted to substitute spontaneity and bravura for soundness in drawing and composition (to the point that he acquired the nickname of ‘pastry cook’ among his fellow students). Despite such uncertain preparation, he nonetheless chose to put his name before the public in 1812 with a heroic single figure, one that would manifest, in unexpected ways, ambitions for psychological and narrative complexity of a kind normally encountered in multfigured narrative machines.

At the age of 21 and using his own resources entirely, he prepared a canvas of monumental dimensions for the Salon of 1812. The Charging Light Cavalryman (chasseur) is both portrait and battle painting; it differed from previous Imperial equestrian portraits in that its announced subject (a lieutenant Dieudonné) was unknown and effectively an anonymous individual; it differed from previous descriptions of French military heroics in its very Classical investment of heroism as a potential within an isolated figure. The development of his sketches passes a crucial point when the direction of the rearing horse is changed from leftward to rightward, while the gesture and attention of the rider, if not actually his seat, remain directed toward the left as before. This uses the body, movement, and even the expression of the horse to convey an internal complication within the action and thoughts of the rider.

This is realized in the final painting with enormous assurance, but it should be recognized that the eloquence and complexity of his body is only implied, translated into external surface equivalents spread outwardly in two dimensions. An energetic and unfinished application of paint instills the excitement of the theme across the physical surface of the canvas. Every directional form leads one’s attention away from the torso of the figure, which lacks any effective volume, any capacity for action within itself. This necessitates perpetual distraction and displacement toward outthrust extremities, ornaments, and turbulent, luminous atmosphere.

It might be argued in reply that the elaborate modern
uniform itself prevents exposure of the body and that the
nature of the subject matter prevents anything approaching
the expressive nudity of Classicism. But the rider's tight
sleeves and breeches only reveal how two-dimensional and
pattern-like Géricault's understanding of the figure remains,
norther modeling nor contour conveying strength in the grip
of his legs or the sweep of his sword arm. The signs of strength
that work effectively are isolated ones displaced to the ends of
limbs: the boot in the stirrup and the clenched fist around the
reins. It comes as no surprise to learn that the painting was
worked out largely through color sketches without prepara-
tory drawing. Worries over drawing would probably have
prevented the painting ever being realized at all.

Works of startling genius can come about through compensa-
tion for deficiencies and the overcoming of self-imposed
diculties. In this instance, the imbedded weakness in the
work is an inescapable mark of the social on the singular
identity of the artist, that is, the mark of those existing
identities to which he must somehow answer if he is to
complete his own. Because Géricault was not yet ready to
match the example of a Drouais on its own terms, the heroic
body that was its emblem is registered in the Light
Cavalryman as an absence, a non-body which generates the
painting's spectacular compensatory invention by its very
unrepresentability.

The year 1814 saw the first fall of Napoleon from power in
France and a temporary return of the Bourbons before their
definitive restoration after Waterloo in 1815. It was decided
that a Salon would hastily be held to mark the return of
monarchist culture, but it had to be exceptionally open in
order to obtain an adequate number of works. Géricault took
advantage of the opportunity to double his representation in
the exhibition by including the Light Cavalryman along with
whatever new work he could prepare in time. Again his bid for
renewed attention was a monumental single figure, The
Wounded Heavy Cavalryman, which he plainly intended as a
pendant to the earlier work. The object would be to deepen
the effect of the new painting (and give the old an enhanced
resonance and timeliness) by setting up a quasinarrative
interplay of antithesis between them: light versus heavy,
active versus passive, mounted versus earthbound, vigorous
versus debilitated. Gravity rules in the second painting, in
contrast to the first where the horse and its passenger had been
connected to the earth by only one spindly, springing limb.
The most obvious of these antitheses has always dominated
commentary, that is, the one provided by Napoleon's
intervening reversal of fortune in the snows of Russia. While
Géricault doubtless made room for that reading, it was just
one part of a grandly rhetorical construction of opposed
qualities between the two paintings, and this had more to do
with enlisting the modern single figure to do the sort of
meaningful work normally reserved for the complex internal
narratives of Classical history painting.

For purposes of balance between the paintings, the addition
of a mount was necessary. And the soldier's need simulta-
neously to keep his feet and to maintain his grip on the animal
in turn justifies the dramatic contrapposto of his pose. Much
has been made of the horse's strange, occluded foreshorten-
ing—the result of a restricted format—as the painting's most
serious failing. But this seems less serious than Géricault's
failure to articulate the key areas of muscular exertion
necessary to complete the action. And these again are passages
where the costume permits the closest approach to the nude.
The thighs of the figure are massive without their underlying
structure being sufficiently defined; they cannot convey the
strength required to keep those heels planted in the ground
and the body braced against the descent and the horse's
panicky movements. Worse is the flaccid, perfunctory shape
of the right arm, which offers no discernible sense of how
sufficient force is being applied to the grip on the bridle.

These failings of execution are overwhelmed in the end by
extraordinary passages elsewhere, the daring expansiveness
of the painting's conception, and its complex dialectic with its
predecessor. Géricault's early proclivity for undertaking
major Salon canvases at the last possible moment made their
impact all the more startling but their conspicuous short-cuts unavoidable. The pressure and the ambitious scale gave him his schooling, painful though it was. Having been refused the honor of a state purchase of either canvas, he could do nothing but return them to his studio and later, unable to bear the sight of them, have them rolled and put away.

RETURN FROM THE WRECKAGE

In 1816, in the wake of this experience, Géricault made a concerted attempt to win the Rome Prize and retroactively acquire the traditional formation he had denied himself as a young student. After a predictable failure to gain the final round in the competition, he again fell back on his own resources, making the rounds of Florence, Rome, and Naples, throwing himself into a new discipline of Classical drawing and command of the nude.

On his return to Paris the following year, he felt himself ready to compete on the supreme level of multi-figured narrative. But the range of available options had altered considerably since his departure. The restoration of the Bourbon monarchy was by now firmly established, enforced by the allied armies of Europe. A correspondingly conventional iconography of praise for royalty and the counter-Revolution was now in place. Among those who eagerly responded was Louis Hersent (1777–1860), a contemporary of Guérin's and likewise an ex-student of Regnault. This artist had early turned away from the Classicism of his training for
more picturesque subject matter. To honor the new King, Louis XVIII, he turned to the sentimental mode of eighteenth-century genre painting to depict Louis XVI (older brother of the reigning monarch) distributing alms to the poor during the harsh winter of 1788. Conservative commentators waxed lyrically about the old King’s habit of secretly performing such charitable acts in the neighborhood of Versailles and compared the figure in Hersent’s maudlin composition to those of beneficent rulers of antiquity—Trajan, Titus, and Marcus Aurelius.

Géricault also saw the genre of the heroic single figure in battle preempted by the regime to celebrate the leaders of the ultra-Catholic and Royalist resistance to the Revolution in the Vendée region of the west of France. Some half-dozen artists were given these commissions in 1816. The enterprising Guérin was one of the first to complete his, a portrait of Henri de Rochejaquelein (1817), which he showed in the Salon of the following year. It is striking to see the ease with which Republican conventions of celebrating individual courage in the thick of battle were turned to opposite ends through the substitution of different iconographical props: the white flag of Royalism, the sacred heart pinned to the chest. This particular Vendée ‘general’ was the most aristocratic of the group, which included individuals who had been little more than opportunist bandits. He had died in 1794, murdered—according to his apologists—by duplicitous Republicans to whom he had offered clemency. Guérin lends to his pose and features the practised beauty and composure of the young Classical warrior, the better to underscore the themes of self-sacrifice and inborn nobility.

The ease with which such opportunist transformations could be effected did as much as anything to drain the moral authority from the Davidian figurative canon. Even for artists steeped in its tradition, other stylistic options were equally accessible. Gérard greeted the returning Bourbons with a vast historical canvas (1817) depicting the seventeenth-century monarch Henry IV being greeted by the civic leaders of Paris in an atmosphere of popular celebration. Henry IV was the founder of the Bourbon dynasty, and even during the Revolution he had been held up as the virtuous monarch, solicitous of the welfare of the people, from whose example subsequent rulers had disastrously departed. His accession to the throne, symbolized in his acceptance by Paris, put an end to a terrible period of protracted civil war. Gérard’s choice was thus in some ways more canny than Hersent’s, in that the historical precedent was more exact and powerful, while it allowed the new regime to exploit a current of criticism once directed against the monarchy. He also exploited the possibilities of historicism, as opened up by Ingres, but without any of the latter’s tendency toward preciousness and esotericism. The Entry of Henry IV expertly recalls the teeming magnificence, the multiplied subsidiary characters, the rich costume, detail, and color of Peter Paul Rubens and other masters of pomp and circumstance from the founding age of Absolutism.
Gérard had renewed his longstanding rivalry with Girodet, each now vying to be named to the revived Old-Regime office of First Painter to the King. It was a contest in which the former easily prevailed, untroubled as he was by any concern to restore the authority of Classical form from within its core mythology. His *Henry IV* set a pattern for a stylistically eclectic approach to historical drama, emphasizing costume and spectacular effects, which a group of younger artists would carry through the 1820's. It was this group (much less than Géricault or Eugène Delacroix) that contemporaries would designate as 'Romantics', and it included avowedly liberal painters like Ary Scheffer and Horace Vernet (1789–1863) as well as uncomplaining Royalists. The young Vernet, a friend of Géricault, would apply this approach to a celebration of the Imperial army's resistance to the Allies at the gates of Paris and the military successes of the Revolutionary forces (*The City Gate at Clichy* and *The Battle of Jemappes*, both 1822).

Vernet's studio became a social center for young, disaffected ex-officers and artists, bored and antagonistic to the Restoration (he himself painted a group portrait of the studio, full of in-jokes and putting the practice of art no higher than fencing and riding). Géricault found a natural home there, but he lacked its insouciance about artistic matters. Having begun as something of a dilettante in the acquisition of technical skills, he sought now, perhaps alone in his generation, to reinvest formal values with the moral import they had carried under the Republic.

He now possessed a command of Classical drawing that was doubly remarkable in an artist who remained essentially self-taught. The question, given the depressing examples around him, was what kind of subject matter would carry his exalted ambition. His drawings from Rome demonstrate that his interest in pictorial action and drama easily carried over into a personal fascination with violence and victimization. Back in Paris, he was first attracted to newspaper accounts of the murder of a liberal official in the provinces, a certain Fualdès, which carried bizarre details of secret conspiracy, transvestism, and ritual murder. He took his meditations no further than a series of drawings, having subsequently found a subject in which horrific suffering was redeemed by far clearer public significance: the shipwreck in 1816 off the West African coast of the frigate *Medusa*.

In its essentials, the story of the survivors of the disaster would not have seemed a vehicle for Géricault's new ambitions for Classical grandeur. The incompetently commanded flagship of a small fleet had run aground in the notorious shallows of the Arguin bank. The commander of the vessel was a returned emigré aristocrat who had spurned the advice of the experienced naval officers under him. As the privileged commandeered the inadequate lifeboats, a large raft was lashed together from the masts and spars. Some 150 seamen and soldiers were forced to crowd together on this precarious, openwork platform; there was no room for them to do anything but stand and the structure was so overloaded that the water came to their waists.

As soon as the officers in the boats (which also carried the cruelly impatient governor of Senegal) realized that towing the raft was slowing their own progress to a crawl, they cut the line, leaving its occupants to their fate. The castaways were then struck from without by a storm and from within by a
horrific episode of despairing delirium in which factions among the enlisted men violently attacked the officers with the intention of breaking up the raft and committing collective suicide. The latter killed and wounded large numbers of the mutineers. The fighting, along with accidental or voluntary surrender to the waves, reduced their number to less than thirty within six days of the abandonment.

The living soon began to eat the flesh of the corpses which remained on the raft. A group of the hardiest and most lucid, including the ship's surgeon Savigny, augmented this horror by organizing deliberate killings of those nearest death in order to stretch the pitiful provisions. Through these expedients, fifteen survived for another week. At virtually the last possible moment, an accidental pass by a search vessel brought the raft in sight, and the blackened, emaciated survivors were taken to the primitive French capital in Senegal. Five more died there; only ten were ever to reach France.

The details of the story only became known because a confidential report written by Savigny to explain his conduct was leaked to the press by elements within government opposed to the Minister of the Marine, and particularly to his policy of excluding experienced Imperial officers from service. The wounded naval administration concentrated its
revenge on the bearer of the news, who then went public with a book on the disaster (written with Corréard, another survivor more recently returned from Africa) to vindicate himself. Their cause found ready support in the circle around Vernet, where the same grievances toward the Restoration were keenly felt. Géricault’s seizing on the subject combined an attraction to the events in themselves and a commitment to Saviy’s and Corréard’s account of their actions.

Their version of events was far from unchallengable, and both the governor of Senegal and the naval authorities had been quick to seize on the grim fact of cannibalism and Savigy’s particular responsibility for the deliberate policy of murder which had allowed him and his confederates to survive (the lone woman on board, the canteen attendant, had suffered a broken thigh and was among those killed). Géricault famously immersed himself in every detail of the castaways’ ordeal; he was said to have visited hospitals to see dying men at first hand and painted his eerily evocative studies of severed heads and limbs as a counterpart to the charnel-house of dismembered bodies which the raft had become. He completed full compositional studies of the two episodes of greatest horror, the mayhem of the mutiny and the subsequent cannibalism. But in the end the demands of his artistic ambition—to equal the clarified grandeur of Davidian historical painting on his own terms—exactly coincided with the moral vindication of the raft survivors. Compromising facts and events are sacrificed in the interests of a purified compact of common humanity, redeemed by suffering and achieving salvation through its own unaided powers. He chose the moment of the first, agonizing sighting of the rescue ship, when no one knew if they had been seen in return and the group is galvanized into one last collective action in order to attract its attention; it is as if the dependent plague victims of Gros’s Plague House at Jaffa had suddenly found the inner resources to take over their own redemption.

It is crucial to recognize that the painting (1819) communicates its subject matter as an idea rather than anything resembling reportage. Were it remotely true to the facts, the bodies would be starved and disfigured by sun poisoning, sores and open wounds. Instead Géricault seized the opportunity to display all of the impressive command of the athletic male nude that he had achieved since departing for Rome—and he could do this on a scale that was larger than life, a notoriously difficult challenge to draftsmanship. He added figures, including three blacks, to answer the needs of his composition. The unconscious youth, cradled in the arms of a middle-aged protector, is a beautiful Athenian ephebe out of Girodet, Bécou, or Guérin. The finished painting is a complex hybrid of the hyper-traditional (a centralized pyramidal arrangement of nude figures) and the unexpected (building it on a pitching sea with a cast of contemporary, semi-anonymous victims). But perhaps its most startling paradox is the degree to which this grand narrative involving many figures continued at the same time in the same problematic of the isolated hero which had preoccupied the artist in his first public paintings.

His catastrophic indecision over the hanging of the painting in the Salon of 1819 was a direct manifestation of its double character: finding that the organizers had placed it low on the wall, he chose instead to have it elevated over the portal of the vast exhibition space in the Louvre. But even as he stayed to watch his painting being hoisted into position, he recognized that he had made a grievous error. The elevated position was the one he automatically felt to be appropriate for an imposing historical composition: the highest genre of painting was defined by expansiveness of effect and breadth of comprehension; its decorum normally demanded a certain distance of viewing so that its totality would be legible and local detail reduced to suitably subordinate importance. The bodies in the Raft are painted with all the imposing generality demanded by tradition, but Géricault and his friends were right to see the painting’s force drain away as it was removed from an intimate proximity to the viewer. The direction of the artist’s compositional decisions had been to push the figures forward into the viewer’s presence, until bodies seem to spill out of pictorial space altogether. Without crucial details being immediately present, as they are today are in its low hanging in the Louvre, contact with the drama was lost.

One such detail, which can stand for all, is the extended hand of the unconscious youth in the lower left. Like everything in the painting, it is twice as large as life; this has the effect of making it seem twice as close as one expects it to be, however near to the painting one stands. The paradox of the Raft is that its colossal size both creates and demands an intimacy of approach that is normally the province of an easel painting. The tender pathos of that open palm is so involving in its emotional invitation that, once it is accepted, any disinterested vantage point outside the composition disappears. The chain of mingled bodies, uniting the races of Europe and Africa, becomes the equivalent of one single body in a state of transformation; its internal quickening proceeds from the group of moribund figures at the left across and upward through rekindled alertness at the center onto the ecstatic vitality of the frantic signaling at the pinnacle of the group. The only figure which is obviously beyond reviving lies on an opposing diagonal to this unified movement, which distributes the physical and moral awakening of one body over the variations of nineteen individuals. This collective body has a brain—the four cooler heads clustered around the mast—but its salvation is overwhelmingly an affair of nerves, sinews, and blood. In this way Géricault, in his production as a public artist, remained a painter of the heroic single figure.
Through the Rafa’s inspired anomalies of theme and scale, he managed to recast historical drama in its terms, pushing painting to an extreme of gigantism in order to generate a paradoxical intimacy with one generalized, eloquent body.

PUNISHMENTS OF THE DAMNED

By the time the Rafa went on display, the scandal had done its work: the captain had been disgraced, the governor and minister had been removed. A new law opened up military ranks to those who had served under the Empire: the King himself had recognized that exclusionary policies were harming the state. Géricault believed that his celebration of the catalyst for reform would be honored by state purchase. He failed in this aim, though the painting was in fact (contrary to legend) rated quite highly by the Academy and awarded a medal. Still, there was no possible private destination for such a work in France and his disappointment was profound.

Ill health, mental and physical, aggravated by horse-riding injuries would cause Géricault’s early death in 1824 at the age of 33. Although he planned new historical compositions (now on openly liberal themes like the evils of the slave trade), his limited energies permitted work only on a more modest scale. But even here his innovations were immense, commensurate with those of his Salon painting. A sojourn in England, where he successfully showed the Rafa in a paying exhibition, led to remarkable experiments in drawing and printmaking. Taking up the new medium of lithography, he produced prints for a wider market, documenting scenes of common life—labor, sports, disability and alcoholism, the indigent poor, a public hanging. And in his primary medium, he manifested similarly broad sympathies in five of the most remarkable exercises in portraiture ever painted.

These have come down to us as his “portraits of the insane,” and there may have been as many as ten of them. They were discovered almost a half century after the artist’s death, and any original data concerning their motivation and purpose has been lost; all one knows of their dating is that they came after the Rafa. There is some evidence that suggests Géricault underwent psychiatric treatment himself within advanced medical circles where new, humane forms of

60 Théodore Géricault  Pay the Sorrows of the Poor Old Man 1821. 12 1/4 x 14 3/4 (31.7 x 37.6)

61 Théodore Géricault  Portrait of an Insane Man 1822-3. 24 x 19 1/4 (61.2 x 50.2)
treatment had been pioneered. French psychiatry in this period had developed the modern therapeutic approach in which mental illness is seen as continuous with normal life; one line of argument even presented the insane as a kind of modern aristocracy in whom the Revolution’s democratic emancipation of individual thought and feeling had simply reached an insupportable extreme.

Géricault's surviving portraits display a sympathetic objectivity which is at least congruent with this new scientific attitude. According to late nineteenth-century testimony, each represents a particular psychological malady, 'a monomania' in contemporary parlance. Each sufferer is depicted according to the portrait conventions of the time, particularly the plain dignity in dress and technique which David had developed in his portraits (and self-portraits) of the Revolutionary period. Géricault conveys the underlying texture of muscle, fat, and bone in each face with startling economy and with a mobile technique which he is able to vary to surprising effect from subject to subject.

For the viewer, each is an occasion for the simultaneous discovery of an individuated person and of the uncertain traces of impersonal, objective conditions; each prompts reflection on the degree to which knowledge of other selves always entails the unstable convergence of the two. In their way they answer the same demands for elevation and complication in the single figure which Géricault had pursued in his public art. Reversing the Raft's passage through the colossal to arrive at the intimate, each portrait begins within a confined and homely approach to one isolated figure but deploys its plain-spoken manufacture and modestly suspended judgment to prompt in the viewer mental events commensurate in scale with those elicited by the most sweeping narrative.

The paintings pursue one latent implication of the Raft's construction of heroism, that is, the heroic subject may not necessarily be an effective actor in the world; heroism may well be manifested in resistance to forces which overwhelm isolated and vulnerable individuals. One's approach to such subjects is through a simultaneous diagnosis of the threatening conditions and identification with the extreme states of mind induced by confrontation with a hostile external world. The most innovative project in historical painting of the 1820's, that of the young Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), would move toward the latter of these two poles.

Géricault and Delacroix had between them something of the same tense combination of filiation and rivalry that had existed within the circle of David. The latter had lost his father in infancy and his mother in adolescence. He shared Géricault's background in the upper bourgeois (his legal father Charles had been an important diplomat) and also took his early training in Guérin's studio. The two became acquainted there in 1817, and Delacroix posed for one of the slumped boys in the left foreground of the Raft. When the older artist received a state commission for a Sacred Heart of Jesus, he surreptitiously passed it on to his grateful protégé. But the ambition of the younger very quickly surpassed such routine works. He pressed himself to complete a major painting for the Salon of 1822 in place of competing for the Grand Prix de Rome. The result was a strikingly original exercise on a literary theme, the Bark of Dante and Virgil, depicting the passage of the two poets across the marshes surrounding the fifth circle of hell.

His first Salon entry demonstrated that he would absorb his Italian culture outside the normal institutional channels. Where Géricault had only postponed his pilgrimage to Italy, Delacroix would forgo the passage that once had been deemed essential in the development of any ambitious painter (he would later travel to the exotic territory of North Africa, following French colonial expansion, as a kind of substitute). The considerable intellectual and technical demands of the highest genre had, nevertheless, to be met in other ways. His recourse to the Divine Comedy marks one solution: cultivation of the most advanced literary taste, which in this period was elevating alternative poetic traditions over the legacy of French Classicism: Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Byron over Racine and Voltaire. Delacroix would illustrate all of these foreign writers during the 1820's.

Searching for the means to make a painting of such literary sources, however, he turned to a more local and immediate mode: Géricault's Raft. Indeed almost all of his major work of this decade can be read as a meditation on one or another aspect of that work, which concentrated and filtered for him virtually the entire previous tradition of historical painting. In spite of Dante's description of passing over a calm and misty slough, Delacroix chose to show the vessel threatened by a turbulent sea. He exploits the Inferno to recall the predictable equation of the Medusa survivors' suffering and sins with the punishments of hell (as Géricault himself had quoted Dante's cannibalistic Ugolino in the vignette of the older man cradling the nude adolescent). The damned souls clinging to the bark call directly to mind the bodies on the fringe of the raft, and one exhibits a mindless, devouring hunger. On that platform of bodies, Delacroix has constructed a compositional pyramid capped by the poet's beckoning gesture toward a distant horizon.

If the painting lacks the Raft's movement into depth, this can perhaps be explained by the differences in stages of technical competence between the two artists. In its summary application of paint, compression of space, and emphasis of surface pattern, Delacroix's Dante and Virgil exhibits some of the same traits as Géricault's Charging Light Cavalryman. Where confident command of drawing is lacking, there is a