

Philippa Kaina  
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History of Art Department  
University College London

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**Between History and Modernity:**

Negotiating Subjectivity in the Early Work of Edgar Degas, c. 1854-1870.

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## **DECLARATION**

I, Philippa Kaina confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

## Abstract

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This thesis provides a critical reassessment of the early career of Edgar Degas between the years 1854-1870; a period during which the artist had yet to gain any critical recognition or commercial success and was struggling to find the terms of a practice he could pursue with integrity. While Degas' output during these years has, until now, been summarily dismissed by scholars in the field, my dissertation takes this crucial formative period of artistic production seriously.

Primacy is given to Degas' historical canvases (together with their related preparatory drawings), which are seen to function as the site upon which the artist negotiated nineteenth-century notions of 'History' and 'Tradition' within the context of an emerging modern self-consciousness. I also examine what is at stake for Degas' own subjectivity here, both in terms of how it is enmeshed within his formal procedures as well as the ways in which it is implicated within the broader historical and artistic transformations taking place at this moment.

Notions of the 'in-between' and 'transitional' function as this thesis' overarching conceptual metaphors. Analogous to Degas' artistic travails, they also articulate something critical about the illegibility of the canvases themselves which exist in various states of 'un-finish'. These pictures initiate a series of radical departures from academic precepts of History painting (most notably here its doctrine of *fini*). However, they also dramatize something of the precariousness of Degas' subjectivity and artistic identity during these early years – at a moment when he was caught between outmoded academic rhetorics and the yet-to-be fully articulated pictorial languages of modernity.

Through a detailed exploration of the ways in which Degas' negotiated the terms of his practice amidst the radically shifting parameters of art in the nineteenth century, I seek to reframe what has thus far been understood as a largely frustrated period of productivity in terms of a crucial process of artistic formation.

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## Acknowledgements

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259. Théodore Géricault, *Cheval arrêté par des esclaves*, 1817 48.5 x 60.5 cm, oil on canvas. Rouen, Musée des Beaux-Arts.
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261. Théodore Géricault, *Labourage en Angleterre* (1820-1) watercolour, 32 x 50 cm, New York, Private Collection.
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289. Edgar Degas, detail of *Scène de steeplechase: Le Jockey Tombé*.
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293. *Dying Gaul*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC. Marble. Paris, Musei di Capoline.
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295. Edgar Degas, figure study for *Scène de steeplechase: le jockey tombé*, c. 1866. Graphite on blue paper, 23.2 x 30.2 cm. Upperville Virginia, collection of Mr and Mrs Paul Mellon.
296. Edgar Degas, figure study for *Scène de steeplechase: le jockey tombé*, c. 1866. Black chalk heightened with white on bluish-grey paper, 31.4 x 44.6 cm. Upperville Virginia, Collection of Mr and Mrs Paul Mellon.
297. Edgar Degas, figure study for *Scène de steeplechase: le jockey tombé*, c. 1866. charcoal and white chalk on paper, 26 x 34.3cm. Upperville Virginia, Collection of Mr and Mrs Paul Mellon.
298. Edgar Degas, figure study for *Scène de steeplechase: le jockey tombé*, c. 1866, black crayon heightened with white on brown paper, 25.4 x 34, Collection of Mr and Mrs Paul Mellon, Upperville Virginia.
299. Edgar Degas, Study for *Scène de guerre*, Paris, Cabinet des Dessins, Musée du Louvre (RF15536).
300. Edgar Degas, Study for *Scène de guerre*, Paris, Cabinet des Dessins, Musée du Louvre (RF15536).
301. Edgar Degas, *Achille Degas en aspirant de Marine*, 1856-7. Oil on canvas, 64.5 x 46.2 cm. Washington, National Gallery of Art.
302. Edgar Degas, *René Degas à l'encrier*, 1855. Oil on canvas, 92 x 73 cm. Northampton, Massachusetts, Smith College Museum of Art.
303. Bronzino, *Portrait of a Sculptor*, 16<sup>th</sup> Century.
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305. Edgar Degas, *M and Mme Edmondo Morbilli*, c. 1865. Oil on canvas, 116.5 x 88.3 cm. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.

306. Edgar Degas, *Auto-portrait*, 1853-4. Oil and charcoal on canvas, 35 x 27 cm. Location Unknown.
307. Edgar Degas, *René Degas*, 1859-60. Oil on cardboard, 30 x 23 cm. Location Unknown.
308. Edgar Degas, *Thérèse Degas en pensionnaire*, c. 1856. Oil on canvas, 31.5 x 15.5 cm. Location Unknown.
309. Edgar Degas, *Marguerite Degas en pensionnaire*, c. 1856. Oil on canvas, 33.5 x 25.5 cm. Walsall, Walsall Art Gallery.
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313. *Jockey Tombé*, c. 1895. Oil on canvas, 181 x 151 cm. Basel, Kunstmuseum.
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315. Edgar Degas, *Portraits dans un bureau (Nouvelle Orléans)*, 1876. Oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm. Pau, Musée des Beaux-Arts.
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326. Edgar Degas, *Portrait d'un homme*, 1866. Oil on canvas, 85 x 65 cm. New York, Brooklyn Museum of Art.

## INTRODUCTION

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There is little primary literature on Degas' artistic output produced between the historical period 1854 and 1870. This is due to the fact that most of the canvases were either never exhibited during his lifetime (as is the case of *Sémiramis construisant Babylone* (c. 1860) (Plate 1), *Petites filles spartiates provoquant des garçons* (c. 1860) (Plate 2), *David et Goliath* (c. 1858) (Plate 3) and *Alexandre et le Bucéphale* (c. 1859-61) (Plate 5)) or, as with *Scène de guerre* (1865) (Plate 4) and *Scène de steeplechase* (1866) (Plate 6), were simply passed over unnoticed by the critics at the Salon where they were first exhibited. Degas continued to exhibit intermittently at this official forum during the 1870s, but it is not until the latter part of this decade that the artist gained a measure of critical recognition as a result of his participation in a series of independently organized exhibitions with a group of artists who would later become collectively known as the 'Impressionists'.<sup>1</sup> Degas gradually assumed prominence amongst this collective and garnered a significant amount of critical attention. With incisive portraits of contemporary life such as *Portraits dans un bureau* (2<sup>nd</sup> Exhibition, 1876) (figure 1), *Femmes devant un café, le soir* (3<sup>rd</sup> Exhibition, 1877) (figure 2) and *Physionomie de criminel* (6<sup>th</sup> Exhibition, 1881), together with his series of *blanchisseuses, repasseurs, danseuses, café-concert chanteuses*, jockeys and imagery of the *maisons closes*, Degas' reputation as a modern Realist was secured.<sup>2</sup>

The primary discourse generated by the work Degas exhibited with the Impressionists is notable in that it laid the foundations of a critical vocabulary through which the artist's work has subsequently come to be discussed. The key text of this discourse is Edmond Duranty's *La Nouvelle Peinture: A propos du groupe d'artistes qui exposent dans les galeries Durand-Ruel* which was published in 1876 to coincide with the second group show.<sup>3</sup> Although (as indicated by its subtitle) the article was ostensibly concerned with the whole cohort of artists exhibiting at this forum, it was clearly written with the work of Degas primarily in mind. Commonly understood as a Realist manifesto of sorts, Duranty's text begins with a vociferous condemnation of academicism. Disparaging the Homeric bric-a-brac (*le bric-à-brac homérique*<sup>4</sup>) of history painting Duranty then proceeded to attack the conservatism of the artistic education provided by the *Ecole-des-Beaux-Arts*, condemning its highly prescribed training programme and emphasis upon slavish imitation which, he argued, did nothing to foster artistic innovation. Also denounced are

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<sup>1</sup> For the documentation and critical literature relating to these exhibitions see Ruth Berson (ed.), *The New Painting: Impressionism, 1874-1886*, 2 vols. (San Francisco: Museum of Fine Arts, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Whilst Degas' work from this period was (and still is) commonly bracketed as Realist or Impressionist, certain critics of the day understood the artist's practice – in particular his use of repetition and seriality – to exceed these categories. For a detailed discussion of the critical response to the work Degas exhibited at the Impressionist exhibitions see Carol Armstrong, *Odd Man Out: Readings of the Work and Reputation of Edgar Degas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> This essay is reprinted in Charles S Moffett (ed.), *The New Painting: Impressionism 1874-1886*, (Oxford: Phaidon, 1986), pp. 477-84.

<sup>4</sup> Edmond Duranty, *La Nouvelle Peinture*, reprinted in Moffett, *The New Painting*, p. 478.



the obsolete figurative rhetorics of the Academy, whose generalized forms based on classical prototypes could not articulate the specificities of contemporary life or the physiognomy of the modern body. As Duranty summed up:

*Adieu le corps humain, traité comme un vase, au pont de vue du galbe decorative; adieu l'uniforme monotonie de la charpente, de l'écorché saillant sous le nu; ce qu'il nous faut, c'est la note spéciale de l'individu moderne, dans son vêtement, au milieu de ses habitudes sociales, chez lui dans la rue.*<sup>5</sup>

*La Nouvelle Peinture* here addresses a set of concerns which have a direct bearing on the artist's early oeuvre. It is precisely the problematic process of transition between the two figurative modes outlined by Duranty that Degas' early work is seen to negotiate. Indeed, Degas and Duranty were close associates during the 1870s and the Realist claims made in the text were certainly formulated as a result of their dialogue.<sup>6</sup> At one point Duranty even quotes from a letter of Degas' which describes the absurdity of an artist who – although delighting in the snub nose and small eyes (*un nez retroussé, des petits yeux*) of his mistress by night – returns in the morning to the sombre prototypes of antiquity. Duranty's conclusion to this anecdote: '*peut-être, quelque jour, la femme française vivante, au nez rétroussé, délogera-t-elle la femme grecque en marbre, au nez droit, au menton épais...*'<sup>7</sup> can here be taken as analogous to the effacement of the classical ideal at stake in the *Spartiates*, a process which chapter 2 will trace in detail.

Whilst *La Nouvelle Peinture* set the dominant interpretative agenda through which the work Degas exhibited at subsequent exhibitions was understood, his 1886 *Suite de nus de femmes se baignant, se lavant, se séchant, s'essuyant, se peignant ou se faisant peigner* exhibited at the 8<sup>th</sup> exhibition inaugurated a critical vocabulary which was distinct from the Realist terms through which his work had previously been read.<sup>8</sup> Of the critical discourse generated by these contorted female figures depicted at various stages of their toilette, Joris-Karl Huysmans' account is most notable. His reading of the *Suite de nus* through the themes of denigration, repudiation and debasement is explicitly indicated at the outset:

*'Il semblait qu'excédé par la bassesse de ses voisinages, il eut voulu user de représailles et jeter à la face de son siècle le plus excessif outrage, en culbutant l'idole constamment ménagée, la femme, qu'il avilit lorsqu'il la représente, en plein tub, dans les humiliantes poses de soins intimes.'*<sup>9</sup>

Huysmans then proceeded to provide detailed commentaries of the individual works themselves. Exemplary of these is his description of the crouching female of *Le tub* (figure 3):

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 481.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed study of Duranty's criticism and its relation to the work of Degas see Armstrong, 'Duranty on Degas: A Theory of Modern Painting' in *Odd Man Out*, pp. 73-100.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 479.

<sup>8</sup> While the hermetic *Suite de nus* certainly represented something of a departure from the artist's previous commitment to realism, the critical discourse they generated is also reflective of an emergent literary tendency which can retrospectively be identified as proto-symbolist. See Armstrong, 'Against the Grain: JK Huysmans and the 1886 Series of Nudes', in *ibid.*, pp. 157-210.

<sup>9</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Certains* (1889)(Paris: Plon, 1980), p. 23.

*'Ici c'est une rousse, boulotte et farcie, courbant l'échine, faisant poindre l'os du sacrum sur les rondeurs tendues des fesses; elle se rompt, à vouloir ramener le bras derrière l'épaule afin de presser l'éponge qui dégouline sur le rachis et clapote le long des reins'.<sup>10</sup>*

The disparaging terms through which Huysmans conceived of the representation of femininity in the *Suite de nus* set the tone through which Degas' imagery of the female body would subsequently come to be read. Even today Huysmans' misogynistic language is so firmly entrenched within the discourse on the artist, that it is all but impossible to distinguish between the inherent violence at stake in the imagery of which he speaks and the virulent metaphors of his own writing. It is thus important to acknowledge that it is this 'misogynist' discourse within which any Degas scholar wishing to address his representation of femininity remains inevitably entangled.<sup>11</sup> This is an issue which chapter 3 will address at length.

After Degas' *'insultant adieu'* (as Huysmans referred to the 1886 *Suite de nus*) to the Impressionists, the artist became increasingly reluctant to exhibit his work.<sup>12</sup> Refusing to participate in group shows and public exhibitions, he confined the distribution of his work to an intimate cohort of friends, dealers and private collectors. Consequently, aside from Degas' correspondence with friends and family, there is scant primary literature upon his artistic output during this period.

In the years after Degas' death a number of publications appeared, most of which were authored by those who knew the artist personally. This literature can be classified into two groups: personal memoirs and critical attempts to assess Degas' oeuvre as a whole. It is into the former category that Jeanne Fèvre's *Mon oncle Degas* (1949), Daniel Halévy's *Degas parle* (1960) and Paul Valéry's *Degas/Danse/Dessin* (1934) fall, while the earliest monographs on the artist to appear were Julius Meier-Grafe's *Degas* (1923) Paul Jamot's *Degas* (1924).<sup>13</sup>

The publication of Paul-André Lemoisne's four volume study *Degas et son Oeuvre* (1946-9) marked an important milestone in the literature on the artist. Despite the fact that much of Lemoisne's dating has since been proved erroneous, this remains the definitive *catalogue raisonné* of the artist's work to date.<sup>14</sup> Theodore Reff has also made a significant contribution to Degas

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 24

<sup>11</sup> See Heather Dawkins, 'Managing Degas' in *Dealing with Degas: Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision*, in Richard Kendall and Griselda Pollock (eds.) (London: Pandora, 1992), pp. 133-45.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>13</sup> Another notable testimony is that of Degas' model Alice Michel, whose memoir was published shortly after the artist's death. See Alice Michel, 'Degas et son modèle', *Mercur de France* (16 February 1919), pp. 457-8, 623-9. Heather Dawkins provides an interesting deconstruction of this text in her PhD thesis *Sexuality, Degas and Women's History*, (University of Leeds, 1991). Another version of this argument is to be found in her essay 'Frogs, Monkeys and Women: A History of Identifications Across a Phantastic Body', in *Dealing with Degas*, pp. 202-17.

<sup>14</sup> For *catalogue raisonné*'s of Degas' work in other media see John Rewald, *Degas: Sculpture* (New York: Abrams, 1956); Jean Adhémar and Françoise Cachin, *Edgar Degas: gravures et monotypes* (Paris: Arts et Métiers Graphiques, 1973) and Eugenia Parry Janis, *Degas Monotypes*, ex. cat. (Cambridge, Mass.: Fogg Art Museums, 1968).

scholarship. His annotations of the artist's *carnets* at the Bibliothèque Nationale and identification of the artist's early copies have proved indispensable to my research.<sup>15</sup> Another key text in the field is the exhibition catalogue produced to accompany the 1988-89 Degas retrospective at the Grand Palais, Paris, Metropolitan Museum of Art New York and the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, edited by Jean Sutherland Boggs. This catalogue is the most comprehensive retrospective of the Degas' oeuvre to date and has proved a serviceable reference guide to the artist's work. However, unlike comparable exhibitions of nineteenth-century canonical male French artists, (such as the Louvre's 1989 Jacques-Louis David retrospective and the 1996 Géricault bicentenary at the Grand Palais) the exhibition missed the opportunity to provide a critical reassessment of Degas due to the fact that the catalogue essays were limited to a formal and stylistic analysis of his work.<sup>16</sup>

In the first generation of art historical studies dealing with French modernist painting of the late nineteenth century to emerge after the Second World War, Degas is an artist who figures prominently. Most notable here is John Rewald's *History of Impressionism* (1946) which, as the title suggests, was the first coherent historical synthesis of this artistic movement. But while this text laid the scholarly foundations for the study of Impressionist art, Rewald's formal methodology was found wanting by a generation of scholars who emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s. For them this was a mode of scholarship which – by attending only to the formal properties of the objects under discussion – neglected to account for the complex social and sexual politics which they were also seen to inscribe. The political consciousness of Anglophone art history gained imperative in the early 1970s with two landmark publications: Linda Nochlin's 'Why have there been no great women artists?' (1971) and an article by T J Clark published in the *Times Literary Supplement* (1974) which called for an art history which addressed the social and political historical realities from which the art historians' objects of study were produced.<sup>17</sup> Whilst the subsequent critical interventions of Clark and Nochlin have redefined the parameters of art history, it is the feminist legacy of the latter, together with that of scholars such as Tamar Garb and Griselda

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<sup>15</sup> See bibliography for a complete list of Reff's publications on Degas.

<sup>16</sup> For the published papers of the symposia accompanying these exhibitions edited by Louvre curator Régis Michel see *David contre David: actes du colloque organisé au musée du Louvre* (Paris: La Documentation Française, 1993) and *Géricault: ouvrage collectif*, 2 vols (Paris: Documentation Française, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Linda Nochlin, 'Why have there been no great women artists?' (1971) reprinted in *Women, Art and Power* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), pp. 145-78 and T J Clark 'On the Conditions of artistic creation', *Times Literary Supplement* (24 May 1974), pp. 561-3. It is important to note that these texts built upon earlier socially informed art historical methodologies, such as those of Arnold Hauser and Meyer Schapiro, but which had, by the early 70s, been largely eclipsed by Greenbergian formalism. For an account of Feminist and Marxist interventions into art history see Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988) (esp. chapter 1 'Feminist interventions in the histories of art: an introduction', pp. 1-17, and chapter 2 'Vision, voice and power: feminist art histories and Marxism', pp. 18-49).

Pollock, from which Degas scholarship has benefited the most and has paved the way for the most interesting and groundbreaking criticism on the artist.<sup>18</sup>

In this respect the 1992 publication *Dealing with Degas: Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision* edited by Richard Kendall and Griselda Pollock marked something of a watershed.<sup>19</sup> Kendall's introductory essay 'Dealing with Degas' assessed the critical literature on the artist to date, whilst Pollock's explicitly addressed the impact of feminist scholarship on the study of Degas.<sup>20</sup> Here Pollock identified a number of themes raised by this discourse which are highly pertinent to a critical consideration of the artist's formal practice: the sexual politics of his imagery, the problems of female spectatorship, the misogynistic terms through which his work is primarily read and the construction of the 'Degas' of canonical art history. These issues were addressed in productive ways by the authors of the various essays contained within this volume and provided a timely reassessment of the artist's work from a critically informed perspective.

The 1990s also witnessed the publication of two book-length studies on Degas: Carol Armstrong's *Odd Man Out* (1991) and Anthea Callen's *The Spectacular Body* (1995). Whilst both texts have, in their different ways, done much to demystify the 'Degas' of early scholarship, Armstrong and Callen represent radically different stances in relation to Degas' oeuvre, and the artist-subject posited by each could not be more different. The ostensible topic of Callen's book is the ways in which Degas' imagery of the human body – particularly the female body – is implicated in the representational conventions of late-nineteenth century artistic and scientific discourse. But it is a thesis which also has an explicit political agenda. As the introduction states in no uncertain terms: 'this book examines the way patriarchy pictures both femininity and masculinity in order to empower men.'<sup>21</sup> While Callen's book provides what is perhaps the most formal and technically sensitive analysis of the artist's work to date, her reading of the imagery itself is inherently reductive. For Callen, Degas' practice does little than encode the dominant patriarchal social relations of the day.<sup>22</sup> Whilst the ambiguities, inconsistencies and illegibilities of the artist's imagery are, for Callen, so many blind-spots, they constitute precisely aspects of his

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<sup>18</sup> See for example, Pollock, *Vision and Difference* and Tamar Garb, 'Gender and Representation', in Briony Fer et. al, *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 219-289. For earlier readings of the work of Degas informed by feminist and Marxist theory see Eunice Lipton, *Looking into Degas: Uneasy Images of Women and Modern Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) and Hollis Clayson, *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991).

<sup>19</sup> This collection of essays was prompted by the 1989 exhibition at Tate Gallery Liverpool on the subject of Degas' 'images of women', many of which were presented at the accompanying colloquium. For the catalogue of this exhibition see *Degas: Images of Women*, ex. cat. (Liverpool: Tate Gallery, 1989).

<sup>20</sup> Kendall, 'Dealing with Degas' and Pollock 'Degas/Images/Women; Women/Degas/Images: What Difference does Feminism Make to Art History?' in *Dealing With Degas*, pp. 11-21 and pp. 22-39 respectively.

<sup>21</sup> Anthea Callen, *The Spectacular Body: Science, Method and Meaning in the Work of Degas* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), p. x.

<sup>22</sup> For an astute review of *The Spectacular Body* see Tamar Garb, 'Degas in the Dock', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 19, no. 1, (1986) pp. 108-11.

practice to which Armstrong is so finely attuned, and for whom they are taken as symptomatic of the ways in which it fails to cohere with the dominant representational codes of the day. But in reading Degas 'against the grain' of his contemporaries, the artist is posited as a subject operating over and above the historical determinants of his discourse. In this way Armstrong's 'Degas' is in stark contrast to Callen's, for whom these parameters constitute a set of stringent limitations by which his practice is entirely circumscribed.

Since the publication of these important texts in the early nineties Degas scholarship has been a rather stagnant field. Over the last few years, however, there has been something of a resurgence of interest in the artist's work. Notable in this context is Jill DeVoyner and Richard Kendall's *Degas and the Dance* (2002). Published to coincide with an exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, this was the most comprehensive study of Degas' ballet work to date.<sup>23</sup> Whilst this text was primarily concerned with establishing a historical context for this aspect of Degas' practice, Tamar Garb's recently published essay 'Temporality and the Dancer' (first given as a lecture to coincide with this exhibition) provides a nuanced and critically informed analysis of the artist's work on this theme.<sup>24</sup>

A small exhibition, entitled *Degas: Art in the Making* staged by the National Gallery in 2002 offered an interesting opportunity for a reassessment of the artist's formal practice.<sup>25</sup> The show ostensibly presented the findings of technical research undertaken by the gallery on its collection of Degas' work. But by tracing the material and conceptual evolutionary processes by which these works were constituted it also posed an interesting set of questions around the concept of 'finish'. It is precisely the complex set of negotiations, dialogues and procedures at stake in the artist's oeuvre to which this exhibition drew attention that my dissertation will seek to foreground.

Also worthy of mention are two articles published in the online journal *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*: Martha Lucy's 'Reading the Animal in Degas' *Young Spartans*' (2003) and Marni Reva Kessler's 'Ocular Anxiety and the Pink Teacup: Edgar Degas' *Woman with a Bandage*' (2006). Although this pair of interesting articles shed new historical perspectives on Degas' practice and are theoretically astute, they are rather different from the scope and ambition of my own project.

While the obscure academic beginnings of a canonical male artist on who so much has already been written would not immediately present itself as the most inspiring or propitious subject for a PhD dissertation, Degas' early corpus is a body of work which maps a compelling process of formation and possesses a critical potential which has not, as yet, been fully explored. One of the major themes of this dissertation is how the artist negotiated nineteenth-century notions of 'History' and 'Tradition' within the context of an emerging, modern self-

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<sup>23</sup> The study built upon existing literature in this field by scholars such as Lilian Browse and Eunice Lipton.

<sup>24</sup> Tamar Garb, 'Temporality and the Dancer', in *The Body in Time: Figures of Femininity in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2008), pp. 7-38.

<sup>25</sup> See my review of this exhibition in *Object*, no. 8 (2005-6), pp. 115-7.

consciousness. However, I also seek to reveal what is at stake for Degas' own subjectivity here, both in terms of how it is implicated within the broader historical and artistic transformations taking place at this moment as well as the ways in which it is enmeshed within his formal procedures.

### **subjects, subjectivities and sexuality**

The methodological framework of this thesis is indebted to psychoanalytic, feminist, structuralist and post-structuralist discourses. Whilst I will draw on various aspects of these theories throughout the thesis, my engagement with them is indicated first and foremost in my formulation of the subject of this thesis: 'Degas' – a construction engaging directly with various notions of the 'subject' posited in these discourses.

Emerging over the course of the twentieth century these theories initiated a radical departure from the privileged 'individual' of the western philosophical tradition. As Kaja Silverman notes in *The Subject of Semiotics* (1983): 'the term 'subject' designates quite a difference semantic and ideological space from that indicated by the more familiar term 'individual'.<sup>26</sup> While the latter (exemplified by the indubitable affirmation of Descartes' *cogito*) presupposes the speaking subject to be a stable, rational entity and autonomous intellectual agent, contemporary theories of subjectivity have effectively undermined and destabilized the authenticity of the stable Cartesian 'I'.<sup>27</sup>

The structuralist semiotics of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure provide one of the earliest sustained critiques of this entity. Implicit in the posthumous *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) is the notion that the subject does not pre-exist, or stand apart from language. Rather, it is only constituted as an *effect* of this signifying system. This is made clear in Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*. The notion that the subject's utterances (*parole*) only have meaning when framed against the signifying system (*langue*) from which they issue radically undermines the privileged authorial subject on which the western philosophical tradition is predicated.

The psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, which posit a subject governed by unconscious forces (first elucidated in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900)), also posed a significant challenge to the metaphysical foundations of the rational 'individual'.<sup>28</sup> The Freudian 'subject' of psychoanalysis was further developed by Jacques Lacan. Bringing structuralist theory to bear explicitly on psychoanalysis Lacan, reiterating Saussure, maintained that there is no subject pre-existing language. Indeed, the subject is only constituted *through* language, whose coming into

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<sup>26</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 126.

<sup>27</sup> See René Descartes, *The Method, Meditations and Philosophy*, trans. John Vietch (Washington: Walter Donne, 1901).

<sup>28</sup> For a succinct outline of Freud's psychic topographies see Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, pp. 54-86.

being (*le devenir*) is marked through a series of formative stages culminating with the child's entry into the symbolic order. For Lacan, initiation into the symbolic is a precondition of subjectivity.<sup>29</sup>

While the writings of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser and Jacques Derrida have, in their various ways, thoroughly undermined and destabilized the stable Cartesian subject of western metaphysics, in a monographic thesis such as this one is obliged to investigate what measure of agency (if any) can be salvaged for the subject from these post-structuralist critiques.<sup>30</sup> The furthest extreme of the paradigm theoretical shift from a 'speaking' to a 'spoken' subject is exemplified by Michel Foucault's 1969 essay 'What is an author?'. By charting the historical formation of the 'author' Foucault unmasks this category as an ideological construct; a 'rational entity' which is enlisted to function as an authentic point of origin and privileged locus of meaning.<sup>31</sup> The ideas outlined in this essay hold a strong resonance for art history whose discourse is constructed around the organizing principle of the maligned 'author-function'. For better or worse art history is primarily a history of artists rather than styles, and for the foreseeable future at least that does not look set to change.

Griselda Pollock has criticized this operation in art historical discourse. Her 1980 essay 'Artists, Mythologies and Media: Genius, Madness and Art History' takes apart the conventional vehicles of representation through which artistic output is organized. In the monographic modes of the *oeuvre* and *catalogue raisonné*, she discusses the ways in which the artist is presented quite apart from the social, historical, gendered and economic determinants of the discourse by which (almost always) 'he' is produced as a subject in the first place. Removing the artist from the praxis of his constituting discourse 'art' is effectively represented as the expression of the artist's 'creative personality'.<sup>32</sup>

In undermining such mythological constructions Roland Barthes' 'The Death of the Author' (1968) provides a useful point of reference. By destabilizing the 'single theological meaning' attached to the 'Author-God' and emphasizing the polysemic nature of the text Barthes (although retaining a certain investment in the 'author-function') offers a set of terms through which traditional notions of artistic agency might productively be rethought.<sup>33</sup>

Whilst signaling a critical awareness of the ways in which art history produces its subjects ('the production of an artistic subject *for* works of art'<sup>34</sup>) I would maintain that it is counter-intuitive to reject the category of the artist outright (even the cultural theorist Mieke Bal, despite

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<sup>29</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (New York: Norton, 1978).

<sup>30</sup> For a concise summary of their interventions see 'From Sign to Subject: A Short History', in *The Subject of Semiotics*, pp. 3-53.

<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?' reprinted in *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 923-928.

<sup>32</sup> Griselda Pollock, 'Artists, Mythologies and Media: Genius, Madness and Art History', *Screen*, 21 (1980), p. 59.

<sup>33</sup> See also Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' (1968), in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 143.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58

her demotion of Rembrandt to 'Rembrandt' ('a cultural text rather than a historical reality'<sup>35</sup>), does not dispense with the 'author function' completely). What has characterized more recent monographic writing on canonical artists in the light of these institutional critiques is a shift from the idea of the artist as creative genius to the artist-subject as producer operating within the determinants of a culturally and historically specific discourse within which his practice is inevitably circumscribed.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, it is within this praxis within which 'Degas' is always-already implicated. His gender, education, nationality, social status and economic position all have a crucial role to play in his artistic formation and their significance will be discussed at various points throughout this thesis.

While I maintain that Degas' early artistic practice constitutes a singularly innovative working through of a set of pertinent artistic concerns, the issues with which he was grappling throughout the 1860s were by no means apprehended only by him. The demise of the ideal nude, the obsolescence of history painting and the problematic legacy of the classical tradition are written across mid-nineteenth century cultural discourse and were being simultaneously interrogated by many of his immediate contemporaries such as Manet, Gustave Moreau and Puvis de Chavannes. However, while not losing sight of this contextual milieu I seek to push Degas' negotiation of contemporary artistic protocols further by exploring the ways in which his own subjectivity and artistic identity are implicated within the broader historical and artistic transformations taking place at this moment. In so doing I will inevitably engage with the details of Degas' biography. I aim, however, to move beyond the mythologizing or sentimentalizing interpretations of his life already in existence towards a more creative understanding of how one might conceive of artistic subjectivity in relation to artistic production.

This is not an archival thesis and the historical 'facts' regarding Degas constitute an already-existing art historical construction that is already securely in place.<sup>37</sup> It is thus the unwritten, yet interconnected, spaces between this 'tissue of quotations' through which my narrative is interwoven.<sup>38</sup> While the 'Degas' who emerges over the course of this dissertation can therefore be nothing other than a fiction, or a work of fantasy, it is a figure who I hope will function to destabilize already-existing constructions of this artist-subject. In this way my thesis hopes to resist any attempt to assign a stable or coherent identity to the artist, instead revealing a

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<sup>35</sup> Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> See for example, Carol Armstrong, *Odd Man Out: Readings of the Work and Reputation of Edgar Degas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>37</sup> For the existing literature on art-historical mythologizations and constructions of the artist see Griselda Pollock, 'Artists, Mythologies and Media: Genius, Madness and Art History', *Screen*, 21 (1980), pp. 57-96 and Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>38</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' (1968), in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 146.



subjectivity that is altogether more fractured, ambiguous and inconsistent than that which previous interpretations of the artist's work have been able to account for.

Degas' reputed misogyny has had a profound impact on feminist readings of his work and has, on occasion, been used as justification for his profoundly troubling imagery of the female body. It is here that I must indicate my departure from some of the existing literature on Degas. Although feminist art history has done much to open up new and productive ways of reading his work, the ways in which the artist has, on occasion, been vilified within this discourse has been to the detriment of a more nuanced awareness of his imagery. Writing off the artist's representations of the female body as cruel and sadistic, or understanding them to do nothing more than reflect the misogynistic or patriarchal norms of late nineteenth-century French culture, is to deny the profound complexity of the imagery itself.

As a female scholar writing from a theoretically informed feminist perspective, the nature of my own investment in Degas' work remains, however, a crucial issue to address. The problematic stakes of my own engagement with the artist's imagery of the female body emerged most forcefully in a sustained encounter with the preparatory figure studies for *Scène de Guerre* in the opulent surroundings of the Cabinet des Dessins at the Louvre where these drawings are housed. The more I studied this extraordinary corpus, the less possible it became to resist being drawn into the fatal logic of Degas' deleterious project of feminine debasement, an experience which I felt necessitated the formulation of an appropriate vocabulary of affect through which to articulate such a troubling, but no less mesmerizing, encounter.

Issues of gender and sexuality, are thus crucial issues to address and it is necessary at this point to indicate the theoretical frameworks from where my understanding of these terms is derived. Here I adhere to feminist and psychoanalytic theoretical notions that 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are not natural categories but cultural constructions.<sup>39</sup> If gendered identities are not *a priori*, but socially and psychically acquired, it follows that sexual difference is a fragile and unstable dichotomy.

Its precarious foundations are clearly outlined by Freud in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1909). Indeed, the recognition of sexual difference – a scenario giving rise to the castration complex – is one that is profoundly traumatic for the young (male) subject. Upon seeing the female genitals for the first time the little boy does not assume that she is in possession of a different anatomical apparatus than him, but that she is a castrated version of himself and that the same fate may befall him too. This primary trauma is only overcome when the young male sacrifices his first desire for the Mother and aligns himself with the Oedipal authority of the Father. As a consequence of his successful 'Oedipalization', the male subject gains access into the symbolic, a realm from which, due to her 'lack' the female is excluded. The phallogocentrism of

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<sup>39</sup> For a coherent summary of these theories and their bearing on the discipline of art history see Tamar Garb, 'Gender and Representation', pp. 219-229.

Freud's model of psychosexual development (and its subsequent elaboration by Lacan) has since come under substantial critique by feminist scholars.<sup>40</sup> Kaja Silverman has provided one of the most sustained deconstructions of the patriarchal foundations of classical psychoanalysis in her book *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (1992). The book begins by exposing the 'dominant fiction' of patriarchal discourse: the conflation of the penis with that privileged signifier of power and authority; the phallus.<sup>41</sup> From here Silverman proceeds to explore a range of masculinities whose defining desires and identifications are – with respect to the phallic standard – 'perverse'.<sup>42</sup> It is Silverman's attempt to re-imagine male subjectivity away from the norms of the patriarchal symbolic to which my exploration of Degas' masculine identity (as discussed in the final chapters of this thesis) is indebted.

One of the ways in which I hope to do this is by addressing the complex ways in which masculinity is thematized in Degas' oeuvre. In terms of sheer quantity, the artist's imagery of the male body cannot compare to that of the female body. Nevertheless it constitutes a highly significant aspect of his output and, I would argue, is a body of work that is equally compelling and problematic. While throughout the 1870s and 1880s the representation of masculinity in Degas' work is, admittedly, largely confined to the top-hatted bourgeois gentlemen of the brothel monotypes and opera *coulisses*, these portentous embodiments of patriarchy were preceded by a host of altogether more timorous figures with whom Degas exhibited a profound identification. As we shall soon discover, protagonists such as the meek Alexander of *Alexandre et le Bucéphale* and the unassuming David of *David et Goliath* have much to tell us about the precarious nature of the artist's subjectivity and artistic identity during his early years. However, these floundering youths also effectively work to undermine a notion of Degas' phallic 'mastery' that is inevitably coupled with a reading of his work as amounting to nothing other than the acting out of sadistic male fantasies. This is an ascription which is destabilized further through a problematization of the masculine desires at stake in the artist's imagery of the female body. While these works would ostensibly appear to be predicated upon the absolute obliteration of feminine desire and subjectivity, upon closer analysis it is the deliquescence of the artist's *own* subjectivity which frequently emerges as a pervasive fantasy.

Historical research undertaken on 'Degas' by previous generations of scholars has enabled me to focus mainly upon what, I hope, is an imaginative, perceptive and original reading of the artist's formative oeuvre. Various theoretical discourses will be brought to bear upon my analysis of the artist's work over the course of this dissertation but, as the above discussion has made clear, it is those of psychoanalysis and feminism to which my project is most greatly indebted and it is only as result of my long standing engagement with these discourses that I have

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<sup>40</sup> See for example the work of Jane Gallup, Juliet Mitchell, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Jacqueline Rose and Kaja Silverman.

<sup>41</sup> See chapter 1 'The Dominant Fiction' in Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 15-51.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

been able to uncover the capacity of Degas' art works to function as objects of endless fascination.

*L'entre deux manqué. L'entre deux n'est pas le plus précieux.*

Daniel Halévy<sup>43</sup>

The work discussed in this thesis was not known to the general public during Degas' lifetime and only came to light after the artist's death when the contents of his studio were unearthed. Although by 1917 there was a considerable amount of Degas' work in circulation, these *articles* (as the artist disparagingly referred to the pictures he was obliged to produce in order to make a living) were largely designed to satisfy a commercial market, and are in no way representative of his output as a whole. The posthumous atelier sales of Degas' estate administered by his dealer Durand-Ruel thus represented something of an epiphany for those supposedly *au fait* with his work, as it was not until this moment that the true nature and sheer extent of the artist's productivity was revealed. As Paul Jamot remarked in amazement: '*c'est presque un Degas inconnu qui nous est relevé*, before proceeding to call for a radical reassessment of Degas' reputation as '*le peintre des danseuses*'.<sup>44</sup>

Daniel Halévy commented on the character of the work which was being inventoried for auction in the Durand-Ruel galleries thus: '*Tout l'atelier Degas est là, tableaux maniables; on les déplace, on les compare. Les anciennes peintures qu'il avait conservés; et tout l'inachevé des dernières années. L'entre deux manqué. L'entre deux n'est pas le plus précieux.*'.<sup>45</sup> This astute assessment of Degas' oeuvre indicates what I believe to constitute its most fascinating aspects: the work of his youth and that of his old age. While the hermetic nature of Degas' late practice – devoted exclusively to the human figure – warrants a study of its own and lies far beyond the scope of the thesis, there are numerous formal and thematic connections at stake between the two bodies of work worth noting.<sup>46</sup> If Degas' work of the late 1890s and early twentieth century is characterized by an overriding preoccupation with three body types: the dancer, the nude and the jockey, each one can be seen to engage with a set of figurative concerns which can be traced back to the very beginning of his artistic career. Various scholars have made a connection between the *Spartiates* and the topoi of the dance.<sup>47</sup> This was an association made all but explicitly by Degas himself towards the end of his life. When Louisine Havemeyer enquired as to the root of his obsession with the ballerina, he

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<sup>43</sup> Daniel Halévy, *Degas parle* (Paris: La Palatine, 1960) pp. 179-80

<sup>44</sup> Paul Jamot, 'Degas', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, XIV (April-June, 1918) p. 128.

<sup>45</sup> Daniel Halévy, *Degas parle*, pp. 179-80.

<sup>46</sup> The most complete study of Degas' late practice to date is Richard Kendall, *Degas: Beyond Impressionism*, ex. cat. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996).

<sup>47</sup> Previous scholars who have made this connection are Carol Armstrong and Richard Kendall and Jill de Voynar. See *Odd Man Out: Readings of the Work and Reputation of Edgar Degas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 114-22 and *Degas and the Dance* (New York: Abrams, 2002), pp. 127-8.

replied that it was because it was only through his experimentations with this figure that he was able to 'recapture the movement of the Greeks'.<sup>48</sup> Less commented on however are the dialogues between the female figures strewn across the foreground of *Scène de Guerre* and Degas' late nudes. The cascades of brightly coloured hair, effacement of facial particularities and figurative vocabulary of shame and mortification enacted through a corporeal semantics of hiding and covering illustrated in these latter works (figure 4) expand upon and reconfigure a symbolic rhetoric of the female nude invented over thirty years earlier (figure 5).

In an oeuvre so overwhelming given over to the representation of the female figure, it is important to note that the jockey is a motif which returned to feature prominently in the artist's late work (see for example figure 6). As we shall see in the final chapter of this dissertation the age-old pairing of horse and rider had functioned as a crucial motif for the artist in the late 1860s, as it was here that he made the ultimate transition from history painting to modern life painting. But if this was only achieved at the cost of the dissolution of the heroic male subjectivity enshrined in the elevated, but now obsolete, genre of *la grande peinture*, there is a compelling (and as yet fully unexplored) nihilistic significance at stake in Degas' reengagement with this motif in his latter years. Indeed, there is no kind of redemption at stake in this return. Wandering purposelessly in packs across open fields, these desultory horses and riders are denuded of the specificity of the racetrack setting with which they had earlier been furnished. Reduced to flat blocks of bright colour, the faceless jockeys are just as de-individualized – and arguably far more characterless – than their female counterparts on which Degas was at work in parallel. Of all Degas' jockey imagery of the late 1890s however, the most significant work is the 1896 *Jockey Tombé*. A reworking of the 1866 *Scène de Steeplechase*, *Le jockey tombé* was begun shortly after the death of his younger brother Achille, who had originally posed for the figure of the fallen jockey. Although the complex familial identifications at stake here are the subject of the final chapter of this dissertation, these works can, at this point, serve to give us some indication of the extent with which Degas' subjectivity is bound up with his artistic practice.

Many of those who knew the artist personally have noted the high affection in which the artist held the work of his youth. It is therefore significant that this was a body of work with which he never parted. Indeed, all of the works discussed in this thesis: the early History paintings (together with their related compositional studies and preparatory drawings), family portraits,  *carnets*  and copies of Old Master's remained in the studio at the time of his death. The nature of Degas' personal attachment to the work of his juvenilia is one of the main themes of this dissertation. However, it is also important to acknowledge a number of rather more prosaic reasons why (apart from the fact that Degas never considered it to be 'finished') most of the work discussed in this thesis had never left the studio and remained with the artist at the time of

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<sup>48</sup> Louise Havemeyer, *Sixteen to Sixty: Memoirs of a Collector* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1961) p. 256.

this death. Although, as we shall soon discover, Degas' early corpus maps a fascinating process of formation and development, this meant little to the institutional powers of the artist's historical milieu. Although the Academy and the Salon were rapidly losing their stronghold over art production and exhibition in the mid-nineteenth century, it was these institutions who still predominantly set the artistic standards of the day. *Scène de Guerre* and *Scène de Steeplechase* somehow managed to pass muster with the Salon jury for inclusion in the annual exhibition. But their obscure narratives, muted colour schemes, compositional illegibility and eschewal of *fini* (a set of characteristics which are the defining features of all Degas' early canvases) fell far short of the clearly legible large scale narrative *tableaux* and slickly finished painted surfaces which constituted the Salon's perennial mainstays at this moment. From the critical silence with which they were greeted, it is quite clear that these insipid offerings simply failed to register with their first audience. The same was true of Degas' father, Auguste. Whilst wholeheartedly supporting his son's chosen career (not least in financial terms) and maintaining a keen interest in his artistic progress, he remained perplexed as to his son's inability to 'finish' his pictures and repeated failure produce a work fit for the Salon. '*Notre Raphaël travaille toujours mais n'a encore rien produit d'achevé cependant les années passent...*',<sup>49</sup> he wrote anxiously to his brother-in-law Michel Musson in 1862.

Indeed, no one has ever made much of Degas' early work. This was certainly the case with the first critical assessments of the artist's oeuvre when it was seen in its entirety after his death. Assessing the History pictures in 1919, Paul Jamot tersely referred to them as '*des documents des plus curieux*',<sup>50</sup> while Jacques-Emile Blanche summarily dismissed them as '*quelques toiles sèches, émaciées*'.<sup>51</sup> Although one or two critics praised the quality of the preparatory drawings, Albert André's and Louis Vauxcelles' comments that the canvases themselves were nothing but '*gages donnés à la tradition scolaire*'<sup>52</sup> with '*nul geste d'insurrection*'<sup>53</sup> sums up the largely negative response with which they were greeted by their first audience. These works, which had lain buried in the half-light of the artist's fusty studio for the previous fifty years, were unlike anything Degas critics had ever seen. Covered in dust they must have appeared as relics from another age and are a stark reminder of how radically the parameters of art had shifted over the course of the artist's lifetime. For subsequent Degas scholars too, the artist's early work has always sat rather uncomfortably within the rest of his oeuvre. The dedication with which he embarked on his academic education and initial career as a history painter have proved a source of embarrassment for a figure whom art history has cast as one of modernism's key progenitors. While it is the artist's work of the 1870s and 1880s which has come under the most sustained historical enquiry in recent years, the

<sup>49</sup> Unpublished letter from Auguste Degas to his brother-in-law Michel Musson, cited in André Lemoisne, *Degas et son Oeuvre*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1946-9), p. 41.

<sup>50</sup> Paul Jamot, *Degas* (Paris: Editions de la Gazette des Beaux-Arts, 1924), p. 28.

<sup>51</sup> Jacques-Emile Blanche, *Propos de peinture*, vol. 1 (Paris: Émile-Paul Frères, 1927), pp. 294-5.

<sup>52</sup> Albert André, *Degas*, Galerie d'Estampes (Paris: Brame, n.d.)

<sup>53</sup> Louis Vauxcelles, *La France* (29 septembre, 1917).

critical potential of the artist's work predating his association with the Café Guerbois circle and the Impressionists has been all but refuted and – if not ignored altogether – is passed over as quickly as possible in most of the literature upon the artist.

Degas' belated coming of age could not have been more different from the precocious artistic debut of his closet rival Manet. Although the pair shared a notoriously stormy relationship, they had much in common. With only two years between them, both came from privileged Parisian backgrounds and had received similar classical educations and academic pupilages. Manet had entered the atelier of Thomas Couture at the age of eighteen and had spent lengthy periods in the museums of western Europe copying from the Masters. (The two artists are reported to have met for the first time at the Louvre in front of Vélasquez's *Infanta Margarita*.<sup>54</sup>) But while Manet's work from the 1860s is – like Degas' – steeped in references to past art, they are deployed to far more subversive and disruptive ends.<sup>55</sup> This idea is illustrated by a comparison of the different way in which each artist utilizes a quotation from Marcantonio Raimondi's engravings after Raphael (widely circulated in artist's studios in the mid-nineteenth century, it was such prints which constituted the bread and butter of the copyist at this moment). While the three figures in the foreground of Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863) (figure 7) are directly based on the triad in the right hand corner of the *Judgement of Paris* (figure 8), Raphael's nymph and river gods are recast as a pair of foppish young men ('ont l'air de collégiens en vacances') and a common streetwalker ('bréda').<sup>56</sup> Degas also cited the work of his illustrious forebear in the *Spartiates*. The seated figure seen in an early version of this work (figure 9) references the muse Euterpe from Raphael's *Parnassus* (figure 10) which Degas had copied several years earlier from Marcantonio Raimondi's engraving (figure 11).

This reference was to be subsequently occluded as the work evolved, although it is still clearly visible in the early stages of this work where it functions simply as acknowledgment of the artist's debt to the classical tradition. While Manet's ultimate profanation of his artistic heritage was achieved two years later with the travesty that was *Olympia*, Degas' quotations of past art in his early work appear as nothing other than attempts to affiliate himself with the classical tradition of which he so ardently desired to be part. The disparity between the two artists as it stood throughout the 1860s is summed up best by Manet himself in the following caustic comment as reported by the Irish art critic George Moore: 'when Degas was painting *Semiramis* I was painting modern Paris'.<sup>57</sup>

Throughout the 1860s Manet was busy establishing a name for himself with a series of assured canvases, which never failed to garner more than their fair share of critical attention.

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<sup>54</sup> Adolphe Tabarant, *Manet et ses oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 37.

<sup>55</sup> For a comprehensive study of Manet's dialogue with the art of the past see Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>56</sup> L Etienne, *Le Jury et les exposants – Salon des Refusés* (Paris, 1863), p. 30.

<sup>57</sup> George Moore, *Confessions of a Young Man* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1888) p. 102.

Degas, in contrast, laboured away alone in his studio without (apparently) managing to produce anything of substance. But if Degas' artistic formation was protracted and difficult, that is all the more reason for it to be taken seriously and considered on its own terms. His artistic coming of age occurred at a moment when the stakes of art were being dramatically redefined. And while the artist would eventually come to play an important role in their reconfiguration, his initial position was one of radical precarity as he attempted to negotiate the terms of his practice amidst these unstable and shifting parameters. It is the tortuous fruits of this endeavour on which my dissertation is based – a series of canvases which have thus far been cast off as wholly insignificant and nugatory.

For most Degas scholars the artist's obscure academic beginnings are only redeemed when the early signs of his 'modernity' are detected. The *Spartiates* is the early canvas most often recruited to serve these ends, and of all the artist's early history pictures is the one which has received by far the most attention in the Degas literature. While the interpretation of the *Spartiates* as a proto-modernist picture produces a reading with which I would, for the most part, concur, it is one which fails to account for the complex ways in which the artist's early practice is entangled in past artistic traditions. The 1860s was a period during which Degas was caught between the beckoning allure of the modernity and the burden of History and Tradition, and it is the pull between these two opposing forces as it is played out in the artist's work produced during this decade which I wish to foreground in this thesis. While, admittedly, the works I discuss do not have the immediate visual appeal of Degas' commercially produced *articles* and do not lend themselves as easily to an unpacking of nineteenth-century sexual politics and social relations in the same way as the artist's imagery of *blanchisseuses* and café-concert *chanteuses*, might not their relative obscurity be exactly what is at stake here? These pictures are difficult, maybe, and often teeter at the very brink of pictorial and narrative illegibility, but I believe them to be highly significant precisely *because* they are transitional and formative. The pictorial languages of Realism and Naturalism, with which Degas' practice would later come to be synonymous, were not pre-existing symbolic systems of representation, but ones which had to be brought into being – to be forged and made – and it is by charting the convoluted and tortuous process of their formation that I attempt to articulate something of their inchoate beginnings.

Degas' early artistic practice here maps onto a broader process of historical transition, a phenomenon which was articulated by various cultural commentators of the day.<sup>58</sup> Although many instances of this can be found in the primary critical literature of the mid-nineteenth century I will focus here upon three key texts which can serve to provide us with a useful barometer of how the parameters of art were shifting over the historical period roughly corresponding to that which is the scope of this thesis. In the closing paragraphs to his extensive

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<sup>58</sup> See Patricia Mainardi, 'The Death of History Painting in France', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, C (December 1982), pp. 219-266 and Joseph Sloane, *French Painting between the Past and the Present: Artists, Critics, and Traditions from 1848-1870* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973).

'Salon de 1846', Baudelaire succinctly summed up the artistic zeitgeist of the moment: *Il est vrai que la grand tradition s'est perdue, et que la nouvelle n'est pas faite.*<sup>59</sup> Whilst the title of his essay 'De l'héroïsme de la vie moderne' is an explicit dig at the historicizing garb of traditional painting and its idealization of the past, Baudelaire also expresses certain reservations with the art of the Realists which, for him at that time, represented the only way forward. With no clear idea as to which direction art should take, the aesthetic climate of the day is characterized here as one of profound uncertainty. In *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (1859-63), however, Baudelaire's critical agenda of modern art is more coherently expressed. The themes of flux and transition at stake in his previous essay are here celebrated as the defining features of modernity (*la modernité, c'est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent*) and Baudelaire proceeds to call for forms of representation which are able to articulate such a radically altered experience of the everyday. But while *Le peintre de la vie moderne* is instrumental in defining an emergent modern self-consciousness, it represents an aesthetic agenda that is still in very much in the process of formation. Although Baudelaire makes repeated reference to a mysterious 'Monsieur G' there is, as yet, no art which fully meets his modern dictum. It is Manet who would later be identified as the quintessential *peinture de la vie moderne*, but his work was not known to Baudelaire when this essay was written – and in any case he had not yet even begun to produce the works for which he would gain this reputation. It is not until 1876 with Duranty's *La Nouvelle Peinture* that the critical agenda of modern art is coherently elucidated. But while Duranty's text set up a clear dialectic between 'Tradition' and 'Modernity', it is important to remember that this latter term, as Duranty deployed it in 1876, refers to a set of representational codes and conventions which were not yet fully formed and still under negotiation in the 1860s and which, as I hope to demonstrate, Degas' early artistic practice was to play a key role in forging.

### **History painting – painting History**

When Degas took up history painting at the beginning of the 1860s it was already a widely discredited practice. Patricia Mainardi has convincingly located the final waning of this genre between 1855 and 1867 (a historical moment coinciding with the period of Degas' artistic formation identified by this dissertation) but the seeds of its demise had been sown much earlier in the century. Its incipient collapse can be located at least as far back as 1824. As Stendhal commented in his Salon review of that year:

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<sup>59</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'De l'héroïsme de la vie moderne' (1846), *Curiosités esthétiques et autres écrits sur l'art* (Paris: Hermann, 1968), p. 73.



*Nous sommes à la veille d'une révolution dans les Beaux-Arts. Les grands tableaux composés de 30 figures nues, copiées d'après les statues antiques et les lourdes tragédies en cinq actes et en vers, sont des ouvrages très respectables sans doute, mais quoi qu'on dise, ils commencent à ennuyer.*<sup>60</sup>

Stendhal's denunciation of history painting functions here as an explicit critique of the basic stipulations of *la grande peinture* which had held sway in France since the seventeenth century. The hierarchy of pictorial genres was the bedrock of academic theory and had been explicitly laid out by the secretary of the *Académie royal de peinture et de sculpture*, André Félibien, soon after its inception. In his preface to the 1667 *Conférences*, Félibien stated that the most highly esteemed kind of paintings were multi-figured compositions based on suitably ennobling subjects drawn from a classical or biblical source.<sup>61</sup> It was only this kind of ambitious narrative painting which deserved the title: '*la peinture d'histoire*'. According to this criterion, the more complex the composition and the nobler the subject, the greater the aesthetic and moral value accorded to the work. Genres such as landscape, still life and animal painting were thus relegated to the lower rungs of this hierarchic ladder. Although the tenets of history painting were hotly debated within the Academy, it was a mode which (despite the challenge of genre painting) continued to flourish throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>62</sup> Even at the turn of the nineteenth century, winning entries such as Ingres' lauded *Achille recevant les ambassadeurs d'Agamemnon* (1801) and Merry Joseph Blondel's *Trahison de Thèbe* (1804) proved that this was a competition still capable of fostering artistic innovation and creativity.<sup>63</sup> But this was soon to change. Even the briefest look at the dry and prescriptive Prix de Rome offerings of the 1820s and 1830s (of which Paul Jourdy's *Homère chantant ses poésies* (1834) (figure 12) is exemplary) bear out Stendhal's claim that this was an exhausted genre which no longer possessed even a modicum of artistic credibility.

While Romanticism and Realism mounted sustained critiques of academic history painting and classicism in the first half of the nineteenth century, there was a parallel school of French art which, presided over by Ingres, remained steadfastly loyal to these traditions. Ingres' fame was inaugurated in 1801 when he won the Prix de Rome with the aforementioned *Ambassadeurs* and, throughout his long career lasting almost seventy years, was to enjoy an undisputed supremacy in French art. This is reflected by the one-man retrospective exhibition

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<sup>60</sup> Stendhal, 'Salon de 1824', quoted in Georges Wildenstein, 'Les Davidiens à Paris sous la Restauration', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, VI, tome LIII, April 1859, pp. 237-54.

<sup>61</sup> André Félibien, *Conférences de l'Académie royal de peinture et de sculpture pendant l'année 1667* (Paris: Frédéric Léonard, 1669). For a critical study of the creation of the French Academy and its institutionalization of painterly discourse see Paul Duro, *The Academy and the Limits of Painting in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>62</sup> See Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth Century Paris* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985) and Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Golden Age of Diderot* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980).

<sup>63</sup> See Philippe Grunhech, *Les Concours des Prix de Rome, 1797 à 1863*, 2 vols. (Paris: Ecole nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, 1986).

space he was accorded by the Imperial Commission at the 1855 *Exposition Universelle* (figure 13). (Delacroix, Decamps and Vernet were also honoured with the same privilege although their artistic status was far less secure.<sup>64</sup>) Ingres' preeminence was confirmed by the fact that Prince Napoléon visited his pavilion before all the others, whilst Théophile Gautier, the official critic of the *Exposition*, claimed he represented the very 'summit' of art.<sup>65</sup> By the time of his death in 1867 '*Monsieur Ingres*' was a veritable institution and widely understood as the embodiment of the Academy and the last bastion of the classical tradition.

Of all the French artists comprising the generation immediately preceding his own, Ingres was the one that Degas admired the most, and sought to align his practice with most closely during the early years of his artistic apprenticeship. This we see in the numerous copies of Ingres's work to be found amongst the pages of the artist's *carnets* (many of which were made in 1855 at the *Exposition Universelle*).<sup>66</sup> Degas' most explicit homage to his master, however, is his contemporaneous self-portrait (figure 14) which directly references the *Auto-portrait à l'âge de 24 ans* which Ingres painted of himself at the beginning of *his* artistic career (figure 15).<sup>67</sup> The act of homage, Mignon Nixon writes, constitutes 'an indispensable rhetorical device for the artist as a young man'.<sup>68</sup> Ostensibly functioning as a way through which an artist defines his lineage, whilst seeking to claim a place for himself in that tradition, the homage – 'quelling appropriation through quotation, turning artistic theft into respectful borrowing' – is at once a covert strategy through which the 'artist-disciple seeks to unseat the master and occupy his place'.<sup>69</sup> Although these terms can be applied to Degas' 1855 *Auto-Portrait* (which directly emulates that of his master Ingres) they are simultaneously rendered more complicated and problematic. Degas mimics the pose and gesture of his mentor, but his apprehensive demeanour is a far cry from the bravado of the self-possessed Ingres. This petulant adolescent is nothing more than a pale shadow of the radiant and assured young man who functions as his aspirational ideal. Indeed, although this pair of portraits depicts the two artists at roughly the same age, their respective professional circumstances at this moment of their lives could not have been more different. With a Prix de Rome and numerous important commissions (including a portrait of the *Premier Consul*) already under his belt, Ingres' artistic renown at twenty-four was by then well established. Standing in front of an easel wearing an artfully draped painter's smock, Ingres has depicted himself accordingly as a confident and self-assured young artist. Degas, on the other hand, had only recently been admitted to the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts*, his lowly status at this institution indicated

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<sup>64</sup> For a discussion of the representation of French art and artists at the 1855 *Exposition* see Patricia Mainardi, *Art and Politics of the Second Empire: The Universal Expositions of 1855 and 1867* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 73-96.

<sup>65</sup> Théophile Gautier, *Les Beaux-Arts en Europe, 1855*. vol. 1 (Paris, 1855-6), p. 154.

<sup>66</sup> See Nb 2, pp. 9, 30, 48, 53-54, 59, 61.

<sup>67</sup> For a discussion of this early self-portrait, in which a comparison with Ingres is also made (although to different ends than my own) see Armstrong, *Odd Man Out*, pp. 226-9.

<sup>68</sup> Mignon Nixon, 'Spero's Curses', *October* (Fall 2007) p. 5.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

by the accoutrements with which he poses. The charcoal in his right hand was the medium commonly used for life drawing, while the portfolio just glimpsed at the bottom left hand corner of the picture (from which a leaf of paper protrudes) presumably contains the old master copies which were the products of the *élève's* daily exercises. From his disaffected expression it appears that Degas was not at all convinced by the efficacy of the *Ecole's* highly prescribed training programme (indeed, he did not stick it out for long, and left after less than a year). While this uneasy attempt at emulation no doubt reflects the personal insecurities of any ambitious novice at the beginning of his artistic education, it might also be taken as indicative of the profound ambivalence Degas felt with regards to taking on the mantle of the classical tradition which the *maître de Montauban* represented and had been able to assume with such confidence only a generation earlier. This is confirmed through a comparison between Ingres' *Auto-portrait à vingt-quatre ans* and the prototypes on which it is based: Raphael's youthful self-portraits (figure 16) which the artist had recently copied in Rome.<sup>70</sup> Since the French Academy's inception Raphael had been held up as the torchbearer of the classical tradition and functioned for Ingres at the beginning of his artistic career as an aspirational artistic ideal.<sup>71</sup> It was only natural, therefore, that Ingres would wish to pay tribute to his master by way of an homage. This we see in his 1804 *Auto-portrait* where Ingres skillfully deploys this time-honoured trope to his own advantage. By appropriating his master's 'signature devices': the three-quarter length portrait format, dark palette, and handsome artist-subject, the young Ingres bows in respectful deference to his master. But, as we have seen, the act of homage is a double edged sword which, ultimately: 'serves notice on its object'.<sup>72</sup> Ingres' *Auto-portrait* – a picture in which Raphael's artistic stature is effectively overwritten by that of his ambitious young progeny – illustrates this function perfectly.

The consummate ease with which Ingres pulls off this feat of usurpation throws into even shaper relief just how miscalculated a gesture was Degas' own unfortunate attempt at homage to *his* master. Although Degas had the foresight and ambition to imagine himself in the place of Ingres, he then appears to have had second thoughts, and, balking from the role which stepping into his shoes would necessarily entail, ultimately fails to wrest the office of artistic authority from him. As an act of homage Degas' 1855 *Auto-portrait* is one which has woefully backfired and demands to be read as nothing other than a failed attempt at identification.

But this was not entirely the result of the artist's own personal diffidence. The belief that the mantle of the classical tradition which had been handed down from generation to generation had come to an end with Ingres was a widely held view at this moment. Although Ingres spawned a generation of loyal followers – Eugène-Emmanuel Amaury-Duval and Hippolyte Flandrin foremost among them – it was patently clear that neither was a worthy successor of his

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<sup>70</sup> For an interesting discussion of the dialogues at stake between Raphael and Ingres' portraits of women see Tamar Garb, *The Painted Face: Portraits of Women in France, 1814-1914* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 39-54.

<sup>71</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Raphael's influence on nineteenth-century French art cf. chapter 3.

<sup>72</sup> Nixon, 'Spero's Curses', p. 3.

master's legacy. Nevertheless, in their continued defence of conservative academic values and the doctrine of *dessin* over that of *couleur*, they represented classicism as it had come to stand by the mid-nineteenth century. It was thus no doubt in pursuit of his '*filiation ingresque*'<sup>73</sup> that Degas entered the atelier of Louis Lamothe (a minor academician and disciple of Hippolyte Flandrin) after he had received dispensation from his father to terminate his law studies in 1854. There is little information regarding Degas' brief apprenticeship at Lamothe's atelier, apart from the fact that in the summer of 1855 he accompanied his master to Lyon in order to assist Flandrin with his mural decorations for the church of Saint-Martin-d'Ainay.<sup>74</sup> Whilst Lamothe passed on to Degas the main precepts of Ingres' teaching, the young apprentice was not convinced by his master's diluted brand of classicism. Neither was his father who, although sharing Lamothe's predilection for the Italian masters of the fifteenth and sixteenth century (a taste the latter inherited directly from Ingres) was to repeatedly warn his son against falling too heavily under his artistic influence.

It was Degas' departure for Italy in 1856 which ultimately enabled him to disassociate his practice from the '*Flandrinien-Lamothien*' school, a move which was welcomed by his father in no uncertain terms. Assessing a series of canvases and drawings on which his son had been at work during his Italian sojourn, (a group of works thought to include *La Famille Bellelli* (1858-67)) Auguste applauded his son for having rid himself of the insipid pictorial style of his first teachers: '*ton dessin est fort, le ton de ta couleur est juste. Tu es débarrassé de ce flasque et trivial dessin Flandrinien-Lamothien et de cette couleur terne et grise.*'<sup>75</sup> When Degas returned from Italy in 1859 he did not resume contact with his former teacher and never made reference to him again.

As well as challenging the formal precepts of classicism, the demise of the '*la peinture d'histoire*' in the nineteenth century also prompted a set of debates around the representation of history. In this respect the most fundamental challenge to this genre was mounted by the Realist school of Courbet's generation who, in their demand for contemporaneity, rejected outright any representation of the past.<sup>76</sup> Abandoning the epic narratives and elevated subjects of history painting – which they perceived to have no bearing upon everyday life or modern experience – the Realists sought to depict the contemporary social realities of mid-nineteenth century France. Whilst Degas would eventually wholeheartedly embrace the Realist dictum '*il faut d'être de son temps*' he was not ready to abandon the rhetoric of the Ideal at this early stage in his career. Moreover, the *haut bourgeois*-pseudo-aristocrat Degas was a profoundly conservative figure, and had little sympathy with the militant socialist politics of Courbet and his followers.

But if radical Realism represented a rejection of bourgeois academicism in the first half of the nineteenth century, this was a moment when the parameters of history painting were also

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<sup>73</sup> Henri Loyrette, *Degas* (Paris: Fayard, 1991), p. 41.

<sup>74</sup> For a biographical account of this period see *ibid.*, pp. 38-44.

<sup>75</sup> Unpublished letter from Auguste Degas to his son Edgar (11 November 1858), cited in *ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>76</sup> For the preeminent study on this historical movement see Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (1971) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990).

being institutionally redefined. Although the Academy nominally upheld *la grande peinture* with the prolongation of the Prix de Rome until 1863 it was a competition which generated less enthusiasm with every passing year. When the *concours* was finally abandoned, a statement issued by Viollet-le-Duc, the key architect of the academic reforms, stated bluntly that the winners of this competition had lost any semblance of originality.<sup>77</sup> In parallel with the decline of academic history painting a new form of historical painting had emerged: the *genre historique*. Developing over the course of the Restoration and July monarchy this was a hybrid genre which sought to represent historical subjects to its audience in a more sympathetic and accessible manner than the lofty rhetoric of the grand academic tradition.<sup>78</sup> Dispensing with the epic narrativizing mode of *la grande peinture*, practitioners of the *genre historique* dealt in subjects representing nationalistic or familial themes which emphasized the everyday nature of human experience.<sup>79</sup> The banal and appeasing subject matter of this genre also satisfied the political motivations of the Orléanist regime, that wished to steer art away from the representation of politically controversial subjects. With the end of the July Monarchy, the *genre historique* became detached from any explicit political ideology. It was, however, a genre which continued to flourish well into the Second Empire and the vast majority of work exhibited at the Salons during this period can be classified under this rubric.

Whilst the modestly sized canvases, high degree of verisimilitude, attention to incidental detail and anecdotal or sentimentalizing subject matter which are this genre's defining characteristics appealed to bourgeois taste, they constituted an aesthetic criteria that also reflected a set of broader debates about the ways in which History should be represented in the modern age. As Stephen Bann has argued, the nineteenth century was a period when 'new codes of historical awareness were established.'<sup>80</sup> The emergence of nineteenth-century historicism can be more precisely located to the 1820s: a decade characterized by a growing consciousness of the

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<sup>77</sup> Viollet-le-Duc, 'L'Enseignement des arts', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, vol. 12 (January-June, 1862), p. 397. For a discussion of the decree of 1863 see Albert Boime, 'The Teaching Reforms of 1863 and the Origins of Modernism in France', *Art Quarterly* (1977), pp. 1-39.

<sup>78</sup> See Beth S Wright, *Painting and History During the French Restoration: Abandoned by the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Michael Marrinan, *Painting Politics for Louis-Philippe: Art and Ideology in Orléanist France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988).

<sup>79</sup> For a discussion of the boundaries between History painting and the *genre historique* in the nineteenth century see Paul Duro, 'Giving up on History? Challenges to the hierarchy of genres in early nineteenth-century France', in *About Stephen Bann*, in Deborah Cherry (ed.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 117-39. See also Stephen Bann, 'Questions of genre in early nineteenth-century French painting' *New Literary History*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2003), pp. 501-511.

<sup>80</sup> Stephen Bann *Romanticism and the Rise of History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 165. Bann is the foremost scholar on the emergence of historicism in the nineteenth century. See the bibliography for a complete list of his writing upon this subject. For a concise discussion of the *genre historique* as a response to contemporaneous ideas regarding the way in which history should be represented see Bann, 'Editorial' in a special issue devoted to the image of 'history', *Word and Image*, vol. 16, no. 1 (January-March 2000), pp. 1-6. Bann, in turn, builds on the scholarship of Hayden White. See *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973).

past or, as Bann puts it, a 'desire for history.'<sup>81</sup> This was an epoch which also witnessed the professionalization of historical study and gave birth to the modern historical narrative.<sup>82</sup> These texts, of which Jules Michelet's *Histoire de France* (1833-44) set the benchmark, aimed to take the study of history outside the domain of the antiquarian or *amateur* by making it a field accessible to a non-specialized audience.<sup>83</sup> As Beth Wright has noted, history, for Michelet, was not the 'contemplation of fragments that had belonged to a past existence or the witnessing of the edifying actions of heroes.' Rather, his writing aimed instead to bringing the past to life in a way which was meaningful for a contemporary audience by emphasizing a set of connections between the past and the present. Indeed, through the continued emphasis upon the *presentness* of history at stake in Michelet's writing, the conventional distinction between these two temporal modes is destabilized.

Another important feature of nineteenth-century historiography is its emphasis on the common citizen. While historical writing of the *ancien régime* had focused solely upon the heroic deeds of kings and noblemen, the writing of Michelet and other prominent historians such as François Guizot and Auguste Thierry placed a greater emphasis on those who had been excluded from History at the expense of these privileged subjects. Although the *grands hommes* of the past were not written out of history altogether they were represented in a less idealized and far more 'human' manner.

The formation of a popular historical consciousness in the first half of the nineteenth century bore with it a number of important ramifications for the grand academic tradition. The elevated sentiments and lofty ideals on which it traded produced a moral and aesthetic affect with which a nineteenth-century audience could not meaningfully identify. The monumentalizing mode of history painting and its devotion to extolling the glories of antiquity presented a vision of the past which was utterly remote from contemporary experience and the reality of everyday life. In order to illustrate History in more meaningful and accessible way for its audience, the historical genre painters abandoned the highly orchestrated compositions and overblown gestural rhetorics of *la grande peinture* by presenting its protagonists in a guise with which its intended audience could directly relate. This mode is exemplified by the work of Paul Delaroche, the foremost practitioner of the genre.<sup>84</sup> Although his paintings represent well known historical figures they are often depicted at moments of vulnerability. This we see in his 1827 *Jeanne d'arc malade est interrogée dans sa prison par le cardinal de Winchester* (figure 17). Abandoning the guise of the patriotic warrior through which she had previously been represented (and a set of conventions

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>82</sup> See White, 'Michelet: Historical Realism as Romance' in *Metahistory*, pp. 135-62. See p. 140 of this text for a full chronological list of narrative histories which emerged in western Europe between the years 1821-68.

<sup>83</sup> For studies of Michelet's writing see *ibid.* and Roland Barthes, *Michelet by himself*, trans. Robert Howard (Oxford: Blackwells, 1987).

<sup>84</sup> For a critical assessment of Delaroche see Stephen Bann, *Paul Delaroche: History Painted* (London: Reaktion, 1997).

which Ingres would later draw upon in *his* portrait of this medieval heroine (just seen in the previous Exposition Universelle photograph)) Joan is recast here as an ill-at-ease young girl cowering in a corner. As Paul Duro has commented of this picture: 'Delaroche's historicizing presentation of Joan of Arc has less to do with the norms and expectations of traditional history painting than with capturing a moment in a very human melodrama.'<sup>85</sup>

The rise of the *genre historique* also represented a growing interest in subjects drawn from historical narratives other than those of Hellenistic antiquity. While historical genre painters did not abandon the representation of the classical past altogether, there was a marked shift away from Homeric motifs towards a depiction of everyday life in ancient Greece. Subjects from French history also constituted prominent themes at the Salon throughout the nineteenth century. Whilst this was a legacy of the Bourbon restoration, it is also symptomatic of a more widespread cultural movement which aimed to promote a sense of pride in French history and foster a sense of collective national identity. Chapter 3 will discuss this subject in more detail.

If the *genre historique*, at the moment of its inauguration in the Romantic era, was founded upon earnest intentions, it is important to note what it had come to represent by mid-century. While the work of Paul Delaroche must be acknowledged as possessing a certain moral and didactic relevance in its day, his brand of historical representation was by no means considered a worthy replacement for *la grande peinture*. Indeed, he was held personally responsible by many commentators for spawning an entire generation of second rate practitioners of the *genre historique*. It was his Second Empire successor and former student Jean-Léon Gérôme who was most widely derided by critics of the day.<sup>86</sup> (Despite this fact he was immensely popular with his contemporary Salon audience, and garnered various institutional honours during his career.<sup>87</sup>) Degas' antipathy for Gérôme is legendary, and is a subject to which I will return repeatedly in this thesis. Although the evidence regarding this fact is largely anecdotal, it is not difficult to see why the artist took offence at the lubricious classicism of his contemporary. This is epitomized by Gérôme's 1846 *Combat de coq* (figure 18), which seems less a sincere representation of the past than a highly contrived costume drama (with the requisite historical props and accessories) pandering to the vulgar tastes of its Second Empire public.

The *genre historique* posed a serious challenge to history painting and was ultimately to take preeminence over the latter. But this did not mean that *la grand peinture* was going to expire without a fight and it remained the genre of choice for many ambitious painters who came of age around the same time as Degas. Even Manet's *Vieux Musicien* (1862) and *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863) address themselves to the conventions of history painting rather than that of the *genre historique*.

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<sup>85</sup> Duro, 'Giving up on History?', p. 126. For a comparison of the painterly modes of Ingres and Delaroche see Susan Siegfried, 'Ingres and the theatrics of history painting', *Word and Image*, vol. 16, no. 1 (January-March 2000), pp. 58-76.

<sup>86</sup> See Mainardi, *Art and Politics of the Second Empire*, pp. 158-62.

<sup>87</sup> For the most comprehensive study of Gérôme to date see Gerald Ackerman, *Jean-Léon Gérôme: his life, his work, 1824-1904* (Dayton: Ohio Art Institute, 1972).

But Degas' early painterly practice, as we have seen, had little in common with that of Manet's. Indeed, whilst for the latter, history painting would appear a genre he set out actively to destroy, Degas' project is more closely aligned with those artists of his generation who endeavoured to rejuvenate it.

It was during his stay in Rome as an unofficial *pensionnaire* at the Villa Medici that Degas came into contact with a cohort of aspiring young artists such as Jean-Jacques Henner, Elie Delaunay, Emile Lèvy and Gustave Moreau, who shared similar artistic ambitions with him.<sup>88</sup> It was the latter, however, who had the most impact upon his practice at this moment. The Symbolist painter was one of Degas' earliest mentors with whom, for a time, he shared a close working relationship.<sup>89</sup> When Moreau left Rome for Florence in the summer of 1858, Degas followed him. From there the pair travelled around Italy together copying, drawing and exchanging ideas as they went. The thirty-one year-old Moreau (erudite, urbane, and already a seasoned Salon exhibitor) must have seemed like a breath of fresh air to the young Degas, weaned on the dry academicism of Lamothe. Moreau, by contrast, was a former student of Théodore Chassériau – previously Ingres's star pupil who had famously defected from his master when he fell under the influence of Delacroix.<sup>90</sup> In the nineteenth century Delacroix and Ingres personified the long-standing *dessin/couleur* debate which had waged within the Academy since the seventeenth century and the two artists were seen to epitomize this pair of irreconcilable artistic approaches at this moment.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, it was through Moreau that Degas developed a taste for artists such as Delacroix, Veronese and Coreggio from whose work he had previously, under the influence of the staunch *Ingresiste* Lamothe, been actively discouraged from engaging.

Degas and Moreau continued their friendship for a time after they returned to Paris, a fact which is borne out by the coincidence of certain themes characterizing each artist's output of the early 1860s. As chapter 1 will discuss in more detail, it was by way of Moreau that Degas came into contact with the material culture of the Near East. It seems that Degas also began work on the *Spartiates* around the same time that Moreau was developing a picture about the Spartan poet *Tyrtaeus*. But as they both attempted to get to grips with the fundamental issue of how to represent History in the modern age, their projects were pursued to radically different ends. Whilst Moreau's visions of the past were achieved through an accumulation of decorative

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<sup>88</sup> For the artistic culture of the Villa Medici in the age of the Prix de Rome see Henri Lapauze, *Histoire de l'Académie de France à Rome* (Paris, 1924) and the recent Villa Medici exhibition catalogue: Olivier Bonfait et. al, *De Ingres à Degas: Les Artistes Français à Rome* (Rome: Académie de France, 2003). For Degas' work of this period see *Degas e l'Italia*, ex. cat. (Roma: Palombi, 1994).

<sup>89</sup> See Phoebe Pool, 'Degas and Moreau,' *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 105, no. 723 (June, 1963), pp. 251-250.

<sup>90</sup> For more on the work of Chassériau see Stéphane Guégan, Vincent Pomarède, Louis-Antoine Prat et al., *Théodore Chassériau, 1819-1856: The Unknown Romantic*, ex. cat., (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>91</sup> See Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *La couleur éloquente: rhétorique et peinture à l'âge classique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989) and Emmanuelle Delapierre, et. al., *Rubens Contre Poussin: La querelle du coloris dans la peinture française à a fin du XVIIe siècle*, ex. cat (Bruges: Ludion, 2004).



effect, Degas' pared-down and sparse canvases progressively eschewed historical detail altogether. Indeed, their differences of opinion over how one should represent 'History' was what ultimately drove the two artists apart: Degas ultimately rejected outright any representation of the past (at least by conventional narrative or descriptive means) as an utterly futile endeavour, whilst Moreau retreated into his increasingly esoteric visions. In later years Degas would vehemently disassociate himself from Moreau, dismissing his attempts at historical reconstruction as mere '*bijouterie*'.<sup>92</sup>

*L'air qu'on voit dans les tableaux des maîtres n'est pas l'air respirable.*

Degas<sup>93</sup>

When Degas returned to Paris from Italy in the spring of 1859 he installed himself in a small studio on the rue de Laval whereupon he embarked in all earnestness upon his chosen career as a history painter. His early canvases, however, initiate a series of radical interventions in the conventions of this genre as they stood at this moment. But while these pictures represent a decisive rejection of the epic narratives of classical antiquity, (whose highly wrought dramatic scenarios were the history painter's meat and drink) they do so without resorting to the anecdotal subject matter of the *genre historique*. Although Degas' early canvases draw from canonical texts of classical history such as Plutarch's *Lives* and Diodorus Siculus' *Bibliotheca Historica*, they generally refer to obscure and non-eventful occurrences in these well known narratives. This is exemplified by the subject matter of the *Spartiates* which corresponds to a passage from Plutarch's 'Life of Lycurgus' describing the egalitarian training of the young boys and girls in Ancient Sparta. Essentially a description of the routines and cultural practices which constituted the daily life of the polis, it a subject which would not immediately present itself as an auspicious subject for a history painting. Degas did not refrain from the representation of illustrious historical protagonists in his early painterly forays either and over the course of this dissertation we will encounter such well-known figures as Alexander the Great, the Israelite King David, Lycurgus the Spartan legislator and Queen Semiramis of Babylon. However, these pictures all mark a radical departure from the conventional ways in which these heroic figures had previously been represented in history painting.

Another notable feature of the canvases discussed in this thesis is their dissolution of compositional perspicacity. But while this series of works are seen to aspire to the ambitious multi-figured narrative compositions of *la peinture d'histoire*, they fail to deliver on legibility. Compositional 'decorum' (an apt and appropriate pictorial rendering of narrative) had been posited as one of history painting's fundamental requirements in the seventeenth century. But if

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<sup>92</sup> Paul Valéry, *Degas/Danse/Dessin* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965) p. 64.

<sup>93</sup> Françoise Sevin, 'Degas à travers ses mots', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 86 (July-August, 1975), pp. 18-46.

this was a stipulation originally set in place by Félibien with the mute eloquence of Nicholas Poussin's *tableaux* in mind, an example of what these compositional tenets had come to represent two hundred years later is exemplified by the 1851 winner of the Prix de Rome: François-Nicolas Chiffart's *Périclès au lit de mort de son fils* (figure 19).<sup>94</sup> Here we witness the Athenian warlord Pericles overcome with grief at the deathbed of his only remaining son Perabo whom he is about to crown with a wreath. The main protagonist's declamatory gesture of despair, which acts as the main focus of the composition, is offset by the more subdued poses of the mourners in the shadows by who he is surrounded. Whilst Chiffart's presentation of narrative is both easily discernable and clearly legible, it serves well to illustrate just how little room for manoeuvre or innovation was available within the highly codified compositional rhetorics of history painting

Degas' early pictures are seen to enact the collapse of the legibility of the body as it was codified in academic rhetoric. *Périclès* is dependant upon the absolute legibility of the main protagonist's body which, within the tableau, shoulders the main responsibility of bearing its narrative. But with the Degas, the figure no longer has any clearly defined narrative role to perform and any semblance of unified action disintegrates. This we see in *Scène de Guerre*, a picture which has dispensed with all but the very last vestiges of narrative and offers no context through which one might account for its highly disturbing scenario. But the troubling nature of this picture is enforced further by its eschewal of compositional unity. In classically arranged compositions the actions and gestures of the protagonists are generally coordinated around the tableau's narrative action. But in *Scène de Guerre* any such notion of pictorial cohesion is unbound. Instead of gravitating towards a common centre the figures, pulled apart as if by some invisible centripetal force, are dispersed to the margins of the picture surface.<sup>95</sup> As for the foreground, conventionally the most privileged space of the composition, we find only a cleavage of empty space.

Illegibility of a different sort is at stake in *Sémiramis Construisant Babylone*. Of all Degas' early canvases this is the one which adheres most closely to classical precepts of composition. Nevertheless, it is a work characterized by an apparent *absence* of subject. The protagonists of this picture seem to be being doing not much more than simply standing there. Rather than enacting a narrative they resemble a group of actors on stage waiting for the curtain to go up. And in the early history pictures where there *is* some form of interaction at play between the figures, it most frequently takes the form of an incoherent or indecipherable dialogue. Whilst this is illustrated most clearly by the uncoordinated network of touches, glances and gestures constituting the

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<sup>94</sup> For Poussin's reputation at this moment see Claire Pace, *Félibien's Life of Poussin* (London: Zwemmer, 1981). For a study of the notion of 'eloquence' and its bearing on Poussin's painting see Marc Fumaroli, 'Muta eloquentia': la représentation de l'éloquence dans l'oeuvre de Poussin', *Bulletin de l'histoire de l'art Français* (1984).

<sup>95</sup> For an interesting discussion of ends to which 'centripetal' compositional structures are deployed in Degas' pictures see Linda Nochlin, 'A house is not a home: Degas and the subversion of the family', in *Representing Women* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999) pp. 152-179.

encounter at stake between the sparring youngsters in the foreground of the *Spartiates*, it is also at play in the obscure standoff between father and son staged in *Alexandre et le Bucéphale*. The complex libidinal and familial dynamics at stake in this pair of encounters will be unraveled more fully at a later stage of this dissertation.

### *Fini/non-fini*

Whilst in these ways we see how Degas' early canvases undermine the tenets of history painting, I would now like to focus in detail on one characteristic feature of these works which would have perhaps the most radical and far reaching implications with regard to the dissolution of this genre: their radical lack of 'finish'.

The doctrine of *fini* was one of the fundamental principles of academic pedagogy in the nineteenth century. Ostensibly referring to a painterly technique: the facturing of a smooth and polished painterly surface from which all trace of the artist's hand is effaced, it is a concept which must be located within the Academy's hierarchy of pictorial value where the *tableau définitif* represented the pinnacle of artistic achievement. Artistic production was highly codified within the *Ecole* at this moment and the *tableau définitif* represented the logical result of a series of preceding stages.<sup>96</sup> This is a procedure which Degas learnt during the years of his early artistic apprenticeship and the preparatory stages of execution for most of his canvases (particularly *Sémiramis* and the *Spartiates*) closely adhere to those laid out in academic practice. Here we find rapidly executed *croquis* and *esquisse peintes*, together with finely drawn *académies* and detailed drapery studies. But Degas' carefully laid plans were to come a cropper when it came to executing the *tableau* itself. Despite labouring over these surfaces throughout most of the 1860s he was unable to bring any of them to a satisfactory sense of resolution or completeness. This we see in the startling disjunctions between the clearly articulated figure studies which Degas executed in preparation for the *Spartiates* and the unconsummated bodies of these figures as they were to be rendered in paint upon the canvas surface. Similarly, the numerous detailed drapery studies for *Sémiramis* were never brought to painterly fruition. The artist's painstaking delineation of the folds and fall of fabric against the body to which these preparatory drawings bear witness were subsequently articulated on the canvas surface at only the most cursory level of painterly detail. As for *Scène de Guerre*, it is little more than a group of *académies* supplanted onto a hastily executed backdrop in time for the Salon.

The unfinished state of Degas' early pictures serve to set his practice dramatically apart from the slick surfaces of the Salon *pompier*. The high degree of painterly *lèche* (a term referring

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<sup>96</sup> For the standard secondary text on nineteenth-century academic theory and practice see Albert Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth-Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986). For primary sources on academic pedagogy and artistic practice see Henri Delaborde, *L'académie des beaux arts depuis la fondation de l'Institut de France* (Paris, 1891); Alexis Lemaistre, *L'école des beaux-Arts dessinée et racontée par un élève* (Paris, 1889) and *Dictionnaire de l'Académie des Beaux-Arts*, 5 vols. (Paris, 1858).

to a polished painterly execution) exhibited by these so-called *finisseurs* catered to the desires of their contemporary audience, whilst the lacquered surfaces of Gérôme's paintings which were his artistic trademark was surely one of the major reasons why he found such favour with the Academy. When compared against the dominant aesthetic taste of the day, Degas' desiccated canvases come up as radically unachieved and utterly lacking in technical finesse.

The undermining of *fini* at stake here can be seen as part of a more widespread disillusionment with this academic doctrine and the emergent aesthetics of the sketch (*esquisse*). It is important to note, however, that the *esquisse peinte* had an important role to play within academic practice.<sup>97</sup> For official projects, commissions or competitions it was common practice for the candidate to submit a painted sketch for preliminary approval. A prime example of this institutional procedure is provided by Ingres' *esquisse peinte* for the aforementioned *Ambassadeurs* (figure 20) (a work which Degas would acquire in later life).<sup>98</sup> Whilst the function of such works was primarily to provide a 'blueprint' for the final work ('de donner l'aspect du tableau à venir, de l'oeuvre en gestation dans l'esprit du peinture...'<sup>99</sup> as the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie des Beaux-Arts* put it) the *esquisse* also displayed a set of pictorial skills which gradually came to be valued on their own terms. Many prominent artists and critics such as Théophile Thoré-Bürger praised the formal characteristics of the *esquisse* over those of the *tableau définitif*.<sup>100</sup> This was because they believed that the informal facture of the *esquisse* preserved a set of important qualities such as spontaneity and pictorial expressiveness which were lost in the labourious and premeditated process of execution demanded by the pursuit of a highly finished painted surface. Whereas the finishing process displayed only the artist's mechanical skills, the *esquisse* represented the artist's creative processes. It was primarily for this reason that progressive critics believed the *esquisse* to be the site of true invention and originality. As Boime sums up, the nineteenth-century *esquisse/fini* conflict was conceptualized by academic detractors as an erroneous privileging of the skill of the artist's hand over the work of his mind.<sup>101</sup>

An indication of how the latter aesthetic qualities gradually came to take precedence over the former during the 1870s is indicated by a passage from Duranty's *La Nouvelle Peinture*. In his extended diatribe against the antiquated teaching programme of the *Ecole*, Duranty condemns its

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<sup>97</sup> For a detailed discussion on the role of the sketch within the Academy see Boime, chapter IV 'The Academic Sketch', in *The Academy and French Painting*, pp. 79-97. For an interesting collection of essays debating the role of the *esquisse* and the *ébauche* in French artistic and literary culture see Sonya Stephens (ed.), *Esquisses/Ebauches: Projects and Pre-texts in Nineteenth-Century French Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

<sup>98</sup> Ann Dumas et. al., *The Private Collection of Edgar Degas*, ex. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997).

<sup>99</sup> See the entry for '*esquisse peinte*', *Dictionnaire de l'académie des Beaux-Arts* (Paris, 1858) vol. 5, p. 306.

<sup>100</sup> See Boime *ibid.*, for a summary of the critical discourse regarding the sketch-finish debate at this moment.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

obsession with pictorial finish, claiming that that this was at the expense of effacing the creative and intellectual rationale behind the work:

*Le public est exposé à un malentendu avec plusieurs des artistes qui mènent le mouvement. Il n'admet guère et ne comprend que la correction, il veut le fini avant. L'artiste charmé des délicatesses ou des éclats de la coloration, du caractère d'un geste, d'un groupement, s'inquiète beaucoup moins de ce fini, de cette correction, les seules qualités de ceux qui ne sont point artistes. Parmi les nouveaux, parmi les nôtres, s'il en était pour qui l'affranchissement devint une question un peu trop simple, et qui trouvaient doux que la beauté de l'art consistât à peindre sans gêne, sans peine et sans douleur, il serait fait justice de telles prétentions.<sup>102</sup>*

Duranty here mounts an important defence of Impressionism, whose pictorial aesthetics and high degree of painterly facture would be widely derided by certain critics for their *non-fini*.<sup>103</sup> As we have seen Degas would later come to be associated with the Impressionist group. However, I would argue that the terms of his practice are far removed from those of artists such as Claude Monet, Berthe Morisot and even Manet, and that the rhetorics of spontaneity and improvisation associated with the techniques of the Impressionists are not applicable to a consideration of the lack of *fini* at stake in Degas oeuvre.

Although the improvised 'look' of the Impressionist paintings belies their highly constructed nature, they represent a pictorial effect which Degas never intentionally sought to achieve. Reflecting upon his practice in later life the artist remarked dryly: *'aucune art n'est aussi peu spontané que le mien. Ce que je fais est le résultat de la réflexion et de l'étude des grands maîtres; de l'inspiration, la spontanéité, le tempérament, je sais rien.'*<sup>104</sup> Whilst Monet, when visiting the Louvre for the first time, had preferred to draw what was outside the window rather than on the walls, Degas would advocate the study of museum art until the very end of his life.<sup>105</sup> When asked by Amboise Vollard how a young novice might learn the *métier* of painting, the artist replied simply: *'il faut copier et recopier les maîtres'*.<sup>106</sup> It was only after adhering to this rigorous programme of instruction (*après avoir donné toutes les preuves d'un bon copyiste*) that Degas believed he should be permitted: *'de faire un radis d'après nature.'*<sup>107</sup> Indeed, Degas had little truck with the Impressionist quest to

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<sup>102</sup> Duranty, *La Nouvelle Peinture*, p. 483.

<sup>103</sup> For more on the question of 'finish' in relation to Impressionist practice see John House, *Impressionism: Paint and Politics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004) (esp. chapter 2, 'Sketch and Finished Painting', pp. 45-70); Richard Brettell, *Impressionism: Painting Quickly in France, 1860-1890* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000) and Richard Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). For a gendered reading of Impressionist painterly technique in relation to the work of Berthe Morisot see Tamar Garb, 'Berthe Morisot and the Feminizing of Impressionism', in *Perspectives on Morisot*, TJ Edelstein (ed.) (New York: Hudson Hills, 1990), pp. 57-66.

<sup>104</sup> Degas, quoted in Lemoisne, *Degas et son Oeuvre* (Paris, 1946) vol 1., p. 104.

<sup>105</sup> See Theodore Reff, 'Copyists in the Louvre', *Art Bulletin*, vol. 46, no 4 (December, 1964), pp. 552-559.

<sup>106</sup> Ambroise Vollard, *Degas* (Paris, 1924), p.64.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

rediscover nature *en face du motif* and when Monet, Bazille and Sisley decamped to the Paris environs in order to paint *en plein air* Degas remained firmly ensconced in his studio. As Degas' views on art have little in common with the contemporaneous aesthetic agenda of the Impressionists, I believe the *non-fini* at stake in his oeuvre can be understood most productively upon its own terms.

*'As usual with Degas when the time arrived to appear he wasn't ready... Degas was never ready for anything.'*

Letter from Katherine Cassatt to her son Robert<sup>108</sup>

Degas was infamous amongst his friends, family and professional associates for never finishing his work. Indeed, the artist's penchant for fiddling with pictures – often to the point of ruination – was one which never left him. It was for this reason that he preferred to keep his work close at hand in the studio where he could rework it as he pleased. When Degas came to exhibit with the Impressionist group he quickly became notorious amongst the critics for listing works in the catalogue and then failing to exhibit them. The artist's endless dithering and indecision with regard to this matter was the cause of much frustration amongst his colleagues. As for the pictures which had passed out of his hands, Degas would often go to great lengths to reclaim them, simply in order to rework them. In 1867 he wrote a letter to the Salon asking for permission to retouch *La Famille Bellelli* which had been accepted for public exhibition that year.<sup>109</sup> And when the artist began to sell his work he would sometimes even go so far as to buy pictures back from collectors in order to get his hands upon them again. Indeed, Degas' mania for adding touches to already 'finished' pictures was so insatiable that Denis Rouart is said to have resorted to attaching his prized *Danseuses à la barre* (which he had previously purchased from the artist) to the wall with chains.<sup>110</sup>

Degas' incapacity to finish his canvases was certainly not for want of trying, and is an aspect of his practice that is perhaps best understood as the pursuit of an endlessly deferred perfection. The writer and poet Paul Valéry summed up Degas' failure to complete and deliver thus:

*Une oeuvre était pour Degas le résultat d'une quantité indéfinie d'études, et puis, d'une série d'opérations. Je crois bien qu'il pensait qu'une oeuvre ne peut jamais être dite achevée, et qu'il ne*

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<sup>108</sup> Letter from Katherine Cassatt to her son Robert quoted in Nancy Mowll Matthews (ed.) *Cassatt and Her Circle: Selected Letters* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), p. 147.

<sup>109</sup> Letter to the Surintendant des Beaux-Arts, 1867 referenced in *Degas e l'Italia*, ex. cat. (Roma: Palombi, 1994), pp. 171-2.

<sup>110</sup> Vollard, Degas, p. 66.

*concevait pas qu'un artiste pût revoir un de ses tableaux après quelque temps sans ressentir le besoin de le reprendre et d'y remettre la main.*<sup>111</sup>

Indeed, for Degas the picture surface would never stand for the consummation of artistic achievement – the logical result or culmination of a series of preceding stages of execution – but always remain an immensely fraught and problematic site riven with doubt, indecision, hesitation and uncertainty. This is especially true of the canvases discussed in this dissertation, whose irresolute surfaces also dramatize something of the precariousness of Degas' subjectivity during this period of artistic formation. It seems to have been the means, rather than the end, at stake in the business of picture making which absorbed the artist.<sup>112</sup> While *fini*, for Degas, seemed to represent an elusive state that he could never hope to achieve, his practice nevertheless remained perpetually caught up in its interminable pursuit. To quote Valéry again:

*'Selon ces natures, [some artists] passent aisément d'une oeuvre à l'autre, déchirent ou verdent, et commencent toute autre chose; certains au contraire, s'acharnent, s'attaquent, corrigent et s'enchaînent; ils ne peuvent lâcher la partie, sortir du cercle de leurs gains et de leurs pertes: ce sont des joueurs qui doublement la mise de durée et de volonté.'*<sup>113</sup>

While this is a comment which astutely sums up the circuitous nature of Degas' formal procedures and the serial nature of his practice, it is one which can also help us to understand the stakes of the self-defeating game in which Degas was caught throughout the 1860s. The artist seems to have realized at a relatively early stage in his career that History painting was utterly defunct. But it was a genre with which he still continued to persevere. Unlike many of his contemporaries, it was never an option for him to disregard outright the representation of the past or abandon the classical tradition *tout court*. At the same time, however, the artist had enough foresight to realize that these doctrines had hardened into a set of exhausted clichés and that to continue to practice in these outmoded rhetorics was to labour under a false illusion. But while these stultified conventions left him (as indicated in the epigraph cited at the start of this section) no room to 'breathe', they bore with them the onerous weight of history and tradition, and thus could not be cast off lightly or renounced without cost. Indeed, for Degas, the process of extricating his practice from a set of representational conventions so heavily imbued with the aura of the past was never going to be anything less than an immensely fraught and problematic endeavour. The unresolved formal negotiations at stake upon the canvases would certainly bear out such an idea. Perhaps the artist's early practice is here best characterized as the playing out of

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<sup>111</sup> Valéry, *Degas/Danse/Dessin*, p. 107.

<sup>112</sup> Even during the 1870s and 1880s when the artist fell on hard times after the death of his father and was obliged to sell his work in order to make a living he maintained two distinct modes of production. The works executed for a commercial market are determined by their relatively high degree of pictorial finish, whilst those works datable to the same period which remained in the studio at the time of his death and were made for nothing other than the gratification of his own personal ends are altogether more murky and experimental.

<sup>113</sup> Valéry, *Degas/Danse/Dessin*, p. 109.

an agonizing and protracted endgame, or the working through of what was for him a very necessary process of mourning. And whilst the grandeur of the historical past was a derelict fantasy that he would ultimately have to relinquish, the irresolute surfaces of Degas *pentimenti*-littered early canvases betray a persistent attachment to the last vestiges of time-honoured artistic rhetorics and are symptomatic of ‘a not wanting to let go’ that is one of the most prominent features of his early practice.



## CHAPTER ONE

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### INVISIBLE CITIES: *SEMIRAMIS CONSTRUISANT BABYLONE*

*Our days were spent in long walks with pauses for rest at nearby farmhouses. Sometimes conversation would lag and Degas would tell us Oriental tales. He was very fond of them, and his extraordinary memory enabled him to recall entire stories from the Arabian Nights. But our rest-periods were not as long as Schéherézáde's nights, and Degas satisfied us with less. After more than seventy years I can still tell two of the stories – the one about the borrowed pots and the bad friend, and the one about the young fakir.*

Daniel Halévy, *My Friend Degas*<sup>114</sup>

Degas holding rapt an audience of children on a hot summer's day with the exotic tales invented night after night by the beautiful Persian sultana Scheherazade to delay her execution by the vengeful King Shahryar: the scene is hard to imagine. It sits somewhat anomalously within Halévy's own portrait of the artist, although this childhood recollection does, admittedly, refer to a much earlier moment than that which forms the bulk of his memoirs.<sup>115</sup> But while this image of a carefree young man in his salad days bears little resemblance to the curmudgeonly and reclusive figure Degas would later be portrayed as, it is the artist's fondness for the *One Thousand and One Nights* which interests me here the most. Indeed, this predilection is soon revealed to be far more than a passing fancy. Much later in the book Halévy reports an after-dinner conversation in which the septuagenarian Degas spoke of his desire to procure an English edition of the text, and his intention to sell a series of recent landscapes in order to fund the cost of such an acquisition.<sup>116</sup> Such was the artist's enduring fondness for the *One Thousand and One Nights* that when, due to his deteriorating eyesight, he was no longer able to read the stories for himself, Halévy would oblige by reading them aloud to him.<sup>117</sup>

The *One Thousand and One Nights* is based upon a heterogeneous range of sources, some dating as far back as 800 AD, but it was only relatively recently that the stories had

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<sup>114</sup> Daniel Halévy, *My Friend Degas*, trans. Mina Curtiss (London: Wesleyan, 1966), p. 31. The English version from which I quote here is a revised version of Halévy's memoir of the artist *Degas parle* (Paris: La Palatine, 1960) in which this recollection does not appear.

<sup>115</sup> Taking the form of a diary written between the years 1888 and 1897 the text is overshadowed by the memory of the Dreyfus affair, over which the artist infamously broke off relations with his lifelong friends the Halévys. Cf. chapter two where Degas' relationship with the Halévys is discussed in more detail.

<sup>116</sup> Halévy, *My Friend Degas*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

become known to a western audience.<sup>118</sup> The first European translation of these tales was the work of the French Orientalist Antoine Galland, whose *Mille et une nuits* appeared in the early eighteenth century. Galland, a student of the eminent Barthélemy d'Herbelot de Molainville had previously written the preface to his master's *Bibliothèque orientale* (1697), a work whose all-encompassing scope is best indicated by its own subtitle: *dictionnaire universel contenant tout ce qui regarde la connaissance des peuples de l'Orient*. Taking the form of a systematically arranged dictionary, the *Bibliothèque* aimed to be no less than a definitive compendium of knowledge regarding the Orient and remained a standard reference work in this field until the nineteenth century.<sup>119</sup>

Edward Said, one of the first scholars to bring to attention what was at stake in the production of these 'knowledges' in his eponymously titled critique of western Orientalism, identifies the *Bibliothèque* as one of the cornerstone texts of this discourse. As Said notes: 'in such efforts as d'Herbelot's, Europe discovered its capacities for encompassing and Orientalizing the Orient'.<sup>120</sup> It is this imperialist historical context within which the reception of the *Mille et une nuits* must be understood. The process of Orientalization to which the East is subject in d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque* is also seen to be at play in the interpretation of the *Alf layla wah-layla* – the Arabic manuscript upon which Galland's text (and the subsequent translations which followed) were loosely based. Indeed, it was only through a process of mediation via the 'grids and codes' of an already-existing Orientalist framework that it could be rendered meaningful for a western audience.<sup>121</sup> In this undertaking the text was subject to various strategies of appropriation. Translators took various liberties with the *Alf layla wah-layla* embellishing and censoring the original text, incorporating tales and fables from myriad other sources and, on occasion, even supplementing those of their own fabrication.<sup>122</sup>

*Mille et une nuits* enjoyed unprecedented popularity. After its initial publication in 1704, the text went through countless editions including illustrated versions and those abridged especially for children. By the nineteenth century the *Mille et une Nuits* was firmly entrenched within the French cultural vernacular. As the 1874 edition of the Larousse *Grand Dictionnaire* comments: '*les Mille et une nuits*' sont devenues le synonyme de tout ce qui offre un

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<sup>118</sup> Eva Sallis, *Sheherazade Through the Looking Glass: The Metamorphosis of the 'Thousand and One Nights'* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999).

<sup>119</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), pp. 63-67. For a complication of Said's reading of this text see Nicholas Dew, 'The Order of Oriental Knowledge: The Making of d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque orientale*', in Christopher Prendergast, *Debating World Literature* (London: Verso, 2004), pp. 233-252.

<sup>120</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 65.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>122</sup> For a discussion of the various translations see Eva Sallis, chapter 3: 'English Translations of the Thousand and One Nights' in *Sheherazade Through the Looking Glass*, pp. 43-64.

*aspect éblouissant, merveilleux, magique; l'image d'un luxe oriental.*<sup>123</sup> From this quotation it is clear that the *Mille et une nuits* was instrumental in the production of the tenacious hold which the exotic lure of the Orient ('less a place than a *topos*'<sup>124</sup>) exerted upon the collective nineteenth-century imagination. Its exotic tales of magicians, *djinnns*, merchants, misers, toothless old men, slaves, hunchbacks, virgins and princesses conjured an evocative and seductive world that was utterly remote from the mundane realities of its modern European audience. Functioning as the site upon which this readership imposed a set of collectively held fantasies and assumptions regarding their discursively produced Oriental 'other' the *Mille et une nuits* played an active role in fuelling a set of escapist fantasies as it fed directly into an image of the East as a land of exotic mystery and promise.

This imaginary terrain appealed to countless artists and writers in the first decades of the nineteenth century. From Ingres' opulent *odalisques*, to the bacchanalian carnage of Delacroix's *Sardanapale* there is hardly an artist who does not draw on the rich *topos* of the Orient in one exotic pictorial fantasy or another. By mid-century Orientalist painting was a well established pictorial genre with a raft of artists devoted to 'exotic' subjects regularly exhibiting at the Salon. It is Eugène Fromentin, Léon Belly and Jean-Léon Gérôme, however, who must be singled out as the most prominent Orientalist painters of this period.<sup>125</sup> Exemplary here is Fromentin's *Tailleurs devant le mosque* (c. 1850s) (figure 21). The picture's richly decorated interior harks back to Delacroix's evocative imagery of the Orient stimulated by his brief visit to Morocco (in particular his *Femmes d'Algiers* (1834)).<sup>126</sup> (Degas is known to have fleetingly admired the colouristic achievements of Fromentin. Upon seeing the artist's North African landscapes at the Salon of 1859, fresh back from his Italian sojourn, he wrote to Moreau how they made everything else look bland in comparison: 'Fromentin à presque les honneurs de l'exposition, à mon avis... Tout paraît saucé à côté'.<sup>127</sup>) But beneath its alluringly exotic surface is a highly contrived representational scenario. Indeed, although this work purports to represent a group of tailors, there is nothing of this *métier* (at

<sup>123</sup> Pierre Larousse, *Grand Dictionnaire universel du dix-neuvième siècle* (Paris, 1876), vol. 11, p. 262.

<sup>124</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 177.

<sup>125</sup> For Orientalist painting in the nineteenth century see Donald A Rosenthal, *Orientalism: The Near East in French Painting, 1800-1880* (New York: Rochester, 1982); Roger Benjamin (ed.), *Orientalism: Delacroix to Klee*, ex. cat. (New South Wales: The Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997); Nicholas Tromans, *The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting*, ex. cat. (London: Tate, 2008). The landmark text in the art historical literature upon Orientalism is Linda Nochlin's, 'The Imaginary Orient,' reprinted in *The Politics of Vision*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), pp. 33-59. Said's *Orientalism* has come under substantial critique in recent years. For an interesting collection of essays which aims to complicate Said's, often reductive, binary see Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts (eds.), *Orientalism's Intercolutors: Painting, Architecture and Photography* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>126</sup> For more on Delacroix's voyage to North Africa see Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, 'Orient and Colonies: Delacroix's Algerian Harem', in Beth S. Wright (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Delacroix*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) pp. 69-87.

<sup>127</sup> Unpublished letter from Degas to Gustave Moreau (9 June 1859). Reprinted in Theodore Reff, 'More unpublished letters of Degas', *Art Bulletin*, 51, (September 1969), p. 285.

least in terms of that which a western spectator would recognize) in evidence within the picture. Rather we see two men (presumably the tailors), one of whom appears to be smoking a pipe, engaged in idle conversation. Encircling this duo the meditatively posed seated figure tucked away within the picture's dark recesses on the right, and unoccupied figures on the left, add to the pervasive atmosphere of lethargy and indolence; qualities one would not usually associate with representations of trade and commerce.

We can surmise that such scenes of 'everyday life' were accepted by the majority of their contemporary audience as accurate portrayals of the cultural practices of the non-western societies they putatively represented. (The authenticity of this imagery was given added purchase by the fact that many of its purveyors had actually traveled to the lands they depicted. Indeed, one scholar has made the connection between Fromentin's *Tailleurs* and a reference in a diary to the so-called 'primitive' industries (*d'industriels sans industrie*) practiced in the old quarters of Algiers which the artist encountered upon his travels.<sup>128</sup>

Critical re-evaluations of Orientalist painting have revealed the ways in which this imagery is seen to function as an instrument of colonialist ideology, effectively confirming a set of assumptions regarding the Oriental 'other' as morally corrupt, barbaric and uncivilized. Linda Nochlin, in her essay 'The Imaginary Orient' has rightly argued that a work such as Gérôme's *Marché des esclaves* (early 1860s) (figure 22) was accepted as credible by the vast majority of its first audience. However, it is a claim which is in danger of underestimating this spectatorship and in rejoinder I would argue that, despite lacking a post-colonial critical vocabulary, for a more discerning nineteenth-century audience this highly contrived scenario was hardly more palatable than it is today. Gérôme, for example, was certainly not without his critical detractors at this moment. Jules-Antoine Castagnary dismissed the artist's peddling of clichéd exoticized fantasies with the following derisive comment: '*Il semble s'en être départi depuis quelques années, et le voilà en train d'écouler des notes prises pendant son voyage en Orient.*'<sup>129</sup> It was his *L'Almée* (1863) (figure 23), however, which he singled out as the most objectionable work. Of this the critic commented brusquely: '*C'est d'une indécence froidement calculée, et je recule devant la description.*'<sup>130</sup> Such works failed to wash with Degas as well, who saw straight through the exotic trappings and 'authenticating' detail of the Orientalist *salonnières*. But while it was their pseudo-realist fantasies from which he had, from the very outset, sought to distance himself, it was Gérôme for whom the artist reserved his most stinging words of criticism. When the Orientalist painter balked at the

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<sup>128</sup> Eugène Fromentin, *Une Année dans le Sahel*, (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1859), p. 27.

<sup>129</sup> Jules-Antoine Castagnary, 'Année 1864', in *Salons: 1857-1870*, vol. 1 (Paris: Charpentier & Fasquelles, 1892), p. 211.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

sparse canvas of the *Spartiates*, Degas is reported to have hit back with the sarcastic riposte: 'I suppose it is not Turkish enough for you, is it, Gérôme?'<sup>131</sup>

The state of affairs of Orientalist painting in the mid-nineteenth-century would seem to render the 'Orient' a highly problematic theme for Degas to broach at this moment. This was evidently not a genre which held much appeal for him, and from what we know of Degas it would seem he was an artist who remained singularly un-attracted to the exotic lure which the Orient exerted upon the nineteenth-century imagination. Indeed, the only evidence we have regarding Degas' 'Orientalism' is his reported penchant for the *One Thousand and One Nights* and his formative canvas *Sémiramis Construisant Babylone* (c. 1860) (figure 24) – a picture which stands apart within the artist's oeuvre as the only work relating to a non-western theme. In making this connection I would not wish to propose this Orientalist text as the literary 'inspiration' behind Degas' *Sémiramis*. Rather, I evoke this comparison in order to draw attention to the radical disjunction between the fabulous world of Scheherazade's nights and Degas' restrained Babylon. It is by thus investigating what is at stake in this radical disparity, through which we can begin to unravel the complex and highly problematic terms of the artist's encounter with the Orient.

### Searching for sources

The subject of *Sémiramis Construisant Babylone* ostensibly refers to the fabled queen Semiramis of Babylon who, according to the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, was the founder of this ancient Mesopotamian city.<sup>132</sup> Although the legend of Semiramis was not a popular painterly theme at this moment, the sexually transgressive and power hungry warrior queen described to us in detail by Diodorus is one which would easily lend itself to Orientalization. Indeed, this was the narrative source which Delacroix drew upon (albeit indirectly, by way of Byron's 1821 poetic drama *Sardanapalus*) in his infamous *Mort de Sardanapale* (1827-8) (figure 25).<sup>133</sup> Both Sardanapalus and Semiramis are seen by Diodorus to epitomize the decadence of the Assyrian Empire. But while Delacroix dramatizes the dissolution of the depraved King for maximum exotic/erotic effect, Degas' *Sémiramis* flatly refuses to facilitate such Orientalist fantasies. This picture, in which the serene protagonist gazes over a balustrade at her barely articulated city on the banks of the Euphrates, could

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<sup>131</sup> George Moore, 'Degas: The Painter of Modern Life', *Magazine of Art*, 13 (1890), p. 306.

<sup>132</sup> For this account see Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, Book 2, 4-21. Reprinted in *Diodorus of Sicily*, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 1., with an English translation by HC Oldfather (London: Heinmann, 1965), pp. 357-425.

<sup>133</sup> See Jack Spector, *Delacroix: The Death of Sardanapalus*, (London: Allen Lane, 1974); Lee Johnson, 'Towards Delacroix's Oriental Sources', *Burlington Magazine*, CXIX (1978), pp. 144-51 and Beatrice Farwell, 'Sources for Delacroix's Sardanapalus', *Art Bulletin*, vol. 40, no. 1 (March 1958), pp. 66-70.

not be further removed from Delacroix's 'harem extravaganza'.<sup>134</sup> Moreover, there are scarcely any Oriental references (save for merest trace of a hieroglyphic pattern decorating the sash festooning Semiramis' headdress) to be found in the picture. Rather, the citations in evidence upon the canvas as it stands today are predominantly classical. Of these there are many: the horse on the right of the picture is directly based on a fragment of the Parthenon frieze which Degas had copied from a plaster cast whilst a student at the *École des Beaux-Arts* (figure 26). The architecture of the spires and colonnades, organized along clearly visible lines of geometric perspective, calls to mind the fifteenth-century architectural plans of Brunelleschi for the Renaissance cities from which Degas had just returned. The poised gestures of the queen's entourage are redolent of antique statuary, while the bearded head of an elderly man peering stoically out from amongst this configuration is a direct copy of a Clouet portrait (figure 27). Above this grouping the eye comes to rest on a gently undulating landscape stippled with pine trees (perhaps a memory of the bucolic Roman countryside which had made such a deep impression upon the artist during his recent travels).<sup>135</sup> The Italianate quality of this picture is further enforced by its frieze-like compositional format and desiccated surface which imbues the work with the character of a recently excavated fresco. Again, this strangely haunting picture – left evocatively suspended in a state of partial completion – could not be further removed from the highly finished, slick, polished canvases in vogue at the time. There is clearly not much to be gained from comparing *Sémiramis* to the faux-Realist works of Degas' Orientalist contemporaries. A work which is seen instead to represent a decisive rejection of their authenticating exotic *bric-a-brac*, I believe it is more productive to consider this work as one of the several carefully chosen historical themes upon which the artist was at work during his early tenure as a history painter.

Although the pared down canvas of *Sémiramis* as it stands today may (despite the historical legend upon which it is ostensibly based) have little to recommend it as an Orientalist painting, there is substantial evidence within the artist's  *carnets*  to indicate the early stages of research on such a theme. Theodore Reff has identified most of the sources upon which these notes and sketches are based.<sup>136</sup> This bewildering array of references includes: detailed copies from albums of Mughal miniatures housed at the Bibliothèque Nationale (the very same ones which Delacroix had consulted over thirty years earlier in his research for *Sardanaple*) (figures 28 and 29) together with copies of Egyptian murals reproduced in J G Wilkinson's *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians* (1837) (figure 30). In addition there are numerous references to contemporaneous travel and 'ethnographic'

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<sup>134</sup> This is Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby's phrase. See her 'Orient and Colonies', p. 72.

<sup>135</sup> For Degas' detailed descriptions of the Italian landscape see transcriptions of Nbs, 10 and 11 in Theodore Reff, *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas*, vol. 1, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

literature. Here we find detailed copies of the various 'natives' illustrated in Louis Dupré's *Voyage à Athènes et à Constantinople* (1825) (figure 31 and 32), together with sketches of the Javanese and South Pacific peasant types from J Crawford's, *Description géographique et historique et commerciale de Java* (1824) (figure 33).

While this frantic tracking down of exotic material bears out Degas' vain, and increasingly frustrated, search for subject matter that would make a suitable history painting, the *potpourri* of references crammed amongst the pages of these *carnets* must also be understood as nothing other than a practice of indiscriminate borrowing from an entirely disparate range of sources. Indeed, the various cultures and histories alluded to in these notebooks correspond perfectly to the domain of the 'Orient' as designated by the secretary of the *Société asiatique* Julius Mohl at this precise historical moment. As Edward Said has noted: 'there is scarcely anything done by a European scholar touching Asia... that Mohl does not enter under *études orientales*...[a rubric which included amongst others] Arabic, innumerable Indian dialects, Hebrew, Pehlevi, Assyrian, Babylonian, Mongolian, Chinese, Burmese, Mesopotamian, [and] Javanese.'<sup>137</sup>

There comes a point, however, at which the artist's research becomes slightly more directed within this vast domain, as Degas eventually refined his research to material relating to the '*proche*' and '*moyen*' Orient. On the lower portion of page 219 of the same carnet (figure 34) we find two rudimentary copies of Assyrian reliefs on display in the Louvre's newly opened *Musée Assyrien*, together with three abbreviated references to contemporary travel literature: Silvestre de Sacy's *Mémoires sur diverses antiquités de la Perse* (1793); CA de Bode's *Travels in Luristan and Arabia* (1845) and Eugène Flandin and Pascal Coste's, *Voyage en Perse* (1843-1854).<sup>138</sup> These large folios to which Degas makes reference, containing detailed written accounts of these various itineraries and supplemented with lavish illustrations, were the fruits of various eighteenth and nineteenth century imperialist missions. The latter for example was conducted under the auspices of the French ministry for *Affaires étrangères*, whose two envoys: the architect Pascal Coste and the painter Eugène Flandin, were sent on an expedition to explore the Middle East. Departing from Toulouse in 1841, Pascal and Coste arrived, via Athens, in Constantinople. The pair then travelled across Turkey, before crossing the frontier of the Ottoman Empire into Persia. Thoroughly traversing this continent, their tour of its myriad village settlements and ancient ruins was punctuated with stopovers at the principal cities of Tabriz, Tehran, Ispahan and Chiraz. From there the pair went on to Iraq, visiting Baghdad and Al Hilla (recently identified at the site of the ancient city of Babylon). They subsequently travelled north to Mosul and then on

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<sup>137</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 52.

<sup>138</sup> Nb 18, p. 219

to Syria. Their voyage finished in Lebanon, and it was from the port of Beirut that the pair finally returned home – almost two years after their voyage had first begun.

The objective of the French emissaries was twofold: to study the country's historic monuments whilst also collecting information on contemporary Persian life. Although this is evident in the text (detailed descriptions of historic sites are interspersed with observations on local cultures and customs), the dual nature of this assignment comes to the fore in the accompanying illustrations which are characterized by two very distinct representational styles. Pascal Coste took responsibility for the documentation of Iran's historic sites. Here Persepolis features first and foremost. Through a detailed inventory of topographical views, plans and frontal elevations, the ancient Achaemenidean city is mapped in exhaustive detail. These drawings, executed with architectural precision (this was indeed Coste's *métier*) inscribe the viewpoint of a detached or disinterested observer. Exemplary of this series is an elevation featuring the façade of the royal tomb (figure 35); the scale running across the bottom of the elevation serves to enforce the image's ostensible value and function as an empirical document. These illustrations were supplemented by Flandin's vignettes of everyday Persian life. Already an Orientalist painter of some renown, Flandin's romanticized representations (liberally peopled with strategically placed camels and cloaked natives) are mired in nineteenth-century conventions of the picturesque.<sup>139</sup> Whilst Coste's architectural drawings are precisely etched, Flandin's altogether more atmospheric illustrations exploit the *sfumato* effects of lithography, as seen in a representation of a Tehrani apartment interior (figure 36). This print bears the familiar hallmarks of Orientalist imagery: an elaborately decorated interior space, Islamic architectural features and authentically dressed Arabs depicted in the guise of going about their daily lives (i.e. seen to be doing not very much at all). It is texts such as Flandin and Coste's *Voyage en Perse* which enshrine western attitudes and perceptions of the East at this moment. And while they represent a set of visual conventions which Degas was ultimately to eschew (at least in *Sémiramis*), they still must be acknowledged as the texts through which his encounter with the Orient was shaped and mediated.

### Degas and Moreau

Up until this point Degas' notebooks had been rather predictable in terms of content. The *carnets* he used as a student, first at the *École* and then the atelier of Louis Lamothe, consist mainly of mechanical copying exercises from plaster casts and engravings of Greek sculpture, while those he carried round with him on his tour of Italy are filled with sketches of Renaissance masterpieces punctuated with rapturous descriptions of the Italian

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<sup>139</sup> François Demange, 'Eugène Flandin, un peintre archéologue', in *De Khorsabad à Paris: La Découverte des Assyriens*, Elisabeth Fontan, (ed.) (Paris, Louvre, 1994), pp. 86-93.



landscape, together with the occasional sketch of contemporary 'street-life'. Indeed, the content of the *carnet* which Degas used throughout 1860 stands alone of all of the artist's notebooks for its inclusion of an extensive range of non-European sources and constitutes a set of references which are entirely anomalous within his oeuvre.

Degas' flirtation with Orientalism borne out on the pages of this early *carnet* must be understood within the context of his association with the artist Gustave Moreau. Although, as we have seen, the two artists could not have gone on to pursue more different artistic projects, the 'exotic' subject on which Degas' *Sémiramis* is ostensibly based must be credited – at least in part – to a creative dialogue between himself and Moreau in which the two artists were engaged at this moment. This is borne out by the coincidence of subject matter with which Degas and Moreau concerned themselves almost as soon as they arrived back in Paris. Indeed, Degas' brief engagement with the cultural artifacts of ancient Assyria and the Mughal Empire coincides precisely with Moreau's encounter with the very same set of objects, and it is highly likely that the two visited the Louvre and Bibliothèque Nationale at the same time and copied there together.

As Frederick Bohrer has noted, Moreau was a loyal subscriber to the *Magasin Pittoresque*. This publication featured detailed coverage of the *Musée Assyrien* when it first opened to the public in 1847 and had, since then, continued to demonstrate an interest in Mesopotamian history that was: 'consistent and cumulative, embracing both historical and contemporary interests'.<sup>140</sup> That Moreau read these articles with particular avidity is evidenced by the fact that he made several references to them in a notebook. In 1861 the magazine featured an article about Assyrian weights.<sup>141</sup> As well as a handwritten note regarding '*poids assyriens*', Bohrer also proposes the connection between a detailed engraving of a bronze lion accompanying this article and a watercolour drawing by the artist (figure 37) which (although sans functional hook) would seem to be based upon the very same object. In addition Moreau also kept a sketchbook of *Etudes orientales*.<sup>142</sup> Dated between 1850 and 1860, the content of these notebooks features imagery derived mainly from Mughal miniatures and Assyrian reliefs. An Assyrian figure from a folio of this sketchbook (figure 38) for instance, corresponds closely to the image of King Sargon as depicted on the Khorsabad palace wall reliefs which Moreau most likely had seen for himself at the Louvre. That the figure is depicted here in reverse would suggest that it was taken from a direct rubbing off the object itself (a common practice). But this drawing is more than simply a direct copy, and the figure of the King which formed the basis of the drawing has been subsequently worked upon and embellished with extra ornamentalizing detail. I would

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<sup>140</sup> Frederic Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture: Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 78.

<sup>141</sup> 'Poids Assyriens', *Le Magasin Pittoresque*, 29 (1861) pp. 203-4.

<sup>142</sup> These sketchbooks are housed at the Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris.

argue, however, that Moreau's engagement with Assyrian artifacts does not really go much deeper than a superficial interest in the decorative aspects of these objects. This is evidenced in the isolation of certain features of the King's costume (the detail of his encrusted sword, for example) which surround the figure, and can be seen within the wider context of Moreau's artistic practice as an effort to refine certain 'authenticating' historical accessories which he may have utilized at a later date.

It was precisely this stockpiling of historical *bric-a-brac* which constituted such a large part of Moreau's efforts at historical recreation that, as we have already seen, Degas deplored. Indeed, their differences of opinion over how one should represent 'History' was what eventually drove the two artists apart; Degas ultimately rejected outright any representation of the past (at least by conventional narrative or descriptive means) as an utterly futile endeavour, whilst Moreau retreated into his increasingly esoteric visions. The latter's elaborately detailed and evermore outlandish pictorial fantasies could not be more different from the pared down historical canvases of Degas. Indeed, if *Salomé* (1874) (figure 39) and *Sémiramis* represent the outcome of their research upon near Eastern themes, they can also taken here to be emblematic of the polarity which had come to separate Degas and Moreau. But the artistic differences between the two in terms of their engagement with the 'exotic' were thrown into sharp relief at an even earlier moment. This is borne out by a comparison of the stages of planning and research for each of their respective canvases.

As Geneviève Lacambre has demonstrated, Moreau's exotic motifs are derived from an incredibly eclectic range of sources.<sup>143</sup> This is evidenced in the elaborately decorated surface of *Salomé* which, fabricated through an amalgamation of motifs drawn from sources as diverse as Egyptian, Greek, Medieval and Oriental, is the result of a large amount of detailed material research.<sup>144</sup> As well as cultural articles in *Le Magasin Pittoresque*, and *Le Tour du Monde* on subjects ranging from Tibetan places of worship to Mexican monuments and Ancient Egypt, Moreau also consulted historical reference manuals such as Auguste Racinet's *Le costume historique* (1876-88) and Owen Jones' *The Grammar of Ornament*. The latter text was translated into French in 1865 and carried a chapter on Assyrian and Persian ornament including numerous patterned swatches (figure 40).

The innumerable detailed drawings crammed amongst the pages of Moreau's notebooks bear witness to a far more sustained and enthusiastic engagement with Near Eastern material culture than anything to be found within Degas' oeuvre – which adds up to nothing more than a few cursory sketches. The starkness of this disparity is epitomized by a comparison between Moreau's detailed embellishment of the figure of King Sargon

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<sup>143</sup> See Geneviève Lacambre, 'Gustave Moreau et l'exotisme', in *Gustave Moreau, 1826-1898*, Geneviève Lacambre, et al., ex. cat., (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1998), pp. 23-27.

<sup>144</sup> See the catalogue entry on the picture in *ibid.*, pp. 144-147.

and Degas' offhand notation of a warrior figure from the very same Palace wall relief (figures 34 and 38).

While Moreau would mine the veritable wealth of exotic motifs amassed amongst the pages of his *Etudes orientales* throughout his career, the fruits of Degas' exotic dabblings, in contrast, ultimately came to nothing. Indeed, the sole indication of his engagement with near Eastern artifacts in *Sémiramis* is the barely glimpsed chariot at the extreme lower right of the picture which closely resembles that of King Sargon's on the palace wall reliefs (figure 41). In order that we to get to the heart of precisely what is at stake in the problematic terms of Degas' encounter with the Orient, an investigation of the historical reception of 'Assyria' at this moment will prove fruitful.

*'Un nouveau monde d'antiquités'*

Paul-Emile Botta, *Monument de Nineve* (1849-50)<sup>145</sup>

In their encounter with the objects of the ancient Near East, both Degas and Moreau engaged with a highly pertinent historical theme. It was only just over a decade earlier that the Louvre had first opened its *Musée assyrien*. The first of its kind in Europe, the museum showcased finds from the recent excavations at the ancient sites of Nineveh and Khorsabad in northern Iraq administered by Paul-Emile Botta.<sup>146</sup> Motivated by the discoveries of Claudius James Rich (whose collection of Near Eastern coins and manuscripts garnered during his tenure as British diplomat in Baghdad he had seen on display at the British Museum during a visit to London) Botta began his excavational forays upon various ancient sites around Northern Iraq immediately after his appointment at French consul in Mosul in 1842. Thanks to the labour of a raft of local men enlisted to his service, preliminary discoveries were made at the site of Kouyunjik in early 1842.<sup>147</sup> Described by Botta as *'quelques fragments d'un pierre grise, gypseuse et portant les traces de sculptures presque effacées...'*<sup>148</sup> these *fouilles* were not deemed auspicious enough to warrant a full scale excavation of the site. As he went onto note: *'Rien malheureusement n'était complet, et il était impossible de reconnaître un plan ou une construction quelconque dans le chaos résultant du bouleversement des édifices qui jadis avaient couronné cette eminence.'*<sup>149</sup> While this site was subsequently excavated by Austen Henry Layard

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<sup>145</sup> Emile Botta, *Monument de Nineve* (1849-50), vol. 5, p. 5.

<sup>146</sup> For the general literature on these excavations see Brian Fagan, *Return to Babylon: Travelers, Archaeologists and Monuments in Mesopotamia* (Colorado: Colorado University Press, 2006); Mogens Trolle Larsen, *The Conquest of Assyria: Excavations in an Antique Land, 1840-1860* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006); Boher, *Orientalism and Visual Culture*, esp. chapter 2 'French Disconnections', pp. 70-97 and Elisabeth Fontan, (ed.), *De Khorsabad à Paris*.

<sup>147</sup> Dominique Beyer, 'Les premières étapes de la découverte à Khorsabad', in Elisabeth Fontan (ed.), *De Khorsabad à Paris*, pp. 46-59.

<sup>148</sup> Botta, quoted in Eugène Flandin, 'Voyage en Mesopotamie, 1840-1842', *Le Tour du Monde* (2e semestre, 1861), p. 70.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

(who uncovered the remains of the palace of Sennacherib and the library of Ashurbanipal which are housed to this day at the British Museum), Botta turned his attentions instead to present day Khorsabad, an already established site of historical interest for a number of western travellers. With a grant from the French government the excavations of *Dur Sharrukin*, the ancient fortress of King Sargon II, began in earnest.

As well as financial backing the French authorities also provided Botta's project with another form of support: itinerant Orientalist painter and illustrator Eugène Flandin. Fresh back from his voyage to Persia with Pascal Coste, Flandin was an ideal candidate for such an undertaking. For this project, however, he took a leaf out of his architect colleague's book. Abandoning the sentimental tone of his earlier Persian vignettes of everyday life, Flandin documented the excavations through an exhaustive inventory of precise architectural drawings appropriate to the positivist framework of the project. This multitude of minutely detailed plans, elevations and reconstructions (figure 42), and exhaustive catalogues of the palace wall reliefs (figure 43) were published in the *Monument de Nineve* (1849-50), a majestic publication which, in terms of both size, scale and imperialist ambition, rivaled the Napoleonic *Description de l'Égypte* (1809).<sup>150</sup>

Of the illustrations constituting the *Description* Edward Said has noted that they are not descriptions, but 'ascriptions'.<sup>151</sup> Refracted through the 'imperialist gaze' the presentation of the ancient monuments through 'objective' architectural drawings and maps (figure 44) functioned as the means through which they were severed from the actuality of their native milieu and which, in turn, served to justify the wholesale transportation of Egyptian antiquities to Europe. As Botta's drawings adhere to a very similar set of representational conventions as those of the *Description*, they also serve the very same set of imperialist ends.

After the departure of Flandin, it was left to Botta to oversee the export of the newly unearthed finds back to France.<sup>152</sup> This was an enormous undertaking. The human-headed winged bulls (*monolithes*, as Botta referred to them) weighed 29 tonnes alone. Resistant to transportation in their entirety, Botta resorted to sawing them in two, a task depicted in a contemporary engraving (figure 45).<sup>153</sup> Packed up ready for the long journey to France, the *fouilles* were transported on rafts down the Tigris to Basra where a fleet of French ships waited.<sup>154</sup> Arriving at Le Havre three months later, the booty was loaded onto barges which made their way down the Seine, finally arriving at the Louvre on 22 January

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<sup>150</sup> Béatrice André-Salvini, 'Introduction aux publications de P.E. Botta et de V Place', in *De Khorsabad à Paris*, Fontan (ed.), pp. 166-175.

<sup>151</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 142.

<sup>152</sup> Nicole Chevalier, 'De Khorsabad à Paris: *La Folie Franque*', in *De Khorsabad à Paris*, Fontan (ed.), pp. 214-225.

<sup>153</sup> Emile Botta, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>154</sup> This was an undertaking not without event: a worker was crushed to death loading the cargo onto the rafts and a consignment of bas-reliefs and sculpture was sunk. See Nicole Chevalier, *De Khorsabad à Paris*, in *De Khorsabad à Paris*, Fontan (ed.), p. 223.

1847. Meanwhile the French cultural elite had done a certain amount of work in preparation for receiving these objects. Adrien de Longpérier (formerly of the Royal department of coins and medals) had summarily been appointed curator of *antiquités orientales* and it was primarily he who engineered the organization and display of the Louvre's '*Musée assyrien*' (the first of its kind in Europe) which was proudly inaugurated by King Louis-Philippe four months later on 1 May 1847.<sup>155</sup>

Once the artifacts had arrived in Paris and been installed in their new home within the Louvre's sculpture galleries, it now remained for the museum institution and the French public at large to come to terms with these strange objects and negotiate the ways in which this newly discovered Assyrian 'history' could be incorporated into already-existing historical and art-historical narratives. As explicitly stated in his preface to the *Monument de Nineve*, Botta did not regard it his responsibility to pass aesthetic judgment upon the objects he was in charge of unearthing, referring to himself as merely: '*l'instrument de M Mohl*'.<sup>156</sup> The aforementioned secretary of the *Société asiatique* Julius Mohl, had been a close ally of Botta's during his tenure in Mosul and it was he who was primarily responsible for securing funding from the French government for the consul's excavations. Throughout the process the two had maintained frequent correspondence. This was first published by Mohl in the *Le Journal Asiatique* between 1843 and 1845, and widely quoted in the French press.<sup>157</sup> Botta's letters consist mainly of dry descriptions of the cuneiform inscriptions and carved stone sculptures discovered at Khorsabad (accompanied, on occasion, by rudimentary tracings and drawings). Mohl's annotations however, as Frederick Boher has commented, 'map another project onto Botta's concerns: one of national acquisition.'<sup>158</sup> Indeed it was he who first envisioned a museum of Assyrian antiquities upon French soil. This is made explicit in an addendum to a long letter by Botta dated July 24 1843, which details the problems hampering his progress with the excavations. As well as the fierce heat and a bout of cholera, his passage was also temporarily impeded by the local inhabitants of Khorsabad, many of whom dwelt in the immediate environs of this ancient site.<sup>159</sup> In his sympathetic footnote Mohl, denounces '*les ruses et la violence*'<sup>160</sup> of the Pasha of Mosul (who had protested

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<sup>155</sup> For the history of the *Musée assyrien* see Christine Aulanier, *Le Pavillon de Horloge et le Département des Antiquités Orientales: Histoire du Palais et du Musée du Louvre*, vol. 9 (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1963) and Elisabeth Fontan, 'Adrien de Longpérier et la création du musée assyrien du Louvre', in *De Khorsabad à Paris*, Fontan (ed.), pp. 242-247.

<sup>156</sup> Botta, *Monument de Nineve*, vol. 5, p. 16.

<sup>157</sup> Paul-Emile Botta, *Lettres de M Botta sur ses découvertes à Khorsabad, près de Nineve* (Paris: Imprimerie royal, 1845).

<sup>158</sup> Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture*, p. 71.

<sup>159</sup> This obstacle was soon solved by the intervention of the French authorities. As Botta notes: '*Son Exc. Le ministre de l'intérieur ayant bien voulu aider mes recherches, j'ai pu agir plus largement, et je suis parvenu à décider le chef du village à céder sa maison, qui nous barrait le passage; il ira s'établir dans la plaine, et tous les habitants l'y suivront.*' Paul-Emile Botta, *Lettres de M Botta*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

against excavations from the start), before offering Botta the following impetus to continue with his project: '*ce n'est que quand il y aura au Louvre une salle de sculptures assyriennes, que la découverte de Khorsabad sera réellement acquise à l'Europe*'.<sup>161</sup> But Mohl, clearly consumed with desire for the acquisition of these objects, could not see them beyond the horizon of his own nationalistic ambitions. Indeed, once the *fonilles* from Khorsabad had arrived on French soil he regarded his mission fulfilled and made no further attempt at their aesthetic or cultural interpretation.

The Louvre too seemed unsure of how to classify these objects, which were initially housed on the ground floor of the museum as part of its already existing sculpture galleries. An 1855 plan of the Louvre (figure 46) shows the positioning of the *Musée assyrien* amidst a collection of objects which included works from classical antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance together with that of established French masters of Neoclassicism such as Puget and Carpeaux. Strictly speaking it is epistemologically inaccurate to describe the artifacts from Assyria as 'sculpture'. However, by classifying and exhibiting them in this way they were subordinated to a western aesthetic framework and thus evaluated according to its particular criteria of value. We see from the same plan that the sculpture galleries also housed the Louvre's recently acquired collections of colonial spoils from Egypt and Algeria – the placement of the *Musée égyptien* and the *Musée algérien* serving to further indicate the uneasy position of these non-western cultures within the interpretive framework of the gallery which, although inserted into a western art-historical museum narrative, remain uncertainly positioned within it. On the other hand one might see how their potentially disruptive presence is mitigated here somewhat by the prefix '*Musée*'. This honorific effectively serves to designate each collection of non-western objects on the plan as self-contained worlds within themselves – indicating both the museum's efforts to discursively appropriate these non-western objects whilst at the same time maintaining their irrevocable 'otherness'.

Even Longpérier himself seemed at a loss as to how to make sense of these newly discovered artifacts. As Frederick Bohrer has noted, their newly appointed keeper made no public comment upon the more spectacular finds looted from Khorsabad such as the colossal human-headed winged bulls of stone (*lamassu* and *sheddu*) which once flanked the entrance to the royal palace complex.<sup>162</sup> Instead he singled out a small bronze statuette of a lion (the very same one which Moreau was soon to copy) (figure 47) which he described as an '*admirable figure, un des plus beaux ouvrages que l'antiquité nous ait légués*'.<sup>163</sup> Although this object is in no way representative of the Louvre's initial collection of Assyrian objects excavated from Khorsabad (which consisted mainly of fragments of the palace wall reliefs,

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>162</sup> See discussion in Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture*, p. 74-76.

<sup>163</sup> Adrien de Longpérier, *Notice des Antiquités assyriennes*, (Paris: Vinchon, 1854), p. 50.

statues of Kings, cuneiform tablets and the aforementioned *lamassu* and *sheddu*) the bronze lion was immediately comparable to the existing sculpture on display in the ground floor galleries in terms of scale, technique and representational conventions and thus functioned as a means through which Longpérier could make some attempt to secure these newly discovered objects within an established western aesthetic framework.

Indeed, it was primarily by means of comparison that other commentators endeavoured to make sense of these artifacts. As already mentioned Botta did not regard it his place to pass aesthetic judgment on the objects he excavated at Khorsabad. But when he did, on occasion, see fit to pass comment on these *fouilles* it was almost always by means of a comparative evaluation. This we see in a note concerning the feet of a stone sculpture of a lion which is praised in the following terms: *Les angles présentant des pattes de lion sont très-bien sculptées, et la tout à un air tellement grec, que j'aurais douté de l'origine.*<sup>164</sup> The arts of Hellenic antiquity function here as a benchmark through which Assyrian material culture is appraised and Botta's value judgments are underscored by a belief in the unquestionable pre-eminence of classical Greek art. This was largely the legacy of the German art-historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, whose aesthetic theories were extremely influential throughout western Europe during the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>165</sup> His model of art historical development which privileged the Greek ideal as the pinnacle of artistic achievement was to become firmly institutionalized within the Academy.

But Winckelmann's theories also gained a much wider cultural currency and the extent to which his paradigm of art history had become entrenched within nineteenth century French discourse at large is indicated in the press coverage of the newly opened *Musée assyrien*. An 1847 *L'Illustration* article, for example, deems the art of Ancient Assyria superior to the work of the Egyptians. Noting many striking similarities between these objects and those of ancient Greece, the commentary concluded that it was the Greeks and the Etruscans who imitated, in order to later perfect, the art of the Assyrians.<sup>166</sup> The model of hierarchical development established here resonates strongly with Winckelmann's systematic ordering of ancient art into a teleological notion of progress (culminating, needless to say, with classical Greece) as outlined in his *History of Ancient Art (Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1764)).<sup>167</sup> Stating at the outset that his aim is to establish the 'superiority

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<sup>164</sup> Paul-Emile Botta, *Lettres de M. Botta*, p. 10.

<sup>165</sup> Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994). Winckelmann's aesthetic theories and their historical influence are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

<sup>166</sup> *L'Illustration*, 'Musée de Nineve', 15 mai 1847, pp. 167-70. Boher also provides a commentary of this article. See *Orientalism and Visual Culture*, pp. 77-8.

<sup>167</sup> Winckelmann's art historical paradigm is seen to be symptomatic of what Martin Bernal has called the pervasive 'Hellenomania' of the nineteenth-century in his book *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987). Although the claims of Bernal's scholarship are regarded as dubious by some, the premise of his book has a certain historical validity. Zainab Bahrani has provided the most

of Greek art over all other nations' Winckelmann continually devalues ancient Egyptian art for its 'primitivism'. He holds the art of the Etruscans in only slightly higher regard – albeit only because one may here detect the rudiments of that which would later be improved upon and perfected by the Greeks.<sup>168</sup> Winckelmann of course had no knowledge of Assyrian art, but we see here how *L'Illustration* adapted his art-historical paradigm in order to retrospectively accommodate these artifacts into an established narrative of artistic development. When Assyrian art was evaluated according to western aesthetic standards it was – without exception – found to be inferior.

A prime example of this tendency is provided by the *Illustration* article discussed above. While the artifacts of the *Musée assyrien* are here valued over those of the ancient Egyptians they are nonetheless placed on the lowliest rungs of artistic development. As for the aesthetic value of these objects the article reserves judgment, pausing even to doubt whether they can be deemed as 'art' at all.

The problems of the assimilation caused by the Assyrian objects within the space of the museum are highlighted by a series of contemporaneous engravings of the Louvre's sculpture galleries. The first engraving (figure 48) is an illustration of an exhibition room dedicated to the work of the sixteenth-century French Mannerist sculpture Germain Pilon. This comprises a mixture of portrait busts and full length classicized figures, all of which are elevated on plinths. The works are widely distributed along a vast gallery which is almost empty, save for a male figure towards the back of the room and a well-dressed couple in the left foreground who have paused for a moment in front of a seated winged figure playing a lyre which they regard in quiet contemplation. As these figures exemplify a 'correct' mode of aesthetic apprehension for works of art displayed in a museum context, it is important to recognize how illustrations such as this were instrumental in constructing nineteenth-century paradigms of museum spectatorship. In the nineteenth-century the Louvre was not readily accessible to the general public, to whom it only opened its doors for a few hours on a Sunday. Indeed, it was through illustrations such as this which appeared in illustrated journals or supplemented museum guides and catalogues like Pierre Marcy's *Guide Populaire* (1867) that the public were primarily acquainted with the Louvre's collection.

Another authorized viewing experience facilitated by the museum environment is indicated in an engraving of the *Salle de Bronze* (figure 49) which accompanied an 1852 *L'Illustration* article on the Louvre's collection of antique bronze miniatures. Although this time the gallery is much more populated, the gallery visitors are evenly dispersed throughout the room in discreet groupings consisting either of mixed couples or lone male

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intelligent critique of western interpretations of Near Eastern Art. See for example, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), esp. chapter 1, 'The Aesthetic and the Epistemic: Race, Culture and Antiquity', pp. 13-49.

<sup>168</sup> Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art*, vol. 1, p. 85.



figures. The presentation of objects is also rather different in this illustration which, although augmented with several busts supported upon freestanding plinths, are for the most part contained in glass-fronted display cabinets. Although there is not quite the aesthetic absorption of the first image, all the figures display a directed form of attention towards the objects under their gaze. The mode of spectatorship is what we might call one of 'active engagement': the couple bent over the glass case in the foreground examine the objects inside with keen interest while the two single male figures (one standing by the glass fronted case in the centre of the room, the other by the wall cabinet on the right) consult small booklets, presumably museum guides. Indeed, the overall impression is of an encounter with the objects that is both edifying and didactic.

But if these engravings can be seen to offer two sanctioned paradigms of nineteenth century museum spectatorship – one 'aesthetic', the other 'didactic' – an analysis of the following two illustrations of the *Musée assyrien* makes clear that the objects on display for the contemporary viewer here did not fit comfortably within either. But while it was clear that the contents of *this* part of the Museum demanded a completely different mode of spectatorship, no one seemed sure exactly what it was meant to be. It is precisely this sense of confusion and uncertainty which is registered in an illustration depicting the interior of the *Musée assyrien* from Adolphe Joanne's *Paris Illustré* (1863) (figure 50). The room is dominated by a pair of stone *sheddu*, but a sculpture of an Assyrian warrior strangling a lion flanked by fragments of palace wall reliefs is also clearly seen. While Pilon's sculpture was well spaced along long galleries, the objects here are cramped and over-crowded. The room is also much busier which, although serving to highlight the popularity of this new museum attraction, imparts a sense of overall disorder and confusion. There is nothing here of the polite mode of spectatorship we saw in the previous illustrations. Instead the image portrays an altogether more fragmented and dislocated experience: the bewildered figures, apparently unsure as to where to direct their gaze, look vainly around the room in all directions. The shared viewing experience exemplified by the couples in the previous two images (whether didactic or aesthetic) is replaced here by an encounter that is fractured, bemused and incoherent. Significantly, the viewing public here consists of much larger groupings. While in the previous illustration the gallery space was depicted as an exclusively adult preserve, here we have couples with children in tow. Not only does this make evident the fact that these objects do not require the refined aesthetic viewing conditions of 'Art', it also implies that they are perceived more as ethnographic 'curiosities' (as highlighted by an engraving of the Louvre's *Musée ethnographique* which consisted of a very similar viewing public (figure 51)).

An engraving from *Le Magasin Pittoresque* (figure 52), on the other hand, can be seen to attempt to bestow a more conventionalized mode of aesthetic attention upon the new

and bewildering set of objects comprising the Louvre's *Musée assyrien*. But the image does not quite manage to pull this off and the effect is an unintentionally incongruous scenario. Again we have the familiar couple personifying the 'exemplary' gallery visitors. However, although dressed in their Sunday best, they are distinctly less dapper and urbane than Pilon's elegant admirers.<sup>169</sup> Arms intertwined and looking straight ahead, they adopt the conventional viewing position expected of them within the museum environment. However, this gaze is not applicable here and we realize that the comely couple are in fact staring intently at the feet and lower legs of the *sheddu*! Whilst the colossal scale of this magnificent winged creature was significantly diminished in the previous image here it is played up to full effect – looming ominously over the spectators to the extent that they are utterly dwarfed by it.

The disparity between the viewing encounters inscribed in this pair of images serves to indicate the lack of an appropriate interpretative framework for deriving a meaningful experience from these objects in the mid-nineteenth-century. This state of affairs is also reflected in the wider context of contemporary French museum culture. While there was scant information regarding the objects on display which might have served to orientate the viewer in relation to these objects in the galleries of the *Musée assyrien*, contemporary museum guides did not offer much more in the way of interpretation. The *Paris Illustré* commentary on the Louvre, for example, offers only the most cursory paragraph on the contents of the *Musée assyrien*. Devoting its attention instead to the painting and sculpture galleries, eulogizing entries on artistic masterpieces such as Leonardo da Vinci's *La Vierge aux rochers* and Nicholas Poussin's *Les bergers d'Arcadie* run over several pages. In fact, in none of the contemporary discourse upon the *Musée assyrien* over the course of the nineteenth century can one find evidence of any concerted efforts to come to terms with its content, aside from a series of half-hearted attempts to accommodate these objects within an already established western aesthetic framework.

This state of affairs is nowhere better epitomized than by the incomprehension and bewilderment with which the protagonists of Zola's novel *L'Assommoir* reacted to the Louvre's collection of Near Eastern antiquities. The scene takes place shortly after the ill-fated marriage of Coupeau and Gervaise. When the drunken post-nuptial jaunts of the wedding party are cut short by the rain, they take shelter in the Louvre. Stumbling by chance into the *Musée assyrien*, their encounter with the objects housed here is described in the following terms:

*En bas, quand le noce se fut engagée dans le musée assyrien, elle eut un petit frisson. Fichtre! Il ne faisait pas chaud; la salle aurait fait une fameuse cave. Et, lentement, les couples avançaient, le*

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<sup>169</sup> This disparity reflects the readership to which each illustrated journal was directed. While *L'Illustration* catered to the refined and educated 'upper bourgeoisie', *Le Magasin Pittoresque* was aimed primarily at a working class readership.

menton lève, les paupières battantes, entre les colosses de pierre, les dieux de marbre noir muets dans leur raideur hiératique, les bêtes monstrueuses, moitié chattes et moitié femmes, avec des figures de mortes, le nez aminci, les lèvres gonflées. Ils trouvaient tout ça très vilain. On travaillait joliment mieux la pierre au jour d'aujourd'hui. Une inscription en caractères phéniciens les stupéfia. Ce n'était pas possible, personne n'avait jamais lu ce grimace.<sup>170</sup>

Needless to say the wedding party did not linger here for very long. Called away by M Madinier (amateur artist and self-appointed tour guide for the day) they were swiftly whisked away to the French Galleries where they could see the works of art with which they were more familiar and comfortable. While this passage must be understood within the context of the unremittingly bleak portrait of the impecunious working classes to which *L'Assommoir* is dedicated, it can also be taken as indication of just how radically inaccessible were these objects to a large contingent of nineteenth-century society, and which were to remain for them as indecipherable as cuneiform script.

While the stupefied response of the Gervaise-Coupeau wedding party is no more that one would expect from the ignorant riffraff of a Zola novel, the educated upper-class strata of nineteenth-century French society to which Degas belonged was rather more equipped to derive some kind of cultural meaning from this newly discovered history. There existed, at this moment, a comparable precedent for the interpretation of non-western historical culture, that is the Egyptian revival in the early nineteenth century, which has since been dubbed 'Egyptomania'.<sup>171</sup> It was the fruits of Napoleon's campaigns in Egypt which were primarily responsible for promoting this fascination with all things Egyptian. This was a trend which caught on almost immediately and quickly permeated all aspects of culture including painting, opera, fashion, architecture and decorative arts. The reception of Near Eastern material culture in France (and western Europe at large), however, was far more problematic. This was mainly due to the already discussed absence of existing historical narratives within which these objects could be contextualized. While nineteenth-century interpretations of 'Assyria' marked an entirely new cultural phenomenon, the 'Egyptomania' craze taking place at more or less the very same moment must be seen as just one phase of a long, enduring European fascination with this ancient civilization. It is for this reason, I would argue, that 'Assyria' underwent a far slower process of assimilation, and it was only towards the very end of the nineteenth century with works such as Georges Rochegrosse's orgiastic *Fin de Babylone* (1891) (figure 53) that Near Eastern historical subjects gained a measure of popularity in painting.<sup>172</sup> In the first part of the

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<sup>170</sup> Emile Zola, *L'Assommoir* (1877), (Paris: Pocket, 1990) p. 100.

<sup>171</sup> See Jean-Marcel Humbert, et al., *Egyptomania: L'Égypte dans l'Art Occidental, 1730-1930*, ex. cat. (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1994).

<sup>172</sup> See Zainab Bahrani, 'Babylonian Women in the Orientalist Imagination', in *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia*, (Routledge: London and New York,

nineteenth century, however, there are scarcely any Orientalist paintings dealing with such themes and it was the theatre which functioned as the most privileged site for the representation and interpretation of ancient Assyrio-Babylonian culture at this moment.<sup>173</sup>

Although musicology has not subjected itself to the same forms of critical reassessment as the discipline of art history in recent years, Edward Said's essay on Verdi's *Aida* (itself a product of western European Egyptomania) draws our attention to the ways in which the Empire is 'at work' in this field of cultural production.<sup>174</sup> The very same politics of imperialist power and domination for which Said makes a case in this essay are also seen to underwrite Gioacchino Rossini's opera *Semiramide*. Rossini's opera (loosely based upon Voltaire's popular play *Sémiramis* of 1748), adheres to the conventional narrative of the Babylonian queen provided by Diodorus. Weaving a tale of treachery, sexual infidelity, incest and murder – with added embellishments for maximum dramatic effect – the opera reaches its theatrical climax with the murder of Semiramis when she is stabbed in the heart by her son under the instructions of the ghost of his dead father King Ninus. First staged in 1823, the opera experienced a resurgence in popularity after the excavations of Botta and Layard and went through several productions during the second half of the nineteenth century. On 4 July 1860 a lavish production premiered at the rue-le-Peletier Opera with acclaimed Italian soprano Carlotta Marchisio as Semiramis headlining the star-studded cast. It was the lavish scale of the Opera's production, however which drew the most press attention. Journalists heaped praise on the magnificence of the actors' costumes and the extravagance spectacle of the scenery.<sup>175</sup>

The *mise-en-scène* of the Paris Opera was a serious business in the nineteenth century. In preparation for each production the opera's distinguished entourage of costumiers, set-designers and scene-painters undertook detailed research appropriate to the historical period they wished to conjure up on the stage, and no expense was spared on the part of the administration in enabling the realization of their extravagant and fantastic visions.<sup>176</sup> The staging of *Semiramide* is no exception to this rule, as the original designs for the scenery and costume of this production bear out. Alfred Albert's illustrations for the costumes of the male performers housed in the archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale de l'Opéra, for instance, exhibit clear borrowings from the *Musée assyrien*. These figures adopt the imperious postures and rigid sculptural poses of the figures from the Khorsabad palace

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2001) pp. 161-179 and Chapter 7 'Mesopotamian Emulation, Interpretation, and Imagination in Late Nineteenth-Century France, in Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture*, pp. 224-271.

<sup>173</sup> Sébastien Allard, 'Babylone au théâtre', in Béatrice André-Salvini (ed.), *Babylone* (Paris: Musée du Louvre, 2008) pp. 476-481.

<sup>174</sup> Edward Said, *The Empire at work: Verdi's Aida*, in *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), pp. 133-159.

<sup>175</sup> See for example *Le Monde Illustré* (July 14, 1860).

<sup>176</sup> Catherine Join-Diéterle, *Les décors de scène de l'Opéra de Paris à l'époque romantique* (Paris: Picard, 1988).

wall reliefs on which they are directly based. The costume for Prince Assur, for example (figure 54) is identical to that of King Sargon. Garbed in brightly coloured and ornately decorated Assyrian warrior costume replete with weaponry, this figure is further adorned with heavy gold jewellery and an intricately knotted hairstyle. He also clearly displays what had come to be in France by the mid-nineteenth century a clearly identifiable ‘Assyrian’ profile: its exaggerated markers of ethnic difference characterized by a prominent nose, heavy eyebrows, low forehead and wide set, slightly upturned, almond-shaped eyes. Charles-Antoine Cambon’s set designs also display a highly proficient visual currency in contemporary interpretations of ‘Assyria’ through their utilization of historical reconstructions of its ancient cities. This is seen most clearly in (figure 55) which seems to have been directly derived from an imaginative architectural reconstruction of Nimrod by Austen Henry Layard (figure 56). The magisterial colonnaded buildings decorated with figural reliefs and the pyramidal *ziggurats* which constituted the unique features of Assyrian architecture also appear in an anonymous engraving of the Opera production (figure 57). Several monumental *sheddu* – surely the most instantly recognizable motif of ‘Assyria’ in Paris at this moment – also figure prominently.

One is struck by the indiscriminate mixing and matching of ‘Mesopotamian’ history, displaying an utter disregard for historical or geographical accuracy. Although the opera is ostensibly set in Babylon (the city with which Semiramis is mythically associated) those involved in the opera’s production evidently had no compunction in borrowing freely from the Assyrian finds at the Louvre in order to achieve the right amount of ‘authenticating’ detail necessary to satisfy the Orientalist taste of contemporary opera goers.

Previous commentators are split as to whether this production was a source of inspiration for Degas’ own *Sémiramis*, a work which he is thought to have begun around the same time as the 1860 Opera run.<sup>177</sup> There is no historical evidence to verify the fact that Degas actually attended a performance. However, the artist was in Paris throughout the summer of 1860 (having just returned from Italy) and, as a regular visitor to the opera and theatre at this time, it is quite possible that he did. But even if this lavish production, together with the substantial critical attention it received in the press, completely passed the artist by, it is highly unlikely that Degas was not already well acquainted with the myth of Semiramis by way of myriad other cultural sources. In any case, the picture would not appear to be based directly upon a scene from the opera. Moreover, the oriental excesses of the stage production are entirely lacking in Degas interpretation of the subject; the palm

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<sup>177</sup> See Lilian Browse, *Degas’ Dancers*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1949) p. 50. This was subsequently dismissed in the catalogue entry on the picture in the 1988 *Degas* exhibition catalogue (Boggs et al., *Degas*, ex. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988), p. 90), although this connection has been more recently reconsidered by Richard Kendall and Jill de Voynar. See *Degas and the Dance* (New York: Abrams, 2002), pp. 46-7.

fronds, tasseled canopies and chariots with which the Opera *décorateurs* went to town were hardly the stuff of artist's own historical stimulus.

Despite this visual evidence I would not disregard a connection between Degas' early historical canvases and the theatre outright.<sup>178</sup> Indeed, the artist was a keen theatre-goer with eclectic taste. In the late 1850s and early 1860s he attended a variety of plays and musicals ranging from Greek tragedy and historical drama to opera and ballet. From the various rapturous descriptions punctuating Degas' *carnets* it is clear that these performances made a deep impression on him. He was especially captivated by the Italian actress Adelaide Ristori whom he saw in productions of Schiller's *Mary Stuart* and Ernest Legouvé's *Médée*.<sup>179</sup> Of the latter performance the artist made a series of detailed sketches relating to climatic moments in the tragedy (figure 58). These are further annotated with notes regarding details of the actress' hairstyle and costume together with handwritten excerpts from the play's script. In this context perhaps one would be justified in understanding these explorations of theatrical motifs as the briefly imagined bases for history paintings.

This notion is certainly borne out in the early compositional sketches of *Sémiramis* (figures 59 and 60). While Richard Kendall and Jill de Voynar have compared the wide perspectives of these works to contemporary engravings of theatre productions, I do not believe it would be going too far to claim that these evocative *croquis* closely resemble initial designs for a stage set.<sup>180</sup> Indeed, these preliminary compositional studies exhibit a large amount of what is best described as 'scenic' detail. Much of this, however, would later be discarded as the work developed and progressed. The copious amounts of vegetation for example, do not feature on the painted canvas. Nevertheless, the picture as it stands today still bears a strong resemblance to a theatrical *mise-en-scène*. This is primarily due to the fact that the composition has been constructed across two horizontal planes with no convincing illusion of receding space through which the two may be linked. The group of figures who form a self-contained 'island', are entirely separate from dreaming spires of the city lining the picture's panoramic horizon.

This sense of spatial disconnection between 'figure' and 'ground' is, I would argue, due partly to the fact that Degas appropriated a ready-made template for his mythical city of Babylon. Indeed, it was Layard's reconstruction of Nimrod which (once reversed) functioned as the compositional basis for *Sémiramis* (just as it had provided the theatrical

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<sup>178</sup> Kendall and de Voynar also explore this connection. See *ibid*, esp. Chapter 2 'The rue le Peletier Opéra', pp. 29-61.

<sup>179</sup> For notes and sketches relating to these performances see Nb. 18, p. 116 and Nb 6, pp. 5-14 respectively.

<sup>180</sup> Kendall and de Voynar, *Degas and the Dance*, p. 45.

backdrop for stage-designer Cambon).<sup>181</sup> Although only the very last vestiges of Layard's reconstruction are still evident in *Sémiramis* (this we see in the barely articulated slate-blue river running across the right hand side of the composition and geometric lines of the city's edifices), even the briefest look at the preliminary compositional studies for this work bear out an acquaintance with Layard's imagined city.<sup>182</sup> The resemblance is clearest in a preparatory study (figure 61). The river was originally accorded a far greater prominence within the composition running, as it does here, along slightly lower lines of perspective. This brings the composition formally closer to Layard's reconstruction, in which the river is seen to cut almost horizontally across the picture surface. The affiliation is cemented by a procession of diminutive sailing boats.

As one specialist in the field has demonstrated, nineteenth-century representations of ancient Near Eastern topographies frequently reflect ideals of landscape painting.<sup>183</sup> This is certainly true of Layard's picturesque utopia. Bearing little resemblance to the desert plains of Iraq which he had encountered during his residency in the region, the lush vegetation of this verdant landscape dotted with livestock is closer to a Poussin pastoral (figure 62). This connection is enforced by the configuration of shepherds in the left foreground, a trio bearing what is surely not a purely coincidental resemblance to the artist's Arcadian bergers (figure 63) whose silent gestural exchange has long been an object of art historical fascination.<sup>184</sup> Perhaps this was a reference which Degas himself picked up on as his own eloquent figurative grouping was substituted for Layard's classically dressed herdsmen at precisely the same point within his own version of the composition.

While Degas and Cambon may have initially derived their respective *mise-en-scènes* from the same pictorial motif, the connection between *Sémiramis* and Rossini's opera stops there. That this was a motif pursued to far different ends in each case is most obvious at the level of bodily rhetoric. While the poised bearings and restrained figurative language of Degas' immobile protagonists could not be further from the overwrought histrionics of Rossini's opera (the melodramatic gesticulations of the rotund Carlotta Marchisio were parodied in numerous contemporary caricatures (figure 64)), it is a work which finds its most appropriate theatrical correlate in the concept of the *tableau* as postulated in the art criticism of Denis Diderot. The *tableau* is described by him in the following terms: 'une

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<sup>181</sup> Geneviève Monnier is the first to point out this connection, although she does not elaborate upon it in any detail. See 'La genèse d'une oeuvre de Degas: Sémiramis construisant une ville', *La Revue du Louvre et des Musées de France*, 28<sup>th</sup> année 5-6 (1978), p. 40

<sup>182</sup> Although there are no direct references to Layard's *Nineveh and its Remains* (1849) in Degas' notebooks, this image was a widely reproduced and adapted motif in the latter part of the nineteenth century and thus one with which he would easily have been familiar.

<sup>183</sup> Naomi F Miller, 'Palm Trees in Paradise: Victorian Views of the Ancient Near Eastern Landscape', *Expedition: The University Museum Magazine of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania*, vol. 32, no. 2 (1990), pp. 52-61.

<sup>184</sup> Erwin Panofsky, 'Et in Arcadia ego: Poussin and the elegiac tradition', *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 295-320.

*disposition de ces personnages sur la scène, si naturelle et si vraie, que, rendue fidèlement par un peintre, elle me plairait sur la toile, est un tableau*.<sup>185</sup> Privileging the dramatic effects of silence, stillness and restraint (as opposed to the contrived and superficial effects of the *coup de théâtre*) the emphasis here is on the unified balance and harmony of the figures comprising the *tableau*.<sup>186</sup>

The notion of the *tableau* as a metaphor for painting continued to hold a strong resonance in nineteenth-century academic practice which placed supreme emphasis upon classical precepts of composition. This is reflected in the annual *concours de composition* instituted in 1816. Composition also continued to remain one of the fundamental criteria upon which Prix de Rome submissions were judged. Of all Degas' canvases discussed in this dissertation, *Sémiramis* is the one which adheres most rigorously to the academic procedure for the execution of a multi-figured narrative composition – or, indeed, a *tableau* as such works were commonly termed. The large number of preparatory studies relating to this picture (which far exceed those he made in preparation for the other canvases on which the artist was at work during the 1860s) are testament to the efforts to which he went in refining the composition – particularly the group of figures constituting Semiramis and her attendants. Numbering around ten in total these works, which are now dispersed amongst various collections, range from summarily executed pencil sketches (figure 65) to delicately coloured pastel *esquisses* (figure 66).<sup>187</sup> Although it is impossible to reconstruct the order in which these works were executed, these drawings bear out the infinitesimal series of shifts and adjustments to which this group of figures were subjected as the artist sought to perfect the compositional blueprint of what was eventually to become the *tableau définitif*.

There also exist a large number of finely executed single figure studies relating to *Sémiramis*. Again this is a practice in strict compliance with nineteenth-century academic pedagogy where such *études* were regarded as an indispensable preparatory stage in the picture making process. In keeping with the academic privileging of *dessin*, these figure studies were seen to function as the picture's underlying compositional armature. They also functioned as the site for the perfection of certain figurative elements in preparation for their transferral onto the canvas surface. It would seem that the *études* for *Sémiramis* were executed with the intention of serving precisely these ends. While these drawings serve to refine various figurative details (the folds and falls of fabric (figure 67), or the detail of a *coiffure* (figure 68), for example) they stand apart from the dry and perfunctory exercises

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<sup>185</sup> Denis Diderot, 'Entretiens sur le fils naturel', in *Oeuvres esthétiques de Diderot*, Paul Vernière (ed.) (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1965) p. 88. For the classical study on the art criticism of Diderot see Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

<sup>186</sup> The analogy between pictures and theatre can be traced back to the writings of the sixteenth-century academic theorists (Coypel, Du Bos, De Piles et al.). Diderot's writing is seen to iterate many of the compositional precepts first set in place by them. See Fried, *ibid*, pp. 76-77.

<sup>187</sup> Most of these have been reproduced in Monnier, 'La genèse d'une oeuvre de Degas'.



which constitute the bulk of mid-nineteenth century academic *études*.<sup>188</sup> It is the meticulous drapery studies of the principal figures, however, which betray the extent of Degas' profound investment in the classical tradition which he had been schooled. This we see most clearly in the poignant studies of a crouching female figure (figures 69, 70 and 71) which the artist first drew naked, covering the body with drapery only when its anatomical proportions had been rendered correctly. (Although, again, this was a practice sanctioned by the academy, it was one which few adhered to with such rigour). The way in which the fabric falls over the body's contours in animated, but graceful, folds here is directly evocative of the 'wet drapery' of antique statuary illustrated by marble fragments such as the *Aphrodite au pilier* (figure 72).<sup>189</sup> The artist's fidelity to the classical tradition demonstrated in the preparatory figure studies was also carried over to the picture surface itself. Of all Degas' early historical canvases *Sémiramis* is by far the most compositionally eloquent. Characterized by an atmosphere of calm serenity, the refined figurative rhetoric of this picture is a world away from the incoherent gesticulations of the young Spartans or the contorted posturings of the *Scene de Guerre* nudes. But while *Sémiramis* is seen here to adhere most closely to classical precepts of composition, so too are the poses and gestures of its protagonists most derivative of canonical academic prototypes (while these references are also in evidence in the latter pictures they are much less clearly legible, having been, for the most part, subverted and defaced almost beyond recognition). Indeed, these figures are steeped in the rhetoric of the classical tradition; their poised body language resonates with the ceremonial rites depicted on Attic funerary urns (figure 73), the regal solemnity of the muses of antiquity, or the mute eloquence of Poussin's allegories (all of which, needless to say, the artist knew intimately thanks to endless afternoons spent copying at the Louvre as a novice). While there are many references to a historical tradition at stake here, the western canonical narratives from which they are without exception derived are precisely the ones which excluded the histories and cultures with which Degas engaged in his research for *Sémiramis*. Just as Layard's reconstruction of Nineveh was mediated through the conventions of the classical landscape tradition in order for it to be made palatable for its intended audience (originally serving as the frontispiece to the *Monuments of Nineveh* one must not underestimate the important function performed by the image within this context), so too is Degas' *Sémiramis* – despite the nominally 'exotic' nature of its originary motif – situated securely within a western frame of reference.

The various processes of repression and appropriation to which this Oriental theme has here been subjected is reflective of the broader strategies of 'domestication'

<sup>188</sup> For examples see Philippe Grunhech, *Les Concours de Prix de Rome, 1797-1863* (Paris: Ecole nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, 1984).

<sup>189</sup> This term was coined by Johann Gottfried Herder. See *Sculpture: Some Observations of Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Dream* (1778), trans. Jason Gaiger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) pp. 50-1.

characterizing the reception of Assyria in the nineteenth century.<sup>190</sup> But it is in the figure of Semiramis herself where what is at stake in these strategies is brought to the fore most startlingly. Thus, it is to a consideration of the various ways in which this Babylonian queen has figured within the western historical imagination – together with the ways in which Degas own *Sémiramis* is seen to engage with this representational tradition – to which the final part of this chapter will now turn.

### **Semiramis**

Degas was probably first acquainted with the legend of Semiramis through the writings of the ancient Greeks, perhaps even as far back as his schooldays at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand. Although mentioned in passing by Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus is the first to give a sustained biographical account of this figure.<sup>191</sup> Providing the European historical imagination with a foundational narrative of this infamous Babylonian queen, who transgressed accepted codes of feminine behaviour and overturned conventional gendered power relations, Diodorus' narrative is worth recounting in detail.

Abandoned at birth Semiramis was the product of an ill-fated union between the Syrian goddess Derceto and one of her young male votaries. Adopted by doves who wrapped her in feathers and fed her with milk from their beaks, Semiramis grew into a young maiden of unsurpassed beauty. One day she caught the attention of the Syrian governor Onnes who, falling under her spell, immediately took her for his wife.

Soon after Onnes was enlisted to lead a military campaign against Asian enemy forces. But far from home he missed his wife very much, and so sent for her to join him. Semiramis responded to his call and set out on the long journey dressed as a man in order to disguise her identity. But on arriving at her husband's station in Bactria she saw that his army was under attack by enemy forces. In response she quickly rounded up some troops, and by creating a diversion managed to re-occupy the city on behalf of her husband's army.

When the King of Syria heard of Semiramis' victory he showered her with lavish gifts, and upon seeing her with his own eyes was so enamoured of her beauty that he asked Onnes if he could take her as his wife in exchange for his own daughter. The General had no choice but to accede to the King's wishes. And so Semiramis married Ninus whereupon she bore him a son.

After the death of her husband a few years later Semiramis was keen to consolidate his legacy, and set her sights upon founding a city upon the river Euphrates which she named Babylon. She sought out the most highly skilled architects who drew up magnificent

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<sup>190</sup> This is Boher's metaphor for the reception of Near Eastern historical antiquities in France. See chapter 2, *Orientalism and Visual Culture*.

<sup>191</sup> For this account see Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, Book 2, 4-21. Reprinted in *Diodorus of Sicily*, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 1., with an English translation by HC Oldfather (London: Heinmann, 1965), pp. 357-425.

plans on a monumental scale, and when these were ready enlisted over two million men to undertake the building work. But Semiramis was still not satisfied and added to the plans herself. She fortified the city at great expense with high walls of burnt brick and built a thirty foot wide bridge across the Euphrates made with beams of the finest cedar wood. Finally she constructed a quay on either side of the river crowned with two elevated palaces on its banks, from which she could stand and survey her entire city.

When the construction of Babylon was complete the Queen then turned her attention further afield. She built several more cities along the Tigris and Euphrates, and then expanded her territories eastwards into Medes. Nothing could stand in the way of her desire to increase her Empire, and she cut huge roads through mountains and erected monuments engraved with her likeness as she went along. But Semiramis, fearful that a husband would usurp her supremacy, did not want to marry again. Instead she took her pick from the ranks of her young and handsome soldiers – whom she had taken away and killed after they had served their purpose.

After bringing Egypt, Ethiopia and Libya under her control Semiramis became restless. And so, excited by the riches of India, accounts of which she had heard from her ambassadors, she assembled a massive army and set out on a campaign to conquer this land. But the Indian army put up a fierce resistance, which the Queen's army, despite her ingenious martial tactics and fearless military leadership, could not overcome. It was during the final battle, the longest and bloodiest of them all, that Semiramis was wounded by King Stabrobates himself and finally forced to return home with a fatally depleted army. And so the Queen was forced to content herself with presiding over her already-existing empire. Time passed peacefully, until some years later she became aware that her son Ninyas was conspiring against her. But rather than punishing him, the Queen understood this plot as the fulfillment of the prophecy of an Ethiopian oracle she had consulted many years earlier. Surrendering to her fate Semiramis turned her entire Kingdom over to her son, whereupon she turned into a dove and was carried away to the heavens in a celestial procession escorted by all the birds of the sky.

The aspects of Semiramis' character outlined in Diodorus' biography; her bewitching beauty, sexually voracious appetite and promiscuous behaviour together with her mania for building and territorial expansion, fearless military leadership, cunning and penchant for disguise, are all traits which would be elaborated upon, augmented and embellished in various ways over the course of the following centuries.<sup>192</sup> It is worth pausing at this point to ask which historical or mythical figures Diodorus' 'Semiramis'

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<sup>192</sup> For essays which trace the historical representation and myths associated with the figure of Semiramis see Julia Asher-Greve, 'From Semiramis of Babylon to Semiramis of Hammersmith', in Steven W Holloway (ed.), *Orientalism, Assyriology and the Bible* (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2006), 322-373 and 'Sémiramis, la reine mystérieuse d'Orient', in Jean Bottéro (ed.), *Initiation à l'Orient ancien: de Sumer à la Bible* (Paris: Sueil, 1992), pp. 184-203.

corresponds to within the Near Eastern historical tradition. Not surprisingly she is here revealed to be entirely a product of the western imagination. However, Semiramis is commonly identified (at times even conflated) by Assyriologists with the historical royal figure 'Sammuramat' of the neo-Assyrian period, the wife of King Shamshi-Adad V (823-811 BC), and mother of his heir Adad-nirari III (810-783 BC). Although Assyria underwent a period of significant expansion under the first neo-Assyrian rulers, particularly the formidable Ashurbanipal II (883-859 BC) (it was he who built the royal city of Nineveh uncovered by Layard), the reign of Shamshi-Adad V was a turbulent one spent mainly attempting to keep under control a series of revolts and uprisings; the legacy of his ruthless predecessors. According to the Assyrian King lists it would appear that after his death Sammuramat was appointed regent from 811-808 BC, most likely because her son was too young to rule autonomously.<sup>193</sup>

Although these facts are largely derived from cuneiform script, and therefore fairly recent forms of European historical knowledge, they contradict the popular myth of Semiramis the Babylonian queen in many ways. The most obvious inconsistency is that of geographical affiliation. Sammuramat was Assyrian, and as at least one prominent Assyriologist has affirmed that 'there is no historical evidence to support the common belief that she was Babylonian.'<sup>194</sup> Indeed, while Assyria and Babylon are commonly lumped together in western discourse under the general rubric of 'Mesopotamia' it is important to remember that these regions were distinct states with their own cultural identities and practices, even if their close geographical proximity and respective political ambitions meant that they were more often than not locked in conflict with one another.<sup>195</sup> At the time of the neo-Assyrian Empire however, Babylon was the weaker of the two and would only later come to prominence under Nebuchadnezzar II (630-562 BC) (it was he who built the legendary Hanging Gardens of this ancient city for his Persian wife who longed for the cool gardens of her homeland). Familiar to us primarily through the Old Testament Books of Daniel and Jeremiah which document his conquest of the Ancient Kingdom of Judah and the subsequent enslavement of its inhabitants, Nebuchadnezzar II is perhaps the most infamous of all the ancient Mesopotamian Kings. Whilst in ancient Babylonian historical texts one finds him venerated and exalted as a Great King and ruler, biblical accounts emphasize his despotic nature and ruthless political and military ambition together with a

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<sup>193</sup> See *The Cambridge Ancient History: The Prehistory of the Balkans, the Middle East and the Aegean World, Tenth to Eighth Centuries BC*, John Boardman (ed.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), vol. 3, pp. 238-280.

<sup>194</sup> See AK Grayson in *ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>195</sup> For an unpacking of this term see Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) pp. 13-49. See also 'Conjuring Mesopotamia' in Lynn Meskell (ed.), *Archaeology Under Fire: Nationalism, Politics and Heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean and Near East* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 159-74.

proclivity for building gardens and palaces which borders upon the fetishistic; all characteristics which are variously associated with Semiramis. Indeed, is this conflation which might also go some way towards explaining why Semiramis is commonly identified as Babylonian.

Another inconsistency between the two narratives is the fact that in no extant cuneiform text is Sammuamat ever called 'sovereign' or 'queen'. Instead she is referred to through the various appellations: 'palace woman', 'royal wife' and 'mother of the King'.<sup>196</sup> However, it is still quite rare for the King's wife to be singled out for mention in any Assyrian historical records, an ancient society which did not give much prominence to royal women. This fact alone is, for some scholars, enough indication of Sammuamat's influence and power.<sup>197</sup> This may be a plausible line of argument. However, it is a speculation which must nevertheless be qualified with the fact that the reign of Sammuamat's husband and son coincides with a particularly ignominious moment in Assyrian history – a period of weakness and decline within the neo-Assyrian historical epoch beginning with Shamshi-Adad V and coming to an end only with the ascendancy of the great Tiglath-Pileser III over eighty years later in 745 BC. All in all, while Sammuamat, in her role as consort to two successive Kings, may have exerted a certain amount of political influence she would seem to have little in common with the autocratic, sexually abusive and power hungry Queen of subsequent myth whose enduring legacy in the western historical tradition is – as Georges Roux has put it – that of a '*diablesse*'.<sup>198</sup>

Despite the unmistakable presence of various prejudices underwriting his text, Diodorus offers a generally favourable account of Semiramis. By the time of the Roman Empire, however, this figure had come to carry much more negative associations where, together with Omphale and Cleopatra, she was regarded as constituting an Oriental 'gynaecocracy'. a form of government indicative of the most barbaric, degenerate and uncivilized races.<sup>199</sup> As time went on Semiramis became explicitly associated with sexual vice and the abuse of power. Vilified by St Augustine and condemned to hell by Dante, the Middle Ages marks an epoch when, as Irene Samuel has asserted, she becomes 'a prime *exemplum* of vicious pagan womanhood... a classic symbol of war, and a harlot'.<sup>200</sup> Functioning as a powerful anti-model to contemporary ideals of Christian femininity, visual confirmation of Semiramis' disrepute at this moment is to be found in numerous

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<sup>196</sup> See Asher-Greve, 'Semiramis', p. 361.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 362.

<sup>198</sup> Georges Roux, 'Sémiramis', la reine mystérieuse d'Orient', in Jean Bottéro (ed), *Initiation à l'Orient ancien: De Sumer à la Bible* (Paris: Sueil, 1992), p. 202.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326.

<sup>200</sup> Irene Samuel, 'Semiramis in the Middle Ages: The History of a Legend', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 2 (1943), pp. 41.

illuminated medieval manuscripts where she is frequently elided with the infamous 'whore of Babylon' from the Book of Revelation (17: 4-18).

Semiramis continued to be an ambiguous object of fascination throughout the Renaissance. This is exemplified by her representation in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Famous Women* (*De mulieribus claris*), (1374). Written as a counterpart to Petrarch's *Illustrious Men* (*De Viris Illustribus*) the text consists of 106 biographies of illustrious women throughout the ages (Semiramis comes in here at number 2, after Eve). Like Diodorus before him, Boccaccio commends Semiramis for her military prowess and public achievements. However, he then goes on to note her propensity for cunning and deceit, describing how she disguised herself as her son Ninyas to take command of her husband's army after his death and rule in his name. Boccaccio makes no effort to disguise his fascination with the Babylonian queen's sexuality. Described as 'constantly burning with a carnal desire' which no lover could satiate, he then proceeds to claim that it was for her rampant lust that chastity belts were invented!<sup>201</sup> Devoting several lengthy passages to her sexual practices Boccaccio reiterates Diodorus in stating that she ordered any man she slept with be immediately killed. However, he also adds to this the claim that she committed incest with her son Ninyas and, by so doing, echoes a charge against Semiramis which had accrued itself to her reputation during the Middle Ages. Although it is difficult to locate precisely where this indictment originated, the medieval characterization of Semiramis a sexual transgressor who abused her position of power might perhaps be seen to find its ultimate expression in the act of incest attributed to her at this moment. Illustrations accompanying the various editions of *De mulieribus claris* throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries usually depict Semiramis in bed with her son (figure 74).

Another important text to mention in the iconographical history of Semiramis is Christine de Pizan's *Livre de la Cité des dames* (1405). Written as a response to the misogynistic social structures prevalent in medieval society, the proto-feminist de Pizan envisages an ideal city in which women are appreciated and defended, rather than oppressed and derided. In her account of Semiramis, de Pizan condemns Boccaccio's preoccupation with her sexual life, stating that the Babylonian sovereign's historical legacy should be judged (just as men are) only by her military and political achievements.<sup>202</sup>

These medieval anthologies can be compared to the roughly contemporaneous Gallic representational tradition of *les neuf preux*.<sup>203</sup> Divided into three historical epochs (pagan, Old Testament and Christian) *les neuf preux* consisted of a nonet of illustrious male

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<sup>201</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, chapter 2. verse 13, edited and translated by Virginia Brown (Cambridge Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 23-4.

<sup>202</sup> For a critical evaluation of these medieval biographies see Stephen Kolsky, *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's 'De mulieribus claris'* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

<sup>203</sup> See *Les neuf preux*, ex. cat., (Auvergne: Cantal Aurillac, 1980) and Horst Schröder, *Topos der Nine Worthies in Literatur und bildender Kunst*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1971).

figures (including Alexander the Great, King David and Charlemagne) who were seen to personify contemporary chivalric ideals. Collections of *les neuf preuses* soon followed, in which Semiramis was often included.<sup>204</sup> But within the iconography of *neuf preuses* there is never any reference made to Semiramis' sexual infamy. Taking her place alongside the other exemplary historical women she functions here solely as a model of female sovereignty. *Les neuf preuses* was a popular cultural trope throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, appearing in mediums as diverse as illuminated manuscripts, playing cards, tapestries, paintings and fresco cycles. Exemplary of this representational tradition is an illumination from the chivalric novel *Le Chevalier Errant* (1402) (figure 75). Semiramis (depicted here fifth from the left), her shield adorned with three golden chairs symbolizing Babylonia, Chaldea and Assyria) takes her place in this line-up of female pageantry alongside her illustrious female companions including the Amazon Hippolyte (to her left), and the warrior queen Lampeto (to her right).

Semiramis remained a model of queenship up until the Enlightenment. However, it is around the mid-eighteenth century that her reputation starts to undergo a radical transformation. A text instrumental in bringing about this shift is the aforementioned 1748 play by Voltaire which exploited the sexual promiscuous, violent and despotic aspects of the Babylonian sovereign's reputation. By the nineteenth century Semiramis has assumed her place amongst the pantheon of swarthy exotic seductresses such as Salome, Delilah, Judith and Cleopatra.

Although most critical literature on the Oriental *femme fatale* has focused upon the prominence of this trope within *fin de siècle* culture, it is a topos which can be backdated to a slightly earlier moment.<sup>205</sup> Théophile Gautier, for instance, had a brief dalliance in the genre of Oriental fiction with novels such as *Une Nuit de Cléopâtre* (1845) and *Roman de la Momie* (1858). While it does not take too much imagination to guess the content of the former, the latter describes the adventures of two European explorers who discover a perfectly preserved nubile young woman within an Egyptian sarcophagus. Another key text of this genre is Gustave Flaubert's lurid historical novel *Salammbô* (1862). Containing graphic descriptions of sex and violence, a greater part of the text is devoted to accounts of the religious rites enacted by the depraved priestess of the novel's title, including several passages describing her having sex with a serpent. For an indication of how the trope of the *femme fatale* manifested itself in painting at this moment, one need look no further than the work of Degas' colleague Gustave Moreau. While figures of exotic femininity constitute

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<sup>204</sup> See entry 'Nine Worthy Women', in *Women in the Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia*, Katharina Wilson and Nadia Margolis (eds.), 2 vols., (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), pp. 721-6.

<sup>205</sup> Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). See also Zainab Bahrani, *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia* (Routledge; London and New York, 2001).

something of an obsessive theme within this artist's oeuvre, Salome is the one who features here the most.

The ways in which Moreau's Salome's tapped into the cultural fantasies and anxieties attached Oriental femininity in the mid-nineteenth-century are nowhere better articulated than in the vivid commentary on the picture provided by the narrator of Joris-Karl Huysmans's 1884 novel *A Rebours*. The highly eroticized terms through with novel's narrator Des Esseintes describes the figure of Salome are worth quoting at length:

*La face recueillie, solennelle, presque auguste, elle commence la lubrique danse qui doit réveiller les sens assoupis du vieil Hérode; ses siens ondulent et, au frottement de ses colliers qui tourbillonnent, leurs bouts se dressent; sur la moniteur de sa peau les diamants, attachés, scintillent; ses bracelets, ses ceintures, ses bagues, crachent des étincelles; sur sa robe triomphale, couturée de perles, ramagée d'argent, lamée d'or, la cuirasse des orfèvreries, dont chaque maille est une pierre, entre un combustion, croise des serpenteaux de feu, grouille sur la chair mate, sur la peau rose thé, ainsi que des insectes splendides aux élytres éblouissants, marbrés de carmin, ponctués de jaune aurore, diaprés de bleu d'acier, tigres de vert paon.<sup>206</sup>*

After chastising the Gospel writers for not providing sufficient warning of the dangers of Salome's dizzying charm and potent depravity (*ni saint Mathieu, ni saint Marc, ni saint Luc, ni les autres évangélistes ne s'étendaient sur les charmes délirants, sur les actives depravations de la danseuse<sup>207</sup>*) Des Esseintes proceeds to offer his own interpretation of this biblical temptress:

*Elle n'était plus seulement le baladine qui arrache à un vieillard par un torsion corrupue de ses reins.... elle devenait, en quelque sorte, la déité symbolique de l'indestructible Luxure, la déesse de l'immortelle Hystérie, la Beauté maudité, élue entre toutes par la catalepsie qui lui radit les chairs et lui durcit les muscles; la Bête monstrueuse, indifférente, irresponsable, insensible, empoisonnant, de même que l'Hélène antique, tout ce qui l'approche, tout ce qui la voit, tout ce qu'elle touche.<sup>208</sup>*

While the above cited texts and images have been variously proposed as sources for *Sémiramis*, I would argue that it was precisely these prevailing stereotypes of Oriental femininity from which Degas explicitly turned away in his representation of the fabled Babylonian queen.<sup>209</sup> The extent to which the artist refuted the image of the exotic *femme fatale* is starkly illustrated by a comparison between his own Semiramis, seen here in a

<sup>206</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *A Rebours* (Paris: 1981), p. 124.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>209</sup> Flaubert's *Salammbô* was proposed as a possible source for Semiramis in the catalogue entry for the 1988 Degas retrospective. See Boggs et. al., *Degas*, pp. 89-92. See also Theodore Reff, 'Degas and the literature of his time', *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 112, no. 810 (September 1970), pp. 575-589.



preliminary figure study, and Moreau's Salome (see details figure 76 and 77). The most striking disparity between the two images is the way in which 'exotic' difference is figured. Of this Salome bears clear signs: the bracelets and headdress, kohl rimmed eyes and diaphanous costume are the clichéd indicators of the Oriental woman's sexual allure and mystery which had held Des Esseintes so transfixed. Aside from these cosmetic effects, Salome's body also bears certain signs of racial difference. This we see in her slightly hooked nose and upturned, almond shaped eyes (albeit that the potential disturbance caused by these 'non-caucasian' ethnic features are offset by marmoreal skin (*la peau rose thé*) and gently undulating limbs which are entirely in accordance with prevailing western conventions of feminine beauty). Degas on the other hand has completely obliterated any sign of Semiramis' Oriental origins; her aquiline profile, classical robes and air of hieratic tranquility are a world away from the exotic beauty of the swarthy queen described by Diodorus.

In the light of this comparison it would seem that Degas' regal figure has more in common with her queenly medieval prototypes than the exotic jezebel's with which the nineteenth-century Orientalist imagination was so in thrall. By making this connection I do not wish to suggest that Degas' Semiramis is directly based upon any single precedent from the iconography of *les neuf preuves*. It is, admittedly, a rather obscure topos, of which we cannot be sure that the artist was even aware. However, it is a representational tradition which provides a motif of female sovereignty that I want to bear in mind as I now turn to consider another Eastern queen of historical legend and the ways in which she has figured within the western historical imagination: the Queen of Sheba. While Semiramis and the Queen of Sheba – aside from their Oriental origins – may have little in common, the connection between the two is not as outlandish as it may at first seem. As we see in the iconography of *les neuf preuves* the two figures were freely interchangeable.<sup>210</sup> While the male canon of *les neuf preux* was a fixed group, *les neuf preuves* consisted of a much more fluid and variable category with several historical women freely substituted for one another. The seamless way in which Semiramis and Sheba stand in for one within this representational tradition betrays their function here as token figures of exotic difference.

*On le dirait sorti de quelque main Florentin, celle de Botticelli peut-être, ou de Piero della Francesca.*

Daniel Halévy, *Degas parle*<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> See 'Nine Worthies', p. 722.

<sup>211</sup> p. 15.

With regard to the connection between the Queen of Sheba and Semiramis, there is an aspect of *Sémiramis* itself which would warrant an interrogation of this link in more detail. As Geneviève Monnier has pointed out (pursuing an observation first made by Daniel Halévy cited above) this is a canvas which bears a formal resemblance to a fresco by Piero della Francesca: *The Queen of Sheba Adoring the Wood of the Cross* (figure 78).<sup>212</sup> Forming part of the Italian master's devotional cycle *The Legend of the True Cross* (c. 1452-66) in the church of San Francesco, Arezzo, this was a work which Degas had certainly seen during a visit to the city on his way to Florence from Rome.<sup>213</sup> Although there are no direct copies of this work in the artist's *carnets*, there are a number of striking similarities between the two works which bear out this association. The compositional format of *Sémiramis* – although reversed – is very similar to that of Piero's fresco. In each we see the figures divided into two principal groupings; the first consists of the sovereign and her closest aides, and the second (set slightly further back), comprises a distinguished-looking horse with a pair of attendant equerries. (Monnier also points out an intermediary figure in each picture by which the two groups are linked: with Piero this takes the form of the dwarf; with Degas the crouching female figure, herself a formal displacement of the kneeling queen of Saba). Another connection between the two images is that, in each, both principal protagonists are positioned at the edge of a precipice. For Piero's sovereign this takes the form of the river Siloe bridged by the wood of the Cross; for Semiramis a vista of the river Euphrates and the ramparts of Babylon. (Moreover, the closest attendant just behind her leaning over Semiramis' shoulder is a direct echo of the attendance displayed to the Queen of Sheba by *her* foremost lady-in-waiting.) Although Monnier's article draws our attention to the formal resemblance between Degas' *Sémiramis* and Piero's *Queen of Sheba*, she does not pursue the implications of this connection any further. Indeed, although a number of scholars have since affirmed this resemblance, no one has yet speculated on the significance of Degas' appropriation of this fifteenth century religious motif.

Degas' love of the early Italian masters is legendary and was a preference inherited directly from his father. But the admiration of the Degas patriarch and his son for those '*adorables fresquistes*' was not shared by all.<sup>214</sup> As chapter 3 will discuss in more detail, the *quattrocento* hardly figured within mid-nineteenth-century academic pedagogy, for whom Raphael was seen to mark the watershed in the classical tradition. Despite the rather low regard in which the so-called *les primitifs* were held at this moment, it appears that Degas was utterly captivated by their work. During his time in Italy the artist made faithful copies of works by Fra Angelico, Bellini, Carpaccio, Ghirlandio, Mantegna, Signorelli, Giotto,

<sup>212</sup> Monnier, 'La Gènes d'une oeuvre'.

<sup>213</sup> Degas noted plans for this trip in a notebook. See Nb 11, pp. 91-2.

<sup>214</sup> Letter from Auguste Degas to Edgar, 25 November 1858, private collection cited in part in André Lemoisne, *Degas et son oeuvre* (Paris, 1946-1949), vol. 1, p. 31

Masolino and Simone Martini. That the pared down formal language of the early Renaissance offered Degas some welcome respite from the Salon excesses of the mid-nineteenth century is summed up succinctly in the following conversation between the artist and G r me retold by Daniel Hal vy:

*Il me revient   la memoire cette phrase de Degas,   G r me, qui lui disait: 'l'art est chose tr s simple, il n'y a pas de parti-pris dans l'art, et les primitifs italiens, qui expriment la douceur des l vres en les imitant par des traits durs, et qui font vivre les yeux, en coupant les paup ri res comme avec ds ciseaux, et les longues mains, les minces poignets de Boticelli? Pas de parti-pris dans l'art'*<sup>215</sup>

As I will discuss in chapter 3, it was what Degas perceived to be the latent violence embedded in their formal language (*en coupant les paup ri res comme avec des ciseaux*) that he harnessed in order to facilitate the debasement of the nude in *Sc ne de Guerre*. But this project must be seen as the outcome of a series of much earlier attempts to come to terms with the corporeal severity of *les primitifs*. This idea is demonstrated perfectly by a copy of the figures of St Catherine and St Agnes (figure 79) from the lower right portion of Fra Angelico's altarpiece *The Coronation of the Virgin* (1430-1432) (figure 80). Although a rather unsophisticated rudimentary drawing (executed somewhere between 1856 and 1858, it is one of the earliest extant copies by Degas), the artist has successfully managed to capture the equanimity and composure of these pious female martyrs. With their high foreheads, intransigent visages and sobriety of bearing, Fra Angelico's Saints Catherine and Agnes are the direct forebears of Semiramis and her ladies-in-waiting. The altarpiece of which they form a part is based on a passage from Jacobus de Voragine's hagiography *The Golden Legend* (c. 1260) which describes the welcoming of the Virgin into heaven by Christ. Taking their place amongst the illustrious retinue of Saints in attendance at this celestial occasion, the venerated are clearly identified by their accoutrements: St Catherine holds a wheel, while St Agnes clasps a lamb to her breast. *The Golden Legend* was widely disseminated across Europe throughout the Middle Ages and early Renaissance and continued to be mined as a source of religious iconography throughout the nineteenth century. This is a text which Degas himself consulted. In a  *carnet*  datable to around 1856 he transcribed a long passage from the life of St Christopher from the original Latin text and also executed a series of sketches illustrating the Saint carrying the infant Christ on his shoulders.<sup>216</sup>

The *Golden Legend* is also the source from which Piero della Francesca derived the theme for his fresco cycle the *Legend of the True Cross* and before I go on to unravel what is at stake in Degas' referencing of Piero's depiction of the meeting of Solomon and Sheba, it is essential that this episode be understood within the larger narrative context of which it

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<sup>215</sup> Hal vy, *Degas parle*, p. 56.

<sup>216</sup> Nb. 6, pp. 21-26.

forms a part.<sup>217</sup> The cycle is based on the Roman Catholic tradition of the True Cross which identifies the pre-Christian origins of the wood forming the cross upon which Christ was crucified. These are traced back to the very beginnings of humanity. In the first episode of the narrative (figure 81) we see Adam as a frail and elderly man attended to by Eve and his son Seth. Seeing Adam close to death Seth goes to ask the angel guarding the gate of the Earthly paradise for the oil of salvation which would save his father's life. The angel refuses as man's salvation will only take place thousands of years later when the Son of God is sent to earth. Instead he gives Seth an offshoot of the tree of knowledge which is then placed in Adam's mouth on his deathbed. It was this branch which would subsequently bear the holy wood of the Cross.

The second part of the fresco cycle refers to the meeting of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. This episode is divided into two parts. On the left hand side of the fresco (which Degas seems to have referenced in the compositional format of *Sémiramis*) we see the Queen kneeling to worship at the beam of hewn wood before her which – by divine intervention – she has apprehended to be Christ's Cross and the vehicle of salvation. On the right hand side we see the queen bowing in deference again; this time before the wise King Solomon. Subsequent episodes of the narrative refer to the Burial of the Wood under the instructions of King Solomon; Constantine's victory over the pagan Maxentius (representing the triumph of Christianity over paganism); the Torture of the Jew (figure 82) (Piero depicts the process of him being lowered into a well with the aim of extracting information regarding the location of the sacred wood); the finding and recognition of the True Cross and the subsequent climatic battle scene (figure 83) where we witness the Christian Emperor Heraclius and his army crush the Sassanian King of Persia. This episode, staged as a bloody confrontation between East and West, Paganism and Christianity, features the *True Cross*' most violent imagery. Sharp, shiny swords are plunged deep into jugulars causing blood to spurt in all directions, while prostrate bodies and decapitated heads litter the ground beneath. The cycle ends with the Exaltation of the Cross which was carried back to Jerusalem by the victorious Heraclius and installed in its rightful place.

The violence sustained by non-Christians (Jews, pagans and Muslims alike) in the name of the True Cross and the inexorable triumph of the Christian faith within the context of this saga is breathtaking, and has been little commented upon within the existing literature upon this work. But whilst in the *Torture of the Jew* and the *Battle of Heraclius and Chosroes* this is illustrated through extremely graphic means, my concern here is with the more insidious form of violence to which the figure of the Queen of Sheba has here been subjected.

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<sup>217</sup> For a synopsis of this fresco cycle see Anna Maria Maetzke and Carlo Bertelli (eds), *Piero della Francesca: The Legend of the True Cross in the Church of San Francesco in Arezzo* (Milan: Skira, 2001).

*Look not upon me because I am swarthy,  
Because the sun hath scorched me.*

*Song of Songs, 1:6*

Within the Judaeo-Christian historical tradition, the Queen of Sheba is a figure with whom we are first acquainted through the Old Testament Book of Kings.<sup>218</sup> Here we learn of her voyage to Jerusalem from the faraway land of Sheba (a dominion corresponding to present-day Yemen or Ethiopia) in order to benefit from the wisdom of King Solomon of whom she had heard great things. Bearing exotic gifts of gold, rare stones, precious wood and camels laden with spices, she was overwhelmed by the prosperity and happiness of the kingdom over which Solomon presided. While there is no mention here of Solomon and Sheba's encounter as being anything other than diplomatic the pair were subsequently to be identified as the enamoured lovers of the Song of Songs. (Also known as the *Song of Solomon* this book was, at one time, commonly thought to have been written by the Hebrew King himself). Although this is now discredited by Biblical scholars, there are a number of similarities between the female protagonist of the *Song of Songs* and the description of the Queen of Sheba in the *Book of Kings* which would account for such a connection. The book opens with the female narrator announcing herself to the daughters of Jerusalem as 'black but beautiful' (1:5). Later on we find the innamorato promising to the return to the 'mount of myrrh and hill of frankincense' (4:6) that is his lover's homeland. The verse also makes reference to 'nard and saffron, spice cane and cinnamon... trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes... the finest of spices' (3:14) – an inventory of precious goods closely corresponding to those gifts which the Book of Kings reports Sheba brought to Solomon. The identification of Solomon and Sheba as the lovers of the *Song of Songs* was a connection supported by the medieval church and in illuminated manuscripts of this period Sheba is frequently depicted as dark-skinned (figure 84).

But as Voragine's *Golden Legend* gained popularity during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the legendary Queen of the South came to figure predominantly within the iconography of the True Cross where she is, without exception, depicted as light-skinned. This representational shift is epitomized in Piero's depiction of Sheba. Whilst the anemic queen of his fresco cycle shares little with the charismatic sovereign described to us by the Book of Kings, this deferential figure is even further removed from the object of desire to whom the highly charged erotic verse of the Song of Songs is addressed.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> For an account of the legend of Sheba in the eastern and western historical traditions see James Pritchard (ed.) *Solomon and Sheba* (London: Phaidon, 1974).

<sup>219</sup> The meeting of Solomon and Sheba appears in the *Book of Kings* 10 and is repeated with minor changes in *Chronicles* 9. For a commentary upon the legend of the Queen of Sheba see Nicholas Clapp, *Sheba: Through the Desert in Search of the Legendary Queen* (Boston: Houghton, 2001).

Shunning any indication of her Eastern origins, Piero has recast Sheba as an aristocratic lady in contemporary dress. Her shaved forehead and lock of hair pulled tightly over the temples correspond to the patrician fashions of late fifteenth-century Tuscany. Sheba has been conscripted to perform a very specific role within the context of the True Cross narrative. Transformed into a proclaimer of Christianity, this pliantly kneeling figure of humility (see detail, figure 85) – hands joined and head bowed – obediently submits to her destiny.

It is clear to see the formal figurative borrowings between Piero's fresco and *Sémiramis*: the similarities between the haughty visages of Sheba's retinue and the intransigent profiles displayed by Semiramis' cortège are unmistakable. But the connection between these two historical figures of exotic feminine difference goes much deeper than superficial resemblance, as Degas' Semiramis is seen to undergo the very same process of domestication to which Piero's Christianized queen of Saba has been subjected – a process of pictorial refraction through which her potentially disruptive otherness is effectively tamed.

As we see from the early notes and sketches relating to *Sémiramis*, Degas had been unable to get to grips with the non western subjects and representational systems which he had consulted in the initial stages of research for this picture, and it was only by recourse to early Renaissance depictions of 'exotic' non-western figures that the artist was able to visually articulate this project. By refracting 'Semiramis' across fifteenth-century precedents Degas drew upon a 'primitive' pictorial system – but one which was less radically other than the recently excavated material culture of the ancient Near East, which he was simply unable to accommodate. Within the context of the problematic historical reception of 'Assyria' in mid-nineteenth century France, *Sémiramis* can be read as a dubious solution of sorts to the disruptive and troubling emergence of this 'Other' history and the perceived threat it posed to established historical and art historical narratives. Through a series of insidious processes of repression and occlusion this newly excavated history is effectively obliterated.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **ILLEGIBLE BODIES: *PETITE FILLES SPARTIATES PROVOQUANT DES GARÇONS***

*L'époque la plus extraordinaire dans ma vie.*

Degas<sup>220</sup>

An unfinished picture by Degas stages a strange figurative encounter (figure 86). Executed shortly after the artist returned from Italy, this is one his first attempts at a full-scale canvas.<sup>221</sup> But in what is an extremely obscure depiction of this renowned biblical scene, a strange inversion of scale has taken place. Dominating the foreground it is the young David who demands our attention, whilst the blurred and indistinct figure of Goliath in recoil visibly withers before our eyes. The figure of David has numerous well-known artistic precedents, of which one of the best known prototypes is Donatello's fifteenth-century bronze statue. This was a work with which Degas himself was familiar, as we see from his faithful copy made a few months earlier in Florence (figure 87). But while the prettified child hero is represented here at the moment of victory, Degas' David, actively engaged in attack, is altogether less romanticized. Arm raised ready to strike his opponent, the figure is infused with an energy and dynamism, its sketchy rendering imparting a palpable impression of a body in motion. David's uninhibited nakedness, tousled hair and youthful vigour are perhaps closer in spirit to the young shepherd boy of the Book of Samuel, who single-handedly took on the giant leader of the Philistines armed only with a sling and stones. But this compelling image of nascent masculinity is most remarkable for its refutation of the staid conventions governing the representation of the ephebic male nude as they stood in the nineteenth century, and which are seen to unravel upon the site of this adolescent figure.

In its foregrounding of the adolescent body, *David et Goliath* can be seen as an important precursor to another formative, but altogether more ambitious attempt at historical painting by the artist: *Petites Filles Spartiates Provoquant des Garçons* (figure 88). The picture is ostensibly based upon a passage from Plutarch's 'Life of Lycurgus' which describes the egalitarian physical training of the young boys and girls in ancient Sparta.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Jeanne Févre, *Mon Oncle Degas* (Pierre Callier: Geneva, 1949), p. 40.

<sup>221</sup> See Nb 14, pp. 9-10. These notebook sketches are reprinted in Theodore Reff, *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

<sup>222</sup> For this account see Plutarch, 'Life of Lycurgus', XV-XVI. Reprinted in Plutarch *Lives*, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 1, with an English translation by Beradotte Perrin (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 247-259. For additional references to the physical education of the young in Ancient Sparta in the writings of Ovid, Euripides, Plato and Pausanias

Degas began work on the *Spartiates* sometime in 1860. But it was a picture over which he was to fret for several decades and, despite periodical reworking, was a project which he would never manage to bring to any satisfactory sense of resolution or completeness. This is evident in the canvas' uneven and patchily covered surface which bears traces of the extensive revisions and adjustments the picture underwent over the course of the artist's life.

Many of these alterations would seem to have been carried out around 1880, when Degas considered showing the *Spartiates* at the fifth Impressionist exhibition. The work was listed in the exhibition catalogue (figure 89), although the artist then appeared to have had second thoughts and pulled it at the last minute.<sup>223</sup> I would like to emphasize the significance of the fact that the *Spartiates* was withdrawn from public display in 1880, and was a picture which the artist never (either before or after this moment) deemed appropriate to exhibit. While its obscure theme and arrant lack of *fini* would not have gone down well at the Salon (and which the artist must have initially had in mind as the eventual forum for the canvas' exhibition when he first began work on it in 1860), neither would the Impressionist exhibitions have provided anymore suitable a context for its display. Its historical subject matter would have appeared anachronistic, and sorely out of place, alongside the modern life subjects and scenes from contemporary life illustrated in the other works exhibited here.<sup>224</sup> Poised uneasily between outmoded academic rhetorics of history painting and the yet-to-be-fully articulated pictorial languages of modernity, this picture is more of a laboratory or studio work; the locus of incubation for an adolescent subjectivity in formation. Here the picture not only thematizes adolescence in terms of its subject but, in the unfinished state of the picture itself and its materialization of a subjectivity in metamorphoses and transition, can be seen to mirror the state of adolescence itself.

Despite remaining perpetually unresolved, the artist was nevertheless extremely fond of this work and remained attached to it even in his old age. Visiting Degas as a young boy Daniel Halévy recalled the canvas resting on an easel in his studio, and the artist talking affectionately of its subject.<sup>225</sup> The son of Ludovic and Louise Halévy whom Degas had known since boyhood, the artist was a constant presence in Daniel's youth until relations

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see Carol Salus, 'Degas' *Young Spartans Exercising*', *Art Bulletin*, vol. 67, no. 3 (1985), pp. 250-258.

<sup>223</sup> This we know from an examination of the critical literature where several critics remarked on its absence. The reviews for this exhibition are reprinted in Ruth Berson (ed.), *The New Painting: Impressionism, 1874-1886*, vol. 1. (San Francisco: Museum of Fine Arts, 1996), pp. 265-319.

<sup>224</sup> For a critical survey of the fifth Impressionist exhibition see 'Disarray and Disappointment', in Charles S Moffett (ed.), *The New Painting: Impressionism, 1874-1886*, ex. cat. (Oxford: Phaidon, 1986), pp. 293-336.

<sup>225</sup> Daniel Halévy, *My Friend Degas*, trans. Mina Curtiss (London: Wesleyan, 1966), p. 119. This book is a revised and updated version of Halévy's memoirs originally published in French as *Degas parle* (La Palatine: Paris, 1960).



were abruptly severed at the end of 1897 regarding a discussion among some young dinner guests at the Halévy's one evening in connection with the Dreyfus affair to which Degas took offence.<sup>226</sup> Halévy's portrait of the elderly artist sequestered in his dusty attic studio above the bustling streets of Montmârtre has provided us with one of the most enduring images of Degas in his reclusive latter years. But it is also notable for the unflinching account it gives us of an ageing man as seen through the eyes of an adolescent.<sup>227</sup> Presented in the form of a diary, the entries written over the course of the late 1880s and 1890s bear witness to a man becoming progressively withered and infirm as old age inexorably encroached. Degas himself also felt acutely the debilitating effects of the ageing process: '*Je travaille plus depuis mon emménagement... Ça m'est égal, je laisse tout*', he commented ruefully to Halévy, '*c'est étonnant, la vieillesse, comme on deviant indifférent*'.<sup>228</sup>

Despite such a profound awareness of his own mortality it was the company of youth for which the artist had the most time in his dotage. As well as Halévy, amongst those who climbed the steep stairs of 37 rue Victor Masse to the artist's attic studio in his latter years (just as he, as a novice himself, had visited the august Ingres) were Paul Valéry, André Gide, Denis and Ernest Rouart and Julie Manet.<sup>229</sup> Although by all accounts a rather crotchety and temperamental old man, it appears the artist's ill-humour was worth enduring for the brief moments when his artistic passion would surface and he would give his young visitors a tour of his extensive art-collection, rhapsodizing over an Ingres *académie*, a Suzanne Valadon bather or a Corot landscape. On occasion he would even talk excitedly about his own work as he pulled out various samples from the piles of portfolios, easels and canvases stacked up against the walls of his studio.

But Degas' niece Jeanne Fèvre who nursed the artist in his final days recalls it was his own formative works for which he reserved the most enthusiasm as an old man and which, like the *Spartiates*, he had never let go. However, I would argue that the artist-subject's psychic investment in the work of his juvenilia is at its most intense in this picture which, as it was periodically reworked, spanned his own career and thus can be seen to have 'grown old' with him. Indeed, we might speculate here as to how the *Spartiates* came to hold a renewed significance for the artist in his latter years, as his identification shifted from the

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<sup>226</sup> Halévy, *Degas parle*, p. 127. After this the artist broke off all contact with the Halevys and did not seem them again until several years later when he called on the family to pay his respects after the death of Ludovic Halévy. Although this marked a reconciliation of sorts for the two parties it seems that Daniel Halévy was the only member of the family to have subsequently maintained any sort of regular contact with the artist.

<sup>227</sup> For more on Degas, the Halévys and the Dreyfus Affair see Linda Nochlin, 'Degas and the Dreyfus Affair: A Portrait of the Artist as an Anti-Semite' in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth Century Art and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), pp. 141-169.

<sup>228</sup> Halévy, *Degas parle*, p. 145.

<sup>229</sup> For an account of Degas' personal and professional life in his latter years see Richard Kendall, '37 Rue Victor Masse: Degas' Last Decades', in *Degas: Beyond Impressionism*, ex. cat. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 13-30.

energetic youngsters sparring in the foreground to the staid figure of the elderly Lycurgus in the distance, the picture at once a token of the artist's own ageing and – as it simultaneously preserved a memory of his bygone youth – his own *memento mori*.

*'The gymnasia and other places where the young exercised naked in athletics and other games, and which were the resort of those who desired to see beautiful youth, were the schools wherein the artist saw the beauty of the structure; and from the daily opportunity of seeing it nude and in perfection his imagination became heated, the beauty of forms he saw became his own, and was ever present in his mind. At Sparta even the young virgins exercised naked, or nearly so, in the games of the arena.'*

Johann-Joachim Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art* (1764).<sup>230</sup>

Degas' engagement with the adolescent body can be traced back to his earliest drawing practice. Dispersed amongst the pages of his early notebooks are diligent copies of the Apollo Sauroktonus (figure 90), David's *Mort de Bara* (figure 91) and a detailed head of Mercury (figure 92). There are also several unidentified male youths in poses reminiscent of classical prototypes, such as a young Narcissus gazing at his reflection in a pool of water (figure 93). It would appear that the artist was first introduced to this body by way of various basic copying exercises; the schematic rendering of the Apollo, for instance, indicating that it was most likely drawn from an engraved *modèle de dessin*. Datable to around the mid-1850s, when the artist studied briefly at the *Ecole*, we see here how it was in Degas' most elementary artistic training that his assimilation of the conventions for the representation of the epebe was first initiated. But this body, as it was enshrined in nineteenth century academic pedagogy, was one whose stringencies offered the artist little in the way of manoeuvre or innovation. Just how over-determined an academic body the figure of the epebe was at this moment is illustrated in an engraving of the Apollo Belvedere (figure 94) from Charles-Antoine Jombert's treatise *Méthode pour apprendre le dessin* (1753). Mapped and measured down to the tiniest detail it maps a set of proportions which the artist was expected to follow by rote. It was contemporary drawing manuals such as this which were used to instruct the novice artist in the nineteenth century. Jean Cousin's sixteenth-century *L'Art du dessin* was the one which Degas himself studied closely. The pages of his earliest notebook are filled with assiduously transcribed notes on the measurements and proportions of the various classical figures illustrated here.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Johann-Joachim Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art*, trans. G Henry Lodge (London, 1881), p. 312.

<sup>231</sup> See Nb. 1, pp. 13-36.

The adolescent body type was one which was to continue to preoccupy the artist when he graduated to drawing from the live model.<sup>232</sup> Access to this body was jealously guarded by the Academy in the mid-nineteenth century and the *élève* was only allowed to draw from the nude after undergoing a rigorous copying regime. The practice of life drawing was at the core of the Academy's training programme and it was the *académie* which underpinned the figures of the History painting. Illustrating the various ages of life they provided a range of male body types for the characters who enacted its narratives.<sup>233</sup> It would seem that Degas first attended an academic life drawing class in Rome at the Villa Medici sometime during in 1856.<sup>234</sup> Most remarkable of this group are a series of drawings of an adolescent male figure (figures 95 and 96).<sup>235</sup> The expressive specificity of the boy's face and the intimate tracing of his clearly defined musculature indicate that this is a body drawn from first hand observation. But for all this figure's corporeal palpability, it is a body which is nevertheless highly mediated, its graceful poses and svelte contours adhering to the already-existing academic conventions governing the representation of the ephebic body type and with which Degas' figurative drawing practice had by now become enmeshed.

Whilst the ephebe to the ancient Greeks had meant a boy undergoing his military training, for Winckelmann in the eighteenth century this figure had come to stand for the epitome of youthful male beauty. In his *History of Ancient Art (Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums)* Winckelmann identified a series of exemplary prototypes in classical sculpture. However, it was the ephebic body type which he revered the most as it was the smooth contours of these lissome adolescent figures which came the closest to embodying ideal beauty in all its radiant perfection. Several examples of this genre are analyzed in detail, but it is the Apollo Belvedere which Winckelmann singles out as the epitome of his 'Beautiful' style. A mode which in aesthetic theory up until this point had been conventionally identified with the feminine (and the ascetic High or 'sublime' style correspondingly with the masculine), it was the body of the ephebe as an image of desirable male youth through

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<sup>232</sup> For more on the practice of academic copying in the nineteenth century see Albert Boime, 'Drawing Instruction' and 'The Copy' in *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 24-36 and 122-127. For the value of the copy within nineteenth century academic pedagogy see the entry 'Copie' in *Dictionnaire de l'Académie des Beaux-Arts*, vol. 1, (Paris, 1858), pp. 38-40.

<sup>233</sup> For the role of life drawing within the Academy see, Boime, *ibid.*, pp. 24-36, and *Strictly Academic: Life Drawing in the Nineteenth Century*, ex. cat. (New York: Binghamton Art Gallery, 1974). See also Alvin L Clark, Jr., *Drawing on Tradition: The Lost Legacy of Academic Figure Studies*, ex. cat. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994). For a first hand account of life drawing at the *Ecole* see Alexis Lemaistre, *L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts dessinée et racontée par un élève* (Paris, 1889).

<sup>234</sup> See the entry on Degas' life drawings in Boggs et. al, *Degas*, ex. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988), pp. 63-64.

<sup>235</sup> These works have since been identified as preparatory figure studies for a proposed History painting upon the theme of John the Baptist which never made it past these initial stages. See Boggs et. al, *Degas*, pp. 67-8.

which, as Alex Potts has demonstrated, the two could be mediated.<sup>236</sup> This was a move which enabled Winckelmann to account for the sensuality of this figure and, as his description of the Apollo Belvedere makes clear, his reformulation of the Beautiful is articulated through the terms of a highly sexualized aesthetics. But while this body functions here as the site for the intense projection of (homo)erotic desire, the unique *frisson* of this figure is located by Winckelmann 'in the coexistence of 'the charming manliness of maturity with graceful youthfulness' [which] 'plays with soft tenderness on the proud build of his limbs'.<sup>237</sup> Indeed, as Alex Potts has affirmed, this figure's libidinality is largely derived from its potential 'to be the focus of competing fantasies of unyielding domination and exquisite desirability'.<sup>238</sup> The erotic charge of these various interplays are exploited repeatedly in Winckelmann's rapturous descriptions of the youthful male body, although his florid descriptions often lapse into an overly romantic sentimentalism. The 'ripeness' of Belvedere Antionus illustrates the 'beauty of the blooming years',<sup>239</sup> whilst the Apollo Belvedere is likened to an 'eternal springtime in Elysium' and his vitality compared to the 'ruddiness of morning on a beautiful day'.<sup>240</sup> Winckelmann however reserves most of his superlatives for the *Borghese Winged Genius* (figure 97): 'a vision of an angel' whose 'beautiful, youthful, godly physique...awakens a tenderness and love that can transport the soul into a sweet dream of ecstasy'.<sup>241</sup>

Aside from these rather clichéd accounts, Winckelmann's theorization of the transitory nature of the adolescent phase as a moment of temporal suspension between growth and maturity elucidated elsewhere in the text is remarkably intuitive. So too is his celebration of this body's potentiality ('*a body in which everything is and is yet to come, appears and does not yet appear*'<sup>242</sup>) together with his repeated insistence upon its liminality or 'in-betweenness'. This latter point is an idea which is made particularly explicit in Winckelmann's curious account of this immature body's surface contour:

*'the forms of a beautiful youth resemble the unity of the surface of the sea, which at some distance appears smooth and still like a mirror, although constantly in movement with its heaving swell...the beautiful youthful outline appears simple but has infinitely different variations...[it is] determined by lines the centre of which is constantly changing, and which if continued, would never describe circles. They are consequently more simple and more complex than a circle, which, however*

<sup>236</sup> See Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), esp. Chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>237</sup> Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art*, quoted in Potts, *ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>238</sup> Alex Potts, *ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>239</sup> Winckelmann, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>240</sup> Winckelmann, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>241</sup> Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art*, p. 325.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313.

*large or small it may be, always has the same centre, and either includes others, or is included in others.*<sup>243</sup>

The privileging of the clearly articulated contour within neoclassical aesthetics might productively be understood as a fetishistic shoring up of the body in order to preserve a coherent, if nonetheless illusory, image of 'wholeness'.<sup>244</sup> But Winckelmann's description of the mutability, fluidity – and thus radical *inconsistency* – of the adolescent's bodily contour in the passage cited above puts this notion of a tightly bounded body in grave jeopardy. For Alex Potts this is read as symptomatic of a dialectical tension at play in Winckelmann's writing at large and is seen to betray something of the profound anxieties at stake in this fetishistically invested contour.<sup>245</sup> I would not disagree with this argument, but perhaps we might also see how the variegated and malleable identity imagined by Winckelmann here – albeit in semi-abstract terms – can be read retrospectively as an *avant la lettre* definition of adolescence, as it lays out the characteristics with which this subjectivity would only much later come to be explicitly associated.

Winckelmann's aesthetic theories were extremely influential across western Europe during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries and it was his adulation of the adolescent male body which played a major role in initiating the revival of the ephebe in Neoclassical art at this moment. This contemporary 'cult of the ephebe' inspired by Winckelmann, however, is seen to be at its most intense in the work of the pupils of David (Anne-Louis Girodet's *Sommeil d'Endymion* (1791) and François-Xavier Fabre's *Mort d'Abel* (1791) (figures 98 and 99) are just two highly charged examples of this genre which come to mind).<sup>246</sup> The homoeroticism of these feminized male bodies has been discussed at length.<sup>247</sup> But in terms of their representation of youth, what these works have in common is a dramatization of the preciousness and ephemerality of this phase of life. Although the transitory nature of this moment was implicit in Winckelmann's writing, it is here pursued to its furthest extremes: these ephebic bodies are often depicted mortally wounded, under the spell of deep sleep or in some other way removed from the mundane temporal praxis of lived experience where their youthful beauty might be immortalized for eternity in a state of arrested development.

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<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 312-313.

<sup>244</sup> The classic text upon the work of the fetish in visual culture remains Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' *Screen*, vol 16, no. 3 (Autumn, 1975), pp. 6-18. For an illuminating discussion of bodily borders and notions of interiority and exteriority in late eighteenth and early nineteenth French discourse see Mechthild Fend, 'Bodily and Pictorial Surfaces: Skin in French Art and Medicine', *Art History*, vol. 28, no. 3 (June, 2005), pp. 311-339.

<sup>245</sup> Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal*, p. 170.

<sup>246</sup> The Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary male body in French Art will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 4.

<sup>247</sup> See for example Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997). For a rejoinder to this book's feminist politics see Satish Padiyar, 'Crisis? What Crisis?', *Art History*, 21:2 (1998) pp. 142-147.

As an artist who embarked upon his academic artistic apprenticeship in the 1850s, the neoclassical ephebe was a body with which Degas was no doubt extremely familiar. Besides the venerated Ingres, the pupils of David were his immediate artistic predecessors, many of who were Prix de Rome winners and would later become prominent academicians.<sup>248</sup> However, the neoclassical ephebe had come to be seen as something of an outmoded figure by the mid-nineteenth century, a point which Abigail Solomon-Godeau has convincingly demonstrated in her discussion of Hippolyte Flandrin's *Thésée Reconnu par son Père* (figure 100), as a prime example of the dry academicism into which this body had ossified at this moment.<sup>249</sup> When this painting was announced as the winner of the Prix de Rome in 1832 it failed to generate much enthusiasm (aside from the mocking ridicule directed at the crude placing of a large meat joint in front of Theseus' genitals!). Although the picture was recognized to be an academically competent historical tableau, its detractors criticized the dryness of its conception and the rigidity of the figures. This unanimously negative critical response has led Solomon-Godeau to suggest that: 'what was subliminally perceived as absent in the work was precisely the sensual and erotic investment in the male body which had animated history painting previously.'<sup>250</sup> This claim is certainly borne out by Flandrin's stiffly posed young protagonist – a figure who embodies nothing of the highly charged eroticism of his swooning predecessors. But while the popular consensus at this moment was that Davidian neoclassicism had had its day, it nevertheless still continued to survive in the work of second rate academic practitioners such as Degas' first teacher Louis Lamothe, (himself a former pupil of Flandrin). We have no record of what Degas personally thought of the work of Girodet et al. (although of all the French artists of the early nineteenth century it would seem Ingres was the only one he held in any esteem). But despite the ephebe's loss of credibility by mid-century it still functioned as the dominant motif through which adolescence could be represented at this moment and thus was a figure with which (as we shall soon see) Degas had inevitably to negotiate.

In relation to the egalitarian subject of this picture's narrative, however, this figure – an exclusively male body type – initially presented itself as a significant problem for the artist at a moment when there were no corresponding conventions for the representation of an equivalent female body in art. The immediate practical difficulties this presented for the artist are evidenced in a life drawing made sometime during the artist's stay in Italy (figure 101).<sup>251</sup> Although datable to around the same time as the male figure studies just discussed,

<sup>248</sup> See Philippe Grunchev, *Les concours des Prix de Rome* (Paris: Ecole nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, 1986).

<sup>249</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble*, pp. 223-4.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>251</sup> This was partly a result of restrictions upon access to the life-model (only men were allowed to pose nude) as the Academy held fast upon its monopoly of this body until 1863. See Albert

the manner of execution here is far more rudimentary and altogether less fluid – a clear indication of the absence of prescribed dictates to which the artist might adhere in the representation of this particular body type. Nevertheless, the gaucheness of technique somehow matches the ungainly posture and awkward gait of this pubescent figure's cumbersome body with its pancake chest, corpulent thighs and distended stomach, whilst also registering something of the painful corporeality of the adolescent phase. Self-consciously shielding her breasts in a gesture acknowledging a newly awakening consciousness of sexuality, this drawing is seen here to anticipate precisely the themes which the *Spartiates* was to later foreground.

### Figuring difference

In the picture's thematization of sexual difference it was perhaps inevitable that Degas would initially conceive of this difference by drawing upon already established pictorial devices. Indeed, the most frequently cited point of reference for this picture's compositional format is Jacques-Louis David's *Sermet de Horatii* (1784) (figure 102).<sup>252</sup> Divided along the axis of a gendered binary opposition, Norman Bryson has understood this picture to exemplify the bifurcation of gender difference; a visual ossification of this binary's two opposing terms as they are rendered non-negotiable within the world demarcated by the bounds of the picture surface.<sup>253</sup> But as gendered identities are here posited as fixed, stable and secure, and fully shored up within the reductive terms of this binary, the *Spartiates* references this pictorial format only in order to subvert it. And whilst this is a binary which – as we shall see – is undermined by the picture in a number of significant ways, I would argue that it was the 'liminality' of the ephebe which functioned as a way through which Degas was initially able to negotiate its remit.

If the ephebe is to be understood as a figure marginal to conventional definitions of masculinity, a compelling visual instance highlighting this idea is provided by Ingres' *Les Ambassadeurs d'Agamemnon* (1801) (figure 103).<sup>254</sup> (Degas admired this work and in later life was to acquire an preparatory oil sketch of it). Like the *Oath* this is a picture which also adheres to a bipartite organizing principle – but with the crucial difference here being that all of the protagonists (apart from the shadowy figure of the captive Briseis on the left) are

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Boime, 'The Teaching Reforms of 1863 and the Origins of Modernism in France', *Art Quarterly*, vol. 1, no 1 (1977), pp. 1-39.

<sup>252</sup> See, for example, Carol Armstrong's discussion of the *Spartiates* in *Degas: Odd Man Out: Readings of the Work and Reputation of Edgar Degas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 114-117.

<sup>253</sup> Norman Bryson, *Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1984), pp. 70-71.

<sup>254</sup> For previous commentaries on this picture see Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble*, p. 61-63 and Carol Ockman 'Profiling Homoeroticism: Ingres' *Ambassadors of Agamemnon*' in *Ingres' Eroticized Bodies: Retracing the Serpentine Line* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 11-31.

males. It is thus a picture which renders 'masculinity' a far more nuanced and complex category than David's monolithic representation of it was able to do. Although the male body types on the right of the picture are highly varied, their difference from each other is represented primarily through 'age'. The stooped figure of the mourning Phoenix supporting himself with a stick is the oldest of the group; his sinewy musculature and pallid complexion contrast sharply with the upright posture of the warrior Ajax draped in a bright red toga and the massive Odysseus who flank him. But for all their physical variations this group of figures can nevertheless be seen to conform to an assertive or 'heroic' image of masculinity. This is epitomized by Odysseus whose broad muscular frame bears a strong resemblance to that of the Farnese Hercules.

But the 'normative' masculinities illustrated here are thrown into sharp relief when contrasted with the slender figures of Achilles and Patroclus opposite, whose supple contours more closely resemble Winckelmann's ephebic prototypes. As discussed this was a body which offered an erotic potential not available within a 'normative' (i.e. heterosexual) libidinal economy, a potential that is given added weight, as Carol Ockman has demonstrated, by the implications of a homosexual relationship between the two protagonists. The bipartite structure of the *Ambassadeurs* is seen here to function as a way through which the male body, as it was codified in academic theory and practice at this moment, could be erotically differentiated. The picture's insistence upon binary oppositions is ultimately seen by Ockman to 'inscribe male power' and 'reinforce male solidarity'.<sup>255</sup> However, I would argue that this opposition – which pits the heterosexual or 'masculinized' masculinity of Agamemnon's ambassadors against the homosexual or 'effeminate' masculinity of Achilles and Patroclus – is rendered extremely problematic within the picture's complex relational network. Indeed, Ockman proceeds to qualify her previous assertion by stating that the picture is also seen to 'reveal the impossibility of stable gender identities',<sup>256</sup> which she then goes on to demonstrate in her nuanced reading of the complex exchanges and dialogues between the protagonists in the picture. Briseis (reported by Homer to be Achilles' lover) has a key role to perform in disrupting the homoerotic economy of the picture. Ockman also draws attention to the figure of Odysseus who acts as a meditating figure between the two groups, thus complicating the ostensible normative/homosexual binary of the picture's compositional structure.

We see here that while the ephebe was a highly codified academic body, it was a figure which, in its marginality, still retained a certain transgressive potential. This is exemplified in the 'fissuring' of masculinity thematized in Ingres' *Ambassadeurs* where the ephebe functions – not, as a 'queer' alternative to a 'straight' or 'normative' sexuality – but,

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<sup>255</sup> Ockman, *Ingres Eroticized Bodies*, p. 28.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.



in its capacity to reveal masculinity (and gendered identities in general) as ambivalent and precarious constructions, as a disruptive figure of difference. It was by harnessing precisely this aspect of the ephebe that Degas initiated his drastic interventions upon the site of this figure and – most significantly – through which he was able to first imagine the possibilities of a female adolescent body type.

As we see from the extant preparatory figure drawings for the *Spartiates*, this was a body type the artist worked out in conjunction with that of the male from the earliest stages of the picture's conception. But although comparable in number to one another, these studies exhibit a number of notable differences. The *académies* of the male figures bear the hallmarks of a rigorously instilled academically learnt drawing technique. This is clearly illustrated in a pair of studies for the youth with upraised arms who would eventually take his place amongst the group of male figures in the right hand side of the picture (figures 104 and 105). The clearly delineated musculature of this figure's legs and torso demonstrate the Degas' anatomical knowledge of the male body, whilst its highly articulated bodily contour is in keeping with academic precepts of *dessin*. Whilst the svelte contours and lithe limbs of the male figure studies which Degas executed in preparation for the *Spartiates* largely conform to ephebic prototypes, the female figure studies are, by contrast, altogether less convention bound. This we see in a study of the girl with an outstretched arm (figure 106). Although just as carefully rendered, this figure is far less idealized than her male counterparts. While the visages of the male *académies* are featureless, or else bear extremely generalized facial traits, the physiognomy of this female figure is markedly more expressive. The ripeness of cheek, slightly clenched fist and animated expression are more indicative of the model's own specificities than a set of prescribed academic conventions. (This again is in stark contrast to some of the male figure studies (see for example (figure 107) which are so derivative of the nubile bodies of Davidian neoclassicism that they are mere glyphs.)

Most interesting however is a study of the two female figures who would eventually form part of the group on the left hand side of the canvas (figure 108). Their maladroit postures and gawky limbs poignantly embody the corporeal awkwardness commonly associated with puberty, and are here redolent with Degas' life drawings of a female adolescent model discussed earlier. That Degas executed this study in oil paint is also significant. While this medium was usually reserved for the execution of the final canvas (once the composition and the placement of the figures within had been definitively worked out), the *esquisse peinte*, as discussed in the introduction, was just as an established part of academic artistic procedure.<sup>257</sup> Its function was to provide a kind of blueprint for the full-scale *tableau définitif* and this stage of execution was characterized by a far less methodical application of paint; the relatively freer handling of the medium retaining the spontaneity of

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<sup>257</sup> See discussion in Boime, *The Academy and French Painting*, pp. 43-4.

a *croquis*. Although the *esquisse* was commonly used to lay out the entire composition (just as Degas own miniature oil-sketch of the *Spartiates* at the Fogg Museum (figure 109) is seen to do) the sketch of the two female figures is closely affiliated with the academic rationale behind this preparatory stage. Indeed, it was by way of the *esquisse peinte* that the artist was able to abandon the restrictions and constraints of *dessin*, and momentarily unburden himself of the historical weight with which drawing was freighted in academic pedagogy at this time. The loose handling of the medium here marks a radical departure from the tightly articulated contours of the punctilious *académies* discussed earlier, as it perfectly mirrors the fluidity of the body in puberty – an entity which cannot be shored up within conventional boundaries and limits. The innumerable *pentimenti*, marking out the various positions of the female figures on the picture surface indicate the artist's refusal to tie down or limit them to any one fixed location. But in leaving the figures in such a state of formal incompleteness they are at once left open to the possibility of revision. Once again the formal properties of the work correspond to the state of puberty – by definition a phase of radical change and transformation.

In his studies of the female adolescent body type Degas, interestingly, did not resort to the established representational conventions of the female nude. The reedy limbs, unformed breasts and closely cropped hairstyles of these figures could not be further from the full bosoms, shapely haunches and flowing tresses which had come to represent ideal femininity at this moment. Indeed, when looking at the preparatory drawings for the *Spartiates* as a whole what comes to the fore is the inherent *androgyny* of these figures.<sup>258</sup> The same can also be said of the pre-pubescent or pubescent body whose secondary sexual characteristics are not yet fully formed. Thus, I would argue that it was through recourse to a moment before sexual difference is fully crystallized (adolescence) that the artist was able to circumvent over-determined cultural norms of masculinity and femininity. Thus, although the *Spartiates* may bear a more immediately obvious resemblance to David's *Oath*, in the light of this discussion I believe that the picture might be situated in a more productive dialogue with Ingres' *Ambassadeurs*. This allows us to account for the complex libidinal dynamics the picture stages, and the radical dissolution of secure gendered identities at stake here – i.e. precisely those aspects of the picture which previous interpretations have failed to account for.

Quentin Bell was one of the first scholars to provide a commentary upon the *Spartiates* when he asserted that the picture was seen to stage a 'war between the sexes'.<sup>259</sup> Discussed within the context of a lecture about the enigmatic *L'Interieur (Le Viol)* (1869), the

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<sup>258</sup> For the relationship between androgyny and adolescence in relation to the representation of the male body in French neoclassical art see: Mechthild Fend, *Grenzen der Männlichkeit: Der Androgyn in der französischen Kunst und Kunsttheorie 1750-1830*, (Berlin: Reimer, 2003).

<sup>259</sup> Quentin Bell, *Degas: Le Viol* (Newcastle University: Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1965), p. 2.

picture was seen to reflect the artist's preoccupation with themes of alienation and hostility between the sexes and, consequently, to add fuel to the myth of the artist's reported antipathy of women. But over twenty years after Bell's lecture, when Degas' 'misogyny' was subject to sustained feminist critiques, Norma Broude eagerly enlisted the *Spartiates* in support of her cause and the subject of the picture was given a new interpretation.<sup>260</sup> According to Broude the picture does not dramatize, as previously believed, an overt sense of antagonism or enmity between the two groups but must rather be seen to put the sexes on an equal footing – or, as Broude herself puts it: to stage 'a natural confrontation amongst equals.'<sup>261</sup> Having thus established the egalitarian nature of the picture's subject she then goes on to show how this can be taken as evidence of Degas' sympathy with the French feminist movement which gained substantial political ground in the late 1870s and 1880s, claiming that it was these circumstances which promoted the artist's renewed interest in the *Spartiates* and ultimately led him to revise the canvas at this moment.

Another possible explanation regarding the meaning of the picture was put forward by Carol Salus. In her 1985 essay published in *Art Bulletin*, the author disputed previous interpretations of the picture, asserting instead that the picture was about the 'presentation of a Spartan courtship ritual'.<sup>262</sup> Whilst the gesture of the female figure (see detail figure 110), arms outstretched to the group of boys opposite, was for Broude a 'sporting challenge' it is inflected rather differently by Salus who believes this figure is shown to be in the process of selecting a mate. Salus' article is no doubt a well researched and scholarly piece of writing, whose claims are substantiated by an impressive range of material. Degas' own notebooks and sketches together with ancient literature, antique bronzes and neoclassical renditions of the same passage from Plutarch are all drawn upon in support of her argument. However, the article's concern with identifying relevant historical and iconographic sources for the *Spartiates* is representative of a rather reductive mode of scholarship.

It was precisely the art historical methodologies underpinning Salus' empiricism which provoked Linda Nochlin to respond to the article in a letter to the editor which was published in the pages of the same journal a few months later. Not disputing Salus' careful scholarship, or undermining its didactic value for art history, Nochlin's attack was directed against the 'reductivism' of this approach to interpretation 'which assumes that there is one correct meaning of every painting and that this meaning is supplied by an accurate reading of the iconography.'<sup>263</sup> Nochlin then went on to suggest that a more productive mode of

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<sup>260</sup> Chapter 3 will deal with the issue of Degas' 'misogyny' in more detail.

<sup>261</sup> Norma Broude, 'Edgar Degas and French Feminism', *Art Bulletin*, vol. 70, no. 4 (December 1988), pp. 640-649.

<sup>262</sup> Carol Salus, 'Degas' Young Spartans Exercising,' *Art Bulletin*, vol. 67, no. 3 (September 1985), pp. 250-8.

<sup>263</sup> Linda Nochlin, 'Letter to the Editor,' *Art Bulletin*, vol. 68, no. 3 (September 1986), pp. 486.

proceeding would be to pursue the multivalencies, ambiguities and resistances of the encounter played out in the foreground. Her letter thus proposes a new set of terms through which the *Spartiates* might be read – and it is these which I have taken as my point of departure from previous analyses of the picture.

In complete agreement with Nochlin I would argue that interpretation is not an ‘either’ ‘or’ game of conjecture and is a debate that is rendered particularly counter-intuitive in the face of a picture which would seem to insist so much upon its ambiguity, indeterminacy and inconsistency – in short its *illegibility*. Indeed, whilst the historical research and interpretative hypotheses provided by Broude, Salus et al. may inform our understanding of the *Spartiates* to a certain extent, they are not sufficiently nuanced to accommodate the complex series of encounters and inter-subjective dynamics enacted between the two groups in the picture’s foreground.

### **Problematics of provocation**

This painting usually goes by the pithy title *Young Spartans Exercising*. But, as noted earlier, Degas himself gave this work the rather longer epithet: *Petites Filles Spartiates Provoquant des Garçons*. And while this has been translated into English by Norma Broude as ‘Spartan Girls Challenging the Boys’ (in order to ‘get rid of all implications of sexual enticement’, the better to reflect what Degas ‘had in mind’<sup>264</sup>) I would argue that these interpretations of the picture’s original title either refuse by omission, or else dampen, the inherent ambiguities embodied in the original verb chosen to articulate what is being enacted in this scene. In the entry under *provoquer* Larousse cites a pair of apparently oppositional meanings: 1. ‘exciter le désir de (qqn.) par son attitude’ and: 2. ‘inciter (qqn.) à une violence par le défi’.<sup>265</sup> That a provocation may be sexual or violent in nature puts pressure on the generally received notion that these kinds of encounters are mutually exclusive. But as the dictionary draws our attention to the capacity of this term to embody apparently contradictory meanings simultaneously, it also serves to highlight the uneasy, but nevertheless pervasive, cultural co-existence of sex and violence. Thus, whilst previous readings of the *Spartiates* have understood the confrontation

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<sup>264</sup> Broude, ‘Edgar Degas and French Feminism’, p. 640.

<sup>265</sup> It is worth noting that in the definition of *provoquer* given by Larousse, *Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIX siècle* (Paris, 1875) the term does not embody quite the same ambiguous meaning as it does today. Although the sexual lure of the *provocatrice* is acknowledged, the verb *provoquer* refers solely to an incitement to physical combat ‘ce mot exprime essentiellement l’idée d’un défi, du injurieux et violent appel à lutte’, tom. 13, p. 335. The encounter enacted in the *Spartiates* clearly exceeds the contemporaneous definition of its title verb. Rather than supporting Broude’s claim that there are no sexual overtones in the picture, I believe this fact only goes to affirm this picture’s precocious modernity. It was only with Freud that the interrelation of sex and violence was explicitly articulated. This is a pervasive notion in Freud’s writing that is explicitly discussed in ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ (1920), vol. 18, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, (London: Hogarth, 1959), pp. 147-58 and ‘Instincts and their Vicissitudes’ (1915), vol. 14, *Standard Edition*, pp. 109-40.

in terms of an outright hostility or antagonism between the two groups, it is through an elaboration of the nature of the provocative address through which might integrate the very definite element of aggression at stake in this encounter with its barely concealed sexual subtext.

Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit have elaborated upon the inherently ambiguous nature of this address in their meditation on a series of boy figures by Caravaggio, including *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* (1594) (figure 111). 'We might rightly call these figures 'provocative,' (they say) if by this we mean a body in which we read an intention to stimulate our desire, not only to contemplate that body, but to approach it, to touch it, to enter into or to imagine some form of intimate physical contact with it.'<sup>266</sup> But the authors then go on to identify the ambivalence of this solicitation, which courts the spectator's desire only to go back upon its original promise. Through the boy's hooded eyes, partially open mouth, titled-back head and exposed right shoulder (from which his shirt has suggestively fallen), we might read the body's fairly unambiguous attempts at seduction. An erotic response is sought on the part of the viewer, but once this has been elicited the boy then refuses to reciprocate and protectively draws back upon himself. We are drawn into the pictorial space he inhabits only to have the possibility of access *into* that space denied. His right arm protectively holding the basket of fruit, effectively functions to rescind what he simultaneously appears to proffer. He invites the desirous gaze of the spectator but, in steadily meeting our gaze at once manages to deflect it – effectively short-circuiting this economy of visual appropriation through his self-defensive gesture of resistance. It is precisely the boy's attempts to retrieve something of the initial surrender by the same gesture of solicitation that embodies the fundamental contradiction at the heart of the provocative address that we might also see operative in the encounter being staged between the two groups in the *Spartiates*.

This is an idea which might be considered especially productively in relation to the outstretched arm of the female figure on the left hand side of the picture. Although it extends assertively towards the group opposite in a way which one may construe as 'challenging', the forcefulness of this gesture is undermined by the sketchy and hesitant detail with which the lower half of her body is painted. Her stance is faltering, the legs – shadowed by the *pentimenti* of other possible positions left visible upon the surface – seem to flounder uncertainly upon the ground, whilst the hand of her neighbour, placed upon the figure's right arm, mitigates the gesture's impulsive spontaneity with a dimension of caution. Whether the girls' appeal is a call to arms, a sexual provocation or simply an offer to play, the innately ambiguous nature of the provocative address enables us to understand its

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<sup>266</sup> Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio's Secrets* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 2-3.

capacity to embody both of these things whilst apprehending the futility of reducing it to either one. The ultimate illegibility of this figure can be extended to every other body implicated within the picture's complex relational network. Of most interest here are the utterly unfathomable set of responses with which the girls' entreaty is met by her counterparts opposite (see detail figure 112). The male figure, set slightly apart from the others at the far left of this configuration, arms raised above his head, proudly shows off his lithe young body. But this exhibitionistic display is at once countered by the defensive gesture of his right arm which serves to partially shield his face. Whether his expression is of hostility or belligerence, those worn by the rest of the figures in this grouping are just as hard to decipher. The crouching figure in the right hand corner – like the predatory animal his pose imitates – looks alert and ready to pounce, whilst next to him the figure with his back towards us stares obliviously into the distance.

Previous interpretations of the picture have relied upon a conventional gendered binary in support of their argument, but it is by addressing the subtle inflections, disjunctions and incongruities within the series of encounters staged in the picture – not only across, but *within* the groupings – through which we might accommodate its hitherto unaccounted for homoerotic dimension. The most overt connotations of same sex desire are insinuated by the suggestively posed nubile male figures on the right hand side of the picture, of whom the most flagrantly sexualized resides in the middle of this group. Pelvis thrust suggestively forward, smooth torso bared, eyes closed and mouth half-open, wearing an expression which would seem to be in the throes of sexual abandon or reverie, he resembles nothing so much as a martyred St Sebastian.<sup>267</sup> Another, albeit more subtle, homoerotic suggestion is to be found in the coupling of the two middle figures of indeterminate gender in the left-hand grouping (figure 113). One discreetly fondling the breast of the other, this pair are tucked away within a collection of bodies infused with a series of subtle moments of touch, where limbs co-join and body parts merge.

As the youngsters are shown to fratch amongst themselves, the picture can be seen to thematize the horizontal axis of peer group relations which Juliet Mitchell has emphasized in her recent work on siblings and sibling rivalry.<sup>268</sup> *Siblings* (2003) provides a critique of classical psychoanalysis and its emphasis upon the vertical Oedipal axis which privileges the child's parental relations in the constitution of subjectivity. This, however, as Mitchell argues has been at the expense of accounting for the child's relations with its siblings – and by extension peers. *Siblings* aim is to redress this balance, by foregrounding the role that *these* relationships play in the subject's formation. For Mitchell the playground is a crucial site in which the blueprints of subsequent relationships are first enacted. It is

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<sup>267</sup> Amongst the collection of Degas' drawings housed at the Louvre's Cabinet des Dessins there are detailed copies of both Mantegna and Perugino's representations of St Sebastian.

<sup>268</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Siblings: Sex and Violence* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2003).

here where the jealousies, sexual tensions, rivalries, and power struggles that will later come to characterize adult relationships are first played out. I would argue that it is a very similar inter-subjective dynamics of peer group relations that we see being played out in the complex libidinal network of interconnected touches, glances and gestures at stake between the two groups in the foreground. These consist of so many demands for attention, aggressive posturings, intimidations and goadings; alternately contradicted by expressions of boredom, refusals of acknowledgment, hesitations and retreats. Moreover, the metaphor of the playground as a formative social and psycho-sexual crucible is analogous to the gymnasium of ancient Sparta where the youngsters practiced their games and exercises. Plutarch himself acknowledged the fact that this arena was the site for the social as well as physical development of the future citizens of the polis as they prepared for adulthood.<sup>269</sup> But if these formative dialogues are seen to anticipate the roles that these youngsters will eventually be obliged to take up, then the inevitability of their fate is sealed as they are initiated into society as adults. This is reflected within the picture by the group of classically dressed figures in the distance consisting of the mothers of the children together with the Spartan legislator Lycurgus, who we see dressed in grey robes to the right of this configuration (see detail figure 114). The guardian of the law, he is the scene's silent figure of authority; the omnipresent representation of the *Nom du père* – his baleful gaze presiding over the apparently carefree bantering of the youngsters in the foreground.<sup>270</sup>

*‘Comment oublier l’antique, l’art le plus fort et le plus charmant?’*

Degas<sup>271</sup>

Fantasies of a utopian Golden Age and the egalitarian nature of the Spartan education system had surely constituted something of the picture's original motif for Degas. This is made clear by the following wistful image conjured up on the pages of an early notebook: *jeunes filles et jeunes garçons luttant dans la plataniste sous les yeux de Lycurge vieux et à côté des mères* (figure 115).<sup>272</sup> A reference to the shaded plane tree groves described by Plutarch where the youngsters performed their games and exercises, this hastily scribbled notation can be seen

<sup>269</sup> Plutarch, ‘Life of Lycurgus’, XVI, 3-6. For an interesting historical study of Greek athletics and its erotic dimensions see Thomas Scanlon, *Eros and Greek Athletics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>270</sup> The *Nom du père*; a term referring to the patriarchal agency of the symbolic is a central concept in Lacanian theory. As Lacan himself puts it: ‘it is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the support of his symbolic function which, from the dawn of history has identified his person with the figure of the law.’ See ‘Function and Field of Speech and Language’ (1953), reprinted in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Routledge: London and New York, 1991), p. 74.

<sup>271</sup> Nb 6, p. 8.

<sup>272</sup> Nb 18, p. 202.

to constitute the artist's earliest vision of the scene and closely corresponds to a pencil and brown wash sketch datable to around the same time (figure 116). This drawing's evocative setting and fluid rendering of the figures (whose poses resonate with the graceful poses of the Greek athletes enshrined in ancient sculptures such as the *Borghese Gladiator* (figure 117) which the artist had carefully traced as a student (figure 118) is strongly resonant with Winckelmann's nostalgic romanticization of the Ancient Greek gymnasium quoted earlier. There is, as yet, no indication of the anxiety and disquiet which was later to characterize the scene.

Degas, as we know possessed an erudite knowledge of ancient history and was well-versed in the classics. Whilst this was nothing out of the ordinary for a man of his class and education, the world of antiquity seemed to have exerted a particularly powerful and tenacious hold upon his imagination. This is corroborated by many accounts of those who knew the artist personally, in particular Jeanne Fèvre, who affirms: *Il est indéniable que... Degas s'est littéralement passionné pour le monde de l'Antiquité. Sa vaste culture lui permettait de retourner facilement dans le passé.*<sup>273</sup> The artist's understanding of the classical world, however, was not only derived from primary sources but shaped and mediated through a secondary set of secondary representations. Of the myriad forms of cultural production which constituted and produced forms of historical 'knowledge' regarding antiquity in the nineteenth century (History painting and Opera, for example) an important category to note here is the literary genre of sentimental stories loosely based upon the classics retold in a modern vernacular. Exemplary of this genre is Abbé Barthélémy's *Voyage du jeune anarcharsis en Grèce*, a *mélange* of classical narratives in which a young Scythian raconteur describes his panoramic journey around the ancient sites of Greece (including an extended stay in Sparta where he observes the customs and cultural practices of this region). First published in 1789, this eight-volume saga was immensely popular with its various audiences and went through several editions well into the nineteenth century. The legacy of the neoclassical *goût Grec*, it was texts such as Barthélémy's *Voyage* which affirmed a nostalgic image of a Hellenistic golden age as a lost Arcadia and provided the dominant motif through which the ancient world was imagined and represented in the nineteenth century. Degas himself was familiar with this work and, as we are told by Fèvre, had only admiration for its author of whom he is reported to have said: *'l'abbé Barthélemy avait admirablement parlé du pays de Homère. Cette Grèce magnifique ressemblait enfin à ses poètes et les expliquait.'*<sup>274</sup> But whilst Degas would seem in so many ways to be utterly captivated by the classical world it was, as we shall see, a fantasy which he could not articulate pictorially or accommodate within the terms of his practice.

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<sup>273</sup> Fèvre, *Mon oncle Degas*, p. 50.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.



In relation to this point it is interesting to consider in more detail the artist's choice of the rather uncommon motif of ancient Sparta for his History painting. In her book *The Spartan Tradition in European Thought* (1991), Elizabeth Rawson has mapped the different ways in which Sparta has figured in the western historical imagination over the centuries, demonstrating how it has been variously revered and denigrated. In the nineteenth century the oligarchal state of Sparta was commonly posited in opposition to its rival Athens. The legendary barbaric practices of this totalitarian military state were infamous and compared unfavourably to the latter's democratic society and emphasis upon liberty and personal freedom. Sparta was also perceived as uncultured which, unlike its neighbour, had little interest in fostering the arts, directing its energies instead almost exclusively towards producing fighting stock. Compared to the rich cultural legacy of Athens and its democratic model of society, the image of Sparta at this moment carried with it associations of the subversive and aberrant, and I believe that it was precisely these disruptive connotations which provided the means through which Degas was able to re-imagine adolescence and update it in relation to his contemporary context.

It is an impossible task to trace the precise chronological development of the large number of extant preparatory works for the *Spartiates*. However, as they roughly adhere to the academic stages of preparation for a History painting, it is possible to reconstruct a tentative developmental trajectory.<sup>275</sup> The aforementioned preliminary wash drawing seems to have been followed by the more detailed *esquisse peinte*, whilst the batch of *académies* discussed earlier are seen to elaborate in more detail the poses and gestures illustrated here. The culmination of these successive preparatory stages seems to have been a full scale canvas now at the Art Institute of Chicago (figure 119). We see here how Degas originally conceived of the composition within a historically specific setting. The river Evrotas meandering through the middle of the picture, the peak of Mount Taygetus on the horizon and the group of trees on the right are resonant with accounts of Sparta given by ancient geographers such as Pausanias.<sup>276</sup> Further classicizing features include the prominent architectural feature in the middle-ground and the headdresses and togas of the young Spartan girls which correspond closely to descriptions given by Plutarch.<sup>277</sup> The facial features of the figures on the Chicago canvas also conform to ideals of classical beauty. This we see most clearly in the aquiline profiles of the females which are strongly redolent with those of the muses of antique statuary. Most notable here is the figure at the centre of this

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<sup>275</sup> For previous attempts to assemble some kind of developmental model for the *Spartiates*: see Devin Burnell, 'Degas and his 'Young Spartans Exercising'', *Museum Studies: The Art Institute of Chicago*, 4 (1969), pp. 49-65. See also the entry on the picture in David Bomford et. al, *Degas: Art in the Making*, ex. cat. (London: National Gallery, 2004), pp. 68-81.

<sup>276</sup> See Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, III-IV, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 2., with an English translation by W H S Jones (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1977).

<sup>277</sup> Plutarch, 'Life of Lycurgus', XVI, pp. 3-6.

configuration dressed in a full peplos (see detail figure 120), whose hieratic bearing and steadfast gaze bears a striking resemblance to the caryatids of the Parthenon frieze (figure 121).

This canvas, however, was abandoned at the preliminary *ébauche* stage of painting and never worked up past the initial monochrome layers marking out the light and dark areas. After this aborted attempt it would seem that the artist went back to the drawing board to rethink the *Spartiates* – a process which resulted in the execution of the National Gallery canvas. Although the two pictures as they stand today exhibit a set of marked differences from one another, an x-ray photograph of the London canvas (figure 122) reveals that Degas initially carried over many of features from the forsaken *grisaille*. Here the artist dispensed with the temple-like architectural feature in the middle-ground and the tree trunks on the right hand side of the canvas (the last indication of Plutarch's plane tree groves). The figures, however, remained more or less unchanged; their idealized profiles and classical costume are much the same as those which the artist initially marked out on the Chicago canvas.

If the formal evolution proposed for the *Spartiates* so far outlines a relatively straightforward process of artistic development, this was all to change when Degas arrived at the National Gallery canvas – a work which was to become the site of the most radical revisions and alterations. Recent technical research undertaken by the museum has revealed just how intense a site of labour this canvas was for the artist.<sup>278</sup> The background bears the scars of washing scraping and reworking. But the most drastic modifications are seen to have taken place upon the site of the figures. That these areas constitute the most fervently worked upon parts of its surface is also clearly visible to the naked eye. This we see in the thickly painted 'mask' like faces of the male figures on the right and the *pentimenti* around the legs of the female figures on the left. Cross sections of the paint layers constituting these areas are incredibly dense and corroborate these extensive revisions. The classical bonnets originally worn by the female figures are nowhere in evidence upon the canvas surface as it stands today. And although they still sport a semblance of classical costume their crudely painted skirts are nothing but a travesty of the detailed peplos they have superseded. In this context, the remnants of black, white and red fabric lying on the ground next to the boy with upraised arms at the edge of the right-hand grouping in the foreground are also highly significant. Perhaps a nod to Plutarch who notes that the young Spartan males exercised completely naked, the youths' eager casting-off of their clothes might also be symbolic of the artist's own discarding of the outmoded trappings of the classical.

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<sup>278</sup> Bomford et. al, *Degas*, pp. 68-81.

Degas' first biographer André Lemoisne, referred to the young Spartans as 'monmâtrois'.<sup>279</sup> A reference to the inhabitants of the predominantly working class district of Monmâtrre of Paris, this description aptly articulates something of their contemporaneity. Indeed, this motley crew of barely formed adolescent bodies is a long way from the idealized youths one would expect to see participating in the enactment of this classical subject. The ephebe's bastard offspring, these urchins and guttersnipes have no place in a History painting. Their milieu proper is the streets of modern Paris rather than a distant mythological antiquity. The pugnacious facial features of these figures which constitute the most legible signs of their 'modernity'. This is exhibited most clearly by the male figures on the right hand side of the canvas, whose intractable expressions, small eyes, low foreheads, prominent jaws and flattened noses make explicit reference to the atavistic, criminal and lower-class stereotypes advanced by the newly emergent quasi-science of physiognomy.

The interest of Degas and his milieu in this discourse, together with recent theories of social Darwinism and biological determinism has been well documented and is a subject to which I will return in more detail in my discussion of the works the artist exhibited at the sixth Impressionist exhibition in 1881.<sup>280</sup> Anthea Callen has commented on how an artistic interest in physiognomic discourse grew out of 'a growing dissatisfaction with the limitations of conventionalized beauty',<sup>281</sup> an idea which is directly applicable to the radical alterations which have taken place in the *Spartiates*. While the abstracted facial types seen on the Chicago canvas were initially carried over to the London version, they were subsequently subjected to a drastic process of de-idealization as the timeless profiles of classical beauty were overwritten with the common mugs of lower class Parisians.

Technical research has dated the reworking of the facial features of the male figures to the late 1870s and 1880s.<sup>282</sup> This would suggest that Degas reworked the picture in parallel with the works he was preparing for the fifth and sixth Impressionist exhibitions. Thus, whilst the artist's work displayed within the context of the Impressionist shows exhibit a series of explicit borrowings from these conventions, it is the *Spartiates* which is seen here to function as the first ground of their emergence. Through this analysis of the *Spartiates*' gestation we see that whilst Degas seems to have initially embarked upon the picture armed with a rather nostalgic or rose-tinted image of the classical world, as the work

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<sup>279</sup> André Lemoisne, *Degas et son Oeuvre*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1946-9), p. 42.

<sup>280</sup> See Anthea Callen, *The Spectacular Body: Science, Method and Meaning in the Work of Degas* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), esp. chapter 1; Douglas Druick and Peter Zegers, 'Scientific Realism: 1873-1881', in Boggs et al. *Degas*, pp. 197-211 and John House, 'Towards a 'Modern' Lavater: Degas and Manet' in *Physiognomy in Profile: Lavatar's Impact on European Culture*, Melissa Percival and Graham Tytler (eds.) (Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 2005). For a detailed reading of the 'animalism' of these figures see Martha Lucy, 'Reading the animal in Degas' *Young Spartans*', *Nineteenth Century Art Worldwide*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Spring, 2003), n.p.

<sup>281</sup> Callen, *The Spectacular Body*, p. 3.

<sup>282</sup> Bomford et al, *Degas: Art in the Making*, p. 70.

progressed through its different stages these are seen gradually to give way to unsettling overtones of intimidation, aggression and disturbance. Similarly, while Neoclassicism had – under the nomination of the ephebe – interpreted the adolescent phase as a moment of eternal youth, with Degas it is configured as a much more problematic juncture.<sup>283</sup>

*Une fois pubère, l'avenir non seulement se rapproche: il installe dans son corps... le présent ne lui apparaît que comme une transition.*

Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*.<sup>284</sup>

It was Jean-Jacques Rousseau who was the first to explicitly articulate the impending danger of adolescence, in his educational treatise *Emile* of 1762. Part IV of this narrative is entirely devoted to this 'critical moment' (*la moment critique*), identified here as stretching from the time of First Communion until either the baccalaureate, or conscription for boys and marriage for girls. It was during this phase that the young person was in danger of going off the rails and thus in particular need of moral guidance. Rousseau puts the onus of responsibility upon the parent or teacher to ensure that the adolescents' tremendous energies are channelled appropriately. This notion of adolescence as a critical age provided the dominant conceptual model for the nineteenth century, as evidenced in the burgeoning genre of social treatises dealing specifically with what came to be known as '*la crise de l'adolescence*'.<sup>285</sup> Exemplary of this trend is Céline Fallet's *L'Éducation de jeunes filles: Conseils aux mères de famille et aux institutrices* (1850). Written as a reference manual for parents and teachers, it administers a wealth of medical and moral guidance on how to deal with young girls undergoing puberty. It is interesting to note the gender-specific nature of the advice doled out in such texts. This is epitomized in the entry under *adolescence* in the *Dictionnaire de Médecine* (1832). For the *jeune fille*, whose sensitive disposition caused her to: '*tombe souvent dans les languers d'une douce mélancholie*',<sup>286</sup> cosseting and protecting by her closest female guardians was the order of the day. Boys, on the other hand, were actively encouraged to sow their wild oats and participate in all manner of strenuous physical activity in order to develop their *force du corps*.<sup>287</sup> Texts such as Fallet's *L'Éducation de jeunes filles* and the *Dictionnaire* entry are symptomatic of an emergent cultural preoccupation with this newly-

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<sup>283</sup> For a discussion of representations of childhood and adolescence as a key tropes of modernity in French painting see Anna Green, *French Paintings of Childhood and Adolescence, 1848-1886* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

<sup>284</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947/74), p. 89.

<sup>285</sup> For a general discussion of adolescence and childhood in the nineteenth century see Michelle Perrot (ed.), *A History of Private Life*, vol. 4, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 493-4, 622-4.

<sup>286</sup> *Dictionnaire des Sciences Médicales*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1812-1822), p. 595.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 597.

identified age category, a discourse which has been recently mapped by Agnès Thiercé in her important book *Histoire de l'Adolescence: 1850-1914*. Although adolescence was not invented in the nineteenth-century, Thiercé claims that: '*la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle donne à l'adolescence sa signification moderne et forge la classe d'âge adolescente*'.<sup>288</sup> Reading Thiercé's analysis of the various institutional discourses devoted to the subject of adolescence (medicine, pedagogy and the penal system are all discussed in detail) it becomes clear that this was a phase conceived of extremely negatively in the nineteenth century. Iterated time and time again is the perilousness of this transitional phase and the juvenile's susceptibility to moral deviance. It was the emergent sexuality of the adolescent, however, which constituted the most profound source of cultural anxiety, and elders were instructed to keep a constant eye out for signs of precociousness in pubescent boys and girls. Adolescents thus constituted a contingent to be kept under close watch, a notion concurring with Michel Foucault's 'repressive hypothesis' which discusses the various forms of pedagogical regulation and institutional surveillance to which this body was subjected during the modern episteme.<sup>289</sup>

Adolescence is defined as that interstitial moment *between* childhood and adulthood. Indeed, the trepidation and anxiety with which the adolescent is commonly regarded by society arises precisely *from* its liminality or 'inbetweenness'. No longer a child, but not yet an adult, the adolescent cannot be comfortably located within either category. Exceeding the terms of one, yet falling short of the other, at once inhabiting and transgressing these identities, the adolescent problematizes available cultural narratives in which it might be situated. As Mary Douglas has commented: '*danger* (my italics) lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is indefinable'.<sup>290</sup> This is a remark which articulates a very real unease regarding liminal bodies and their place, or rather placeless-*ness* within the social order, and is a state borne out by the bodies of the young Spartans themselves, impossible to fix within a set of terms that do not continually undermine and subvert one another. Immature and unformed, they are clearly still in the process of growing and developing. But while displaying the child's bandy form and lanky limbs, these aspects of their bodies co-exist uneasily alongside the emergent signs of their secondary sexual characteristics. Of the pubertal phase Freud remarked: 'there is no need to expect that anatomical growth and psychical development must be exactly simultaneous', and this mismatched assortment of bodies can be seen to articulate precisely this disjunction.<sup>291</sup> Embodying a set of jarring and uncomfortable juxtapositions, what is so troubling about these figures is precisely their nascent sexuality and precociousness. As

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<sup>288</sup> Agnès Thiercé, *Histoire de l'adolescence: 1850-1914* (Paris: Belin 1999), p. 7.

<sup>289</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1. trans. Robert Hurley, (London: Penguin, 1998), esp., pp. 15-17.

<sup>290</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge 2002), p. 119.

<sup>291</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex,' (1924) *Standard Edition*, vol. 19, pp. 155-72.

these bodies fail to register as either children or adults they are consequently accorded an ambiguous status. Indeed, it is in its refusal to cohere, or fall into line with dominant narratives, that the adolescent harbours an extremely troubling disruptive and transgressive potential.

But the *Spartiates* thematizes the marginality and ‘out-of-place-ness’ of the youngsters in the foreground in another important way. One of the most striking characteristics of this picture is the sparse landscape in which its scene is staged. There is little here that corresponds to Lycurgus’ thriving city-state or the shaded groves where the youngsters are thought to have performed their games and exercises. These landmarks of ancient Sparta have been substituted by a patch of indeterminate wasteland: an undefined no-mans land at the periphery of a ramshackle polis. The desolate setting of the *Spartiates* constitutes another key aspect of its modernity, the significance of which is made clear by a comparison with a contemporaneous work: Edouard Manet’s *Vieux musicien* (1862) (figure 123). Albeit presented in the guise of a thinly veiled allegory, Manet’s picture carries an important political subtext regarding the urban reforms of Baron Haussmann. The painting constitutes a veritable catalogue of those displaced by the renovations.<sup>292</sup> Aside from the Old Musician of the picture’s title (a figure who has since been identified as the organ grinder of a gypsy band) the rag-pickers, street vendors and urchins take their place in this line-up of modernity’s dispossessed. Most notable here, however, is the unstipulated ground on which they stand. Although vaguely reminiscent of an allegorical landscape setting, it simultaneously refers to the margins of the urban landscape to where this itinerant marginalia of society had been relegated. In Degas’ picture the young Spartans are a contingent similarly outcast. Their lower-class physiognomies make direct reference to the ‘*tourbe de nomads*’ that Haussmann’s urban planning policies were designed to evict.<sup>293</sup>

### Children of the Revolution

In order to pursue what might be at stake in the contemporary cultural anxieties attached to lower-class youth at this moment (which the young Spartans are seen to intimate in no uncertain terms) I would like to consider these figures in relation to representations of the archetypal urban street urchin; the *gamin* which – in conjunction with the epebe – presents another image of youth that might be considered productively in relation to Degas’

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<sup>292</sup> For a discussion of this painting from a socio-historical perspective see Nigel Blake and Francis Frascina, ‘Modernity, realism and the history of art: Manet’s *Old Musician*’ in Briony Fer et. al, *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 80-102.

<sup>293</sup> Haussmann, *Mémoires*, quoted in José Cubero, *Histoire du Vagabondage* (Paris: Imago, 1988), p. 246.

thematization of adolescence.<sup>294</sup> A quintessentially Parisian social-type the *gamin* is a spirited figure of rebellion within the city's cultural iconography. Nowadays the *gamin* is practically synonymous with Victor Hugo's irrepressible Gavroche, the endearing *polisson* of *Les Misérables* (1862) who lives by his wits on the streets, begging and borrowing wherever he can, but this is a character who is in fact derived from an already well-established representational motif within French popular culture. The status of the *gamin* at this moment is indicated by the substantial entry devoted to this figure in the compendium *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* (1840-1842). Part of the 'Tableaux de Paris' genre, so popular in the first half of the nineteenth century, this study of contemporary manners (*mœurs contemporaine*), consists of a series of portraits of the various characters and social types who constituted the fabric of Parisian city life at this moment.<sup>295</sup> A collaborative affair consisting of contributions from various well-known social commentators and illustrators, the character study of the *gamin* contained here is written by the playwright and journalist Jules Janin. Although Janin begins by dispensing mild words of admonishment for the *gamin's* truant activities, it soon becomes clear that this is a figure for whom the author clearly holds a great deal of affection. Indeed, the *gamin* is later commended for his resourcefulness and resilience, whilst his mischief is generally looked upon with a benevolent tolerance. Janin's portrait of the *gamin* as a cheeky but lovable rogue, is enforced by the accompanying illustrations supplied by Charlet and Gavarni (figures 124 and 125). Depicted as an ingratiating scamp singing for his supper these affectionate illustrations are (like Janin's portrayal) entirely in keeping with the picturesque conventions of this genre.

But, as the French historian Jean-Jacques Yvorel has drawn to our attention, the *gamin* must also be understood as a highly politicized being. This is demonstrated in his 2002 article on the *gamin* which discusses how this figure is first seen to emerge in the iconography of the July Revolution.<sup>296</sup> Indeed, it is commonly thought that the small boy in Delacroix's monumental *La Liberté Guidant le Peuple* (1831) (figure 126), painted in commemoration of *Les Trois Glorieuses* provided Gavroche's initial prototype. Situated on the front line of the barricade and brandishing two pistols as he charges fearlessly ahead, this intrepid *enfant du peuple* is here accorded a significant revolutionary potential. The prominent role given to the child-insurgent in Delacroix's picture is also echoed in the recognition given to the *petits patriotes* in the commemorative popular imagery produced in

<sup>294</sup> See Working Children; Dangerous Children' in Green, *French Paintings of Childhood and Adolescence*, pp. 47-86.

<sup>295</sup> On the history of the *Tableaux de Paris* see Jillian Taylor Lerner, *Panoramic Literature: Marketing Illustrated Journalism in July Monarchy Paris*, PhD Diss. (Columbia, 2006). For more on the picturesque literature of the nineteenth century, see sections on 'Les Tableaux de Paris' and 'Jules Janin' in Louis Chevalier *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses à Paris pendant la première moitié du XIXe siècle* (Paris, Librairie Plon; 1958, pp. 45-57).

<sup>296</sup> Jean-Jacques Yvorel, 'De Delacroix à Poulbot: L'image du gamin à Paris', *Revue de Histoire de l'enfance irrégulière*, No 4 (2002), n.p.

the immediate euphoric aftermath of *Les Trois Glorieuses*. An important figure worthy of mention here is the '*jeune Arvole*' of whom there are numerous personifications to be found in contemporary print culture. According to the historian Jacques Hillairet, this character is based upon an actual historical person: a young boy by the name of Jean Fournier who was killed in the midst of battle whilst planting a flag outside the Hôtel de Ville, and as we see him depicted in an engraving by Antoine-Louis Goblain (figure 127).<sup>297</sup>

The mythologization of the martyred child-hero within this iconographic tradition must be seen as part of a popular representational cult dating back to the first Revolution and initiated by the deaths of the young soldiers Agricol Viala and Joseph Bara. These young Republican martyrs subsequently became potent emblems of the cause and were commemorated in numerous popular engravings and illustrations (see for example figures 128 and 129).<sup>298</sup> Also notable in this context is David's *Mort de Bara* (1794) (figure 130), particularly the way in which the body of the ephebe is harnessed to serve the explicitly political ends of the revolutionary martyr cult.<sup>299</sup> We see here how the child rebel-warrior cast as a hero functioned as a potent symbol of political insurrection during the first half of the nineteenth century. As Jean-Jacques Yvrel has remarked: '*de la rue Transnonian à la Commune, il n'y a guère d'images de barricades d'où sa silhouette soit absent.*'<sup>300</sup> The associations of mayhem and anarchy which these *enfants-émeutiers* carried with them at this moment are brought to the fore in a series of satirical caricatures by Daumier published in *Le Charivari* on 4 March 1848 in which a mischievous young *gamin* runs riot around the Tuileries (figure 131). As one might imagine the *gamin* was a figure who was not looked upon kindly by everyone and it was precisely the potential subversiveness harboured by these insubordinates through which they gradually came to be perceived as a threat to the social order. As a result the child-urchin began to lose his place in the nation's affections as the attributes of errancy, unrest and rebellion he personified came to be looked upon unfavourably and to carry negative connotations.

### From *gamin* to *voyou*

*The word voyou has an essential relation with the voie, the way, with the urban roadways [voirie], the roadways of the city or the polis, and thus with the street [rue], the waywardness [dévoiement] of the voyou consisting in making ill use of the street, in corrupting the street or loitering in the streets, in 'roaming the streets', as we say in a strangely transitive formation.'*

<sup>297</sup> Jacques Hillairet, *Dictionnaire historique des rues de Paris* (Paris, 1963), vol. 1, p. 106.

<sup>298</sup> For more on the myths of Bara and Viala see Marie-Pierre Foissy-Aufrère, *Le mort de Bara*, ex. cat. (Avignon: Musée Calvet, 1989).

<sup>299</sup> Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal*, p. 235. See the chapter 'Revolutionary Heroes' in pp. 223-237.

<sup>300</sup> Yvrel, 'De Delacroix à Poulbot'.



The dramatic shift regarding the representation and perception of the *gamin* in French visual culture begins to take place around the late 1830s. This historical phenomenon is thrown into sharp relief by a comparison between the illustrations of this character provided by Charlet and Gavarni for *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* and an image of a youth by the illustrator Traviès (figure 132). No. 28 of his *Galerie Physiologique*, *Titi le Talochneur* (*Titi* being a slang expression for an insolent youth), this image is one of a series of brutally satirical caricatures published in *Le Charivari* in 1837. Depicting a series of ‘types’ drawn from the ranks of the lower classes, they constitute what Judith Weschler has referred to, as a ‘panorama of demoralization’.<sup>302</sup> We see here how Traviès’ sketch marks a radical departure from the representation of the urchin under the rubric of the *gamin* enshrined in the picturesque literature already discussed.<sup>303</sup> With closely cropped hair, hands shoved in his pockets and smoking what would appear to be a large hand-rolled cigarette, these attributes add up to a radically disaffected portrait of contemporary youth.

*Titi le Talochneur* can be taken as indicative of contemporary anxieties regarding the uncomfortable presence of working class youth in Paris at this moment. This demographic of the urban population figures prominently in Honoré-Antoine Frégier’s 1840 study of ‘*les classes dangereuses*’ (alongside the thieves, criminal gangs and prostitutes who constitute Parisian society’s degenerate underbelly).<sup>304</sup> As the *prefecture du Seine*’s chief of police, Frégier was well placed to undertake such an investigation and his analysis draws upon an impressive range of statistics in order to verify that the highest incidence of juvenile crime was found to occur amongst the lower strata of society. Frégier then goes on to supply a detailed portrait of the degenerate offspring of ‘*les classes pauvres et vicieuses*’,<sup>305</sup> whose inevitable descent into corruption and misconduct as a result of neglect and lack of discipline is outlined in the following passage:

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<sup>301</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascal-Anne Brandt and Michael Naas (California: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 65.

<sup>302</sup> Judith Weschler, *A Human Comedy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), p. 96.

<sup>303</sup> Although the *Physiologies* adhere to a similar classificatory model as the *Tableaux de Paris* genre they enshrine a more degenerate set of lower class stereotypes than those contained in the earlier picturesque literature. For more on this genre see Martina Lauster, *Sketches of the Nineteenth Century: European Journalism and its Physiologies: 1830-1850*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).

<sup>304</sup> Honoré-Antoine Frégier, *Des classes dangereuses de la population dans les grandes villes et des moyens de les rendre meilleures*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1840). The classic study of this nineteenth century text is Louis Chevalier’s, *Classes laborieuses et classes Dangereuses*.

<sup>305</sup> Frégier then goes on to state that it is this contingent of society: ‘*ont toujours été et seront toujours la pépinière la plus productive de toutes les sortes de malfaiteurs; ce sont elles que nous désignerons plus particulièrement sous le titre de classes dangereuse...*’ Frégier cited in Chevalier, *ibid.*, p. 159.

*Livré à lui-même sur le pavé de Paris, exempt de surveillance en raison de la position de ses parents qu'un travail assidu retient hors du logis du matin jusqu'au soir, il parvient aisément à secouer le joug de cette discipline qui lui pèse; au lieu d'aller à l'école, il erre souvent dans les rues, sur les quais, sur les boulevards attire par les jeux des enfants de son âge, il se même parmi eux avec empressement; il contracte leurs goûts et leurs habitudes, d'autant plus volontiers qu'ils sont dominés comme lui par une répugnance naturelle pour le travail...*<sup>306</sup>

Although admittedly playing truant from school, it is the child's unsupervised and freewheeling wanderings around the city ('dans les rues, sur les quais, sur les boulevards') which constitute the most profound source of the author's anxiety.

Frégier's text can be read as symptomatic of a more generalized set of anxieties regarding vagrancy (*la mendicité*) at this moment. Although the *vagabond* and the *mendiant* (alongside their close relation the *chiffonnier*) were constitutive stalwarts of the picturesque imagination (as seen in the dilapidated characters constituting *les pauvres* of the *Les Français peint par eux-mêmes* (figure 133) their existence gradually came to be reconfigured as a pressing social 'problem' in the latter part of the nineteenth century. From 1830 onwards severe vagrancy laws were brought into force in the attempt to regulate this nomadic and shifting population.<sup>307</sup> But while criminal statistics from the last seventy years of the nineteenth century witness an exponential increase in the number of convictions for vagabondage, it was the phenomenon of youthful vagrancy which was identified as being the most widespread.<sup>308</sup> As Kristin Ross has remarked: 'in most cases vagabondage corresponded to the ritualization of the entry into the workforce at the end of school. With that abrupt passage into a new age...came the moment of rupture'.<sup>309</sup> Youngsters would often come to Paris and other major cities from rural areas in search of work and end up sleeping rough on the streets until they found some form of paid employment, or simply fall off the institutional radar altogether. Effectively criminalizing the activities of the urchin, whilst placing severe restrictions on his movements, the enforcement of a range of

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<sup>306</sup> Frégier, cited in Chevalier, *ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>307</sup> That these laws against mendicity were invented primarily as a means of social control is summed up well by Ross: 'vagabondage is a pure creation of penal law, a word of repression; it has no existence apart from a legally constituted infraction.' She then goes on to add: 'A vagabond is a vagabond because he or she is arrested. What is particularly disquieting about the vagabond is its ambiguous status: technically. They have not violated any laws (except the laws against vagabondage), they have not committed any crimes,' Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 57. For a cultural history of vagabondage see José Cubero, *Histoire du vagabondage du Moyen Age à Nos Jours* (Paris: Imago, 1998). For nineteenth century studies of this phenomenon see Charles Portales, *Des mendiants et des vagabonds* (Nîmes: Baldy and Roger, 1854); Théodore Homberg, *Etudes sur le vagabondage* (Paris: Forestier, 1880) and Louis Rivière, *Un Siècle de lutte contre le vagabondage* (Paris: Bureaux de la revue politique et parlementaire, 1899).

<sup>308</sup> See Ross, *ibid.*, for more on the phenomenon of child vagabondage.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

penal laws targeted specifically at curbing vagabondage mark the ultimate demise of the romantic image of the *gamin* which had previously held sway. This is iterated in the 1866 entry on the *gamin* in the *Grand Dictionnaire* which admits that this is a figure which is now all but extinct – a figure consigned to the picturesque imagination, as it goes onto lament the objectionable *voyous* who have taken his place.<sup>310</sup>

*La race de Paris, c'est le pale voyou*

Auguste Barbier<sup>311</sup>

Roughly corresponding to the English 'yob' or 'hooligan', together with all its pejorative connotations, the *voyou* is an epithet that is to be found all over the place in contemporary social discourse at this moment. Still common parlance in France today, the implications of this term were recently pursued by Jacques Derrida in a series of lectures on the concept of the rogue-state (which translates as *Etat-Voyou*) and which were published posthumously in France under the title *Voyous*. Although Derrida is here addressing a post 9/11 global context, and thus a radically different milieu to the one with which I am concerned, his characterization of the *voyou* as social pariah and subaltern is one which is extremely pertinent to my argument. Moreover, Derrida's discourse on the *voyou* begins by acknowledging the nineteenth century popular origins of this term and its inextricability from the praxis of the street (not only is *voyou* etymologically derived from *les voies*, but it is a term of argot: the language of the street), before going on to cite its usage by Nerval and Barbier.<sup>312</sup> For Derrida the *voyous* are the ones who:

*introduce disorder into the street; they are picked out, denounced, judged and condemned, pointed out as actual or virtual delinquents, as those accused and pursued by the civilized citizen, by the state or civil society, by decent law-abiding citizens and by their police...*

He goes on to add that the *voyou* is never a neutral attribute, but one that is most often 'pejorative and accusatory':

*...it casts a normative, indeed performative evaluation, a disdainful or threatening insult, an appellation that initiates an inquiry and prepares a prosecution before the law. It is an appellation that already looks like a virtual interpolation.*

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<sup>310</sup> As the entry goes on to note: '*depuis 1852.. on peut dire que la physionomie du Parisien à changée complètement... Le gamin, si admirablement dépeint par Victor Hugo, se fait bien rare, grâce à la sévérité de lois sur la vagabondage; on rencontre bien encore quelques titis, quelques pâles voyous; mais le vrai gamin, le Gavroche, dont le romancier nous à laissé l'inimitable portrait, est à peu près disparu.*' Larousse, *Grand Dictionnaire*, vol. 8, p. 983.

<sup>311</sup> Auguste Barbier, *Lambes and Poèmes* (Paris, 1840), p. 94.

<sup>312</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 66.

As he affirms:

*'The voyou is always the other, always being pointed out by the respectable right thinking bourgeois, the representative of the moral or judicial order'.<sup>313</sup>*

As Derrida's searing critique draws our attention to the discursive cultural forces operative in the production and designation of this marginalized body, he maintains that the *voyou* is anyone who poses a threat to 'democratic' society, or else represents a principle of disorder or subversion *to* it. But while the *voyou* functions here as a postmodern figure of subversion, put to work as a destabilizing and disruptive force within the space of the text, his characterization of the *voyou* is undoubtedly based upon the disenfranchised youth of the Paris *banlieues*. Delivered as lecture in 2004, this text can be seen to pre-empt the civil unrest which erupted across the suburbs of the city the following year. The blueprint of the contemporary *voyou* provided here by Derrida: young, predominantly male, non-native or immigrant (albeit second or third generation by now) – effectively ghettoized at the periphery of the urban landscape and alienated by society shares many similarities with his nineteenth century counterpart and whose truant activities are the source of a very similar set of anxieties.

It was precisely this unruly contingent of nineteenth century French society with whom the Vicomte d'Haussonville concerned himself in a series of articles published in 1878 and 1880 in the journal *Revue des Deux Mondes*.<sup>314</sup> The first article; 'L'enfance à Paris: Les Vagabonds et les Mendiants,' discusses the growing problem of vagabondage among the lower class infant population of Paris. With no home to call their own, these diminutive vagrants make themselves comfortable on the streets, finding improvised shelters under bridges and in shop doorways. Although the Vicomte has ostensibly philanthropic intentions and expresses a certain amount of sympathy for the unfortunate conditions by which these children were rendered homeless in the first place, the ultimate objective underwriting his text is that the undesirable presence of these waifs and strays should be obliterated from the face of the streets by whichever means necessary. The article draws on criminal statistics to identify the sharp rise of juvenile crime in Paris and calls for a more stringent enforcement of vagabondage laws and tighter restrictions on begging. Providing a detailed commentary of the vices and moral ills of lower class contemporary youth, the text is punctuated with colourful descriptions of the ragamuffins to be found loitering outside department stores and theatre exits, selling matches, cigarettes, flowers or obscene photographs and generally harassing the bourgeoisie. A menace to society, this '*petite armée*'

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>314</sup> The articles are as follows: 'L'Enfance à Paris: La Vagabonds' (1 June, 1878), pp 598-627; 'L'Enfance à Paris: La Mendicité' (15 June, 1878), pp. 891-927, and 'L'Enfance à Paris: Les Rendez-vous du crime – Les Jeunes Adultes et l'éducation correctionnelle' (15 January, 1879), pp. 346-347.

are portrayed running amok across the city like packs of wolves, queuing up at soup-kitchens for wounded soldiers, pick-pocketing, shoplifting and committing all manner of petty crime. A profoundly vicious creature (*un être profondément vicieux*<sup>315</sup>) with ‘a pale face and a evil eye’ (*du teint pale et à l’oeil éveillé*) his text provides a detailed portrait of a specific social type, and his final call for a recognition of the diverse forms of the child criminal must be seen as instrumental in the constitution of a legible juvenile delinquent subject within the nineteenth-century discourse on the criminal.<sup>316</sup> Indeed, the Vicomte’s final article is explicitly concerned with the subject of correctional education – a subject of great debate amongst social reformers at this moment.<sup>317</sup> The nomadic characteristics embodied in the figure of the urchin were thus a source of profound cultural anxiety in the nineteenth century. Indeed, this was a figure whom, even – or precisely *because* – he was seen to be doing not very much at all was generally viewed with suspicion as being up to no good in one way or another. As Derrida puts it: *the voyou is at once unoccupied, if not unemployed, and actively occupied with occupying the streets, either by ‘roaming the streets’ doing nothing, loitering, or by doing what is not supposed to be done... (a characterization which incidentally also serves well to reflect the idle loitering and distracted fratching of the young Spartans).*<sup>318</sup>

It is necessary to remark at this point upon the highly gendered nature of the discourse on the *gamin* and *voyou*. Jean Jacques Yvorel has made some attempt to address this matter by drawing upon the *grisette* (the *gamin*’s ‘*grande soeur*’) as a counterpoint. But although a well established social type within the picturesque literature, this working-class woman of independent means is not really comparable to the *gamin*, a pair who, aside from their independence and resourcefulness do not share much in common. With regard to the *voyou* Derrida himself remarks upon the absurdity of the *voyoute*.<sup>319</sup> As for the primary texts themselves, although Frégier and d’Haussonville are primarily concerned with *mauvais garçons* of Paris they both (however briefly) make explicit reference to the phenomenon of wayward young girls and their susceptibility to be drawn into a life of prostitution. This is an issue which the next section will address in greater detail.

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<sup>315</sup> ‘L’Enfance à Paris: La Vagabonds’ (1 June, 1878), pp 620.

<sup>316</sup> This is a discourse which would burgeon in the latter part of the nineteenth century. For more on the emergence of the juvenile delinquent subject see: Robert Nye, *Crime, Madness and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). and Stephen Toth, ‘Desire and the Delinquent: Juvenile Crime and Deviance in Fin-de-Siècle French Criminology’, *History of the Human Sciences*, vol. 10, no. 4 (1997), pp. 65-83.

<sup>317</sup> For a study of the treatment of the young offender in the nineteenth century see Michelle Perrot ‘Une population particulière: les enfants’, in Jacques Petit (ed.) *Histoire des Prisons en France* (Toulouse: Privat, 2002), pp. 67-72. See also Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London, Vintage, 1995).

<sup>318</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 65.

<sup>319</sup> Derrida notes that in the French language a *voyoute* is a liberated woman who shuns the conventional trappings of femininity. *Rogues*, p. 67.

## Physionomie de Criminel

The works Degas exhibited at the sixth Impressionist exhibition in 1881 can be seen as a continuation of the artist's preoccupation with the theme of adolescence. One of these works, the wax sculpture *Petite danseuse de quatorze ans*, he had intended to exhibit the previously year alongside the *Spartiates* although, along with that picture, it was withheld from the show at the last minute. It was eventually exhibited the following year alongside two pastel studies entitled *Physionomie de criminel* (figures (figures 134 and 135). (The fact that Degas considered showing the *Spartiates* with these contemporary works indicates that he believed them to be thematically connected.)

The *Physionomie de criminels* are, in fact, portraits of actual historical persons – three youths Paul Kirail, Emile Abadie and Paul Knobloch who had been recently brought to trial in association with a spate of brutal murders committed in Paris in 1879.<sup>320</sup> Two youths were arrested in connection with the murders: the nineteen year old Abadie and sixteen year old Pierre Gille whose faces are familiar to us from the official police photographs taken at the time of their arrest (figures 136 and 137). During the course of their trials, which took place in the summer of 1879, it emerged that the pair were members of a sophisticated juvenile crime racket with its own set of codes and rites, and a procession of youths were called to the witness bench to testify.<sup>321</sup> The proceedings however centred mainly on Emile Abadie whom the jury cast as the gang's ringleader and principal architect of the crimes committed. Pierre Gille on the other hand initially managed to elicit a little more sympathy from the prosecutors who were inclined to understand him as a *bon enfant* led astray rather than Abadie's cold-blooded partner in crime. This was due in part to his blond hair and angelic features which did not conform to the typical profile of a criminal. Albert Wolff, the journalist who covered the trial for the *Le Figaro* thought Gille resembled a the son of an English Lord (even though he then went on to admit that this illusion was shattered when this 'jeune gentleman' opened his mouth and *parle canaille comme un veritable yoyou* (sic.) *de Paris*.<sup>322</sup>

Much was made of Abadie's social and family background in the debate surrounding the case. Hailing from one of the poorest areas of Paris, there was no mention of his father, and his mother – described by a character witnesses as a woman of 'loose morals' – was a seamstress who was more often that not out of work. His education was fragmentary and in court he told of his time spent stealing, drinking absinthe and getting up

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<sup>320</sup> The 'Abadie Affair', as it was so dubbed, received extensive coverage in the press. For detailed commentary of this affair see Douglas Druick 'Scientific Realism: 1873-1881' in Boggs et. al, *Degas*, pp. 197-211 and 'Framing the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*', in Richard Kendall, *Degas and the Dance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 77-96.

<sup>321</sup> For an overview of the French criminal justice system at this moment see Kathleen Fischer Taylor, *In the Theater of Criminal Justice: The Palais de Justice in Second Empire Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>322</sup> Wolff, *Le Figaro* (4 août 1879).

to various sexual exploits with women of all ages. The accused also had a history of previous convictions. In short, his profile exhibited all the environmental factors which were seen to pre-dispose him to a life of crime and to illustrate perfectly the Naturalist theories propounded at the time in the novels of Emile Zola among others. Abadie was also seen to display the typical physical traits of the criminal. This idea was reinforced by Albert Wolff, who provided the reader with a compelling portrait of the nineteen year old as he took his place at bench to testify:

*Il n'a que dix-neuf ans et déjà il est formé comme un homme. Petit trapu aux épaules larges; sous les vêtements on devine des bras d'acier, unis à ces épaules par un jeu des muscles, surprenants chez un homme de cet âge; cet un jeune hercule qui dans cette associations de précoces malfaiteurs représentant la force physique; entre ses épaules de lutteur, la tête est plantée solidement sur un cou court et épais; la mâchoire, large et puissante, donne à cette tête cette allure de brute qui fait passer à la même particularité que, jadis j'ai observais chez Troppman. Le teint est pâle jaunâtre; c'est la coloration de la prison; les sourcils sont épais; le nez fort; les pommettes saillants outre mesure; la bouche est épaisse; un commencement de moustache dessiné une ombre noire sur la lèvre; l'oeil est terrible: le regard est fermé et ne se trouble jamais.<sup>323</sup>*

In this trenchant description Wolff paints the accused as guilty even before he has opened his mouth. For him Abadie's 'short solid neck' (*cou court et épais*), 'powerful jaw' (*la mâchoire, large et puissante*) and 'broad shoulders built for fighting' (*épaules de lutteur*) revealed his atavism and perfectly illustrated the features characteristic of a degenerate criminal physiognomy. While Wolff then went on to chastise the official courtroom sketches of the trial for not insisting enough on Abadie's '*côté bestial*',<sup>324</sup> it was precisely these aspects of his physical appearance which Degas emphasized in his portrait of the accused which he made the following year.

At the end of the trials in 1879, Abadie and Gille were found guilty of the murder of Mme Basengard and condemned to death (although this penalty was later rescinded). However, the case reopened again only a few months later when the sixteen year old Michel Knobloch came forward and confessed to the murder of a young grocer's boy from Saint-Mandé whilst implicating Abadie and another gang member, the twenty year old Paul Kirail, in the crime. A second set of trials took place in August 1880 and it was these which Degas, along with other members of the public, attended. Here he made several sketches of the boys in his carnets and which were to provide the basis for the *Physionomie de Criminel*.

<sup>323</sup> Albert Wolff, *Le Figaro* (4 août 1879).

<sup>324</sup> Ibid. The whereabouts of these drawings is not known. They are not on file at the *Préfecture de Police* archives with the other documentation relating to this case.

For these two portraits Degas mimicked the pictorial conventions of the courtroom sketch.<sup>325</sup> This we see first of all in the artist's carefully chosen media; the pastel crayon and brown paper constituting the typical materials of the courtroom artist. The sketchy rendering of the *Physionomie de Criminel* conveys the impression of it having been executed rapidly on the spot and in its appropriation of the gaze of the 'eyewitness' one is led to believe that this is a direct and unmediated character study. In fact the picture was not made *in situ* but is a highly orchestrated composition in which Degas utilized the conventions of the courtroom sketch to naturalize the effective criminalization of his subjects. This is illustrated by a comparison between the representation of Abadie in the *Physionomie de Criminel* and the initial sketches Degas made of him in court (figure 138). Although in the *carnets* he is represented in profile, his head was substantially adjusted in order to conform to contemporary criminal physiognomic stereotypes. The jaw-line was sharpened and highlighted (a recognized feature of degeneracy) while the nose and forehead were both flattened giving his profile a distinctly simian cast. The crowning feature of Abadie's degeneracy is his helmet of thick black hair (an attribute which Cesare Lombroso had explicitly associated with atavism).<sup>326</sup> Apart from the explicit references to physiognomic conventions there are a number of other important factors at work within the image through which the accused are effectively 'criminalized'. While the figures are positioned against an indeterminate background, the bar running across the bottom of the picture is enough to clearly locate these figures in the dock. But the insipid figure of Gille functions here as little more than a foil to Abadie's pathological corruption: his intractable expression, dark heavy features and brutish countenance are in stark contrast to the altogether more diffident presence on his right. To Abadie's right we glimpse the left shoulder of a prison guard (whose white epaulette placed in close proximity to his mouth resembles – in a cruel visual pun – the epiphysis of a bone). The boys are represented from the side (another explicit borrowing from physiognomic conventions). They both exhibit highly defined profiles which have been traced with sharp point of a black charcoal crayon, the better clearly to stand out against the picture's sketchy background. If further proof were needed that these works were designed with the explicit aim of providing a portrait of a legible juvenile criminal subject, it is explicitly acknowledged in the title of these works: *Physionomie de Criminel*.

Although the names of the youths were not given when these works were exhibited, the portraits were recognized immediately by their audience. As one critic jubilantly pointed out: '*M. Degas a fixé, avec son remarquable talent, les figures abruties et repoussantes*

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<sup>325</sup> For examples of nineteenth century representations of courtroom proceedings see 'The Trail Personae: Choreography and Character' in Fischer-Taylor, *In the Theatre of Criminal Justice*, pp. 31-43.

<sup>326</sup> Callen, *The Spectacular Body*, p. 26.



de Knobloch et d'Abadie'.<sup>327</sup> Whilst this was due in part to the fact that this scandalous case was still fresh in public memory (these works were exhibited in April of 1881 only eight months after the case had finally closed), they also displayed a physiognomic language with which they were already familiar. The critics received these works enthusiastically and went to town with their caustic commentaries of Degas' portraits of these degenerate and depraved youths. Charles Ephrussi praised Degas for his 'arresting' and 'incisive' portraits of the assassins: '*M. Degas qui expose de saisissantes et incisives études d'assassins...*'.<sup>328</sup> The art critic for *Le Journal des Arts* marvelled at their 'scientific exactitude' and 'terrifying realism: '*Quelles têtes! Avec quelle science et quelle exactitude elles sont redues dans leur répugnante expression!*'<sup>329</sup> Finally, Gustave Geffroy complemented the '*singulière sûreté*' of their physiognomies upon which all the stains of murderousness and vice were etched: '*sur lesquelles sont empreinte toutes les meurtrissures, toutes les salissures du vice.*'<sup>330</sup>

*Tes pas légers de jour, tes pas légers de nuit;  
Fais que, pour mon plaisir, elle sente son fruit  
Et garde, aux palais d'or, la race de sa rue*

Degas, *Petite Danseuse*<sup>331</sup>

The *Physionomies de Criminel* were exhibited in close proximity to the *Petite Danseuse de Quatorze ans* (figure 139), and these works were often discussed by critics in the same breath. It would appear that something of the innate criminality ascribed to the physiognomies of Abadie and co. was seen to rub off on the *Petite Danseuse*, a work which garnered an extremely vitriolic response from its first audience.<sup>332</sup> Charles Ephrussi condemned the sculpture's '*mauvais instincts et de penchants vicieux*'.<sup>333</sup> The art critic Paul Mantz had even more stinging words at the ready in his review of the sixth Impressionist exhibition in *Le Temps* – the greater portion of which is devoted exclusively to the *Petite Danseuse*. Here he rants at length about the 'bestial effrontery' (*bestiale effronterie*) of this 'profoundly vicious creature' (*un caractère si profondément vicieux*), before proceeding to examine the instructive ugliness of

<sup>327</sup> See Aug. Dalligny, 'Les Indépendants: Sixième Exposition', *Le Journal des Arts* (8 avril, 1881), p. 1. Reprinted in Ruth Berson, *The New Painting*, vol. 1, p. 336.

<sup>328</sup> Charles Ephrussi, 'Exposition des artistes indépendants', *La chronique des arts et de la curiosité*, (16 avril 1881), pp. 127. Reprinted in *ibid.*, p. 336.

<sup>329</sup> Aug. Dalligny, 'Les Indépendants: Sixième Exposition'. Reprinted in *ibid.*, p. 335.

<sup>330</sup> Gustave Geffroy, 'L'Exposition des artistes indépendants', *La Justice* (19 avril, 1881), p. 3. Reprinted in *ibid.*, p. 343.

<sup>331</sup> Degas sonnet *Petite Danseuse* reprinted in Degas, *Lettres*, Marcel Guérin (ed.) (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1947), p. 264.

<sup>332</sup> For more on the physiognomy of the *Petite Danseuse* see Callen, *The Spectacular Body*, pp. 21-29.

<sup>333</sup> Charles Ephrussi, 'Exposition des artistes indépendants', *La Chronique des arts et de la curiosité*, 16 avril 1881, p. 127. Reprinted in *ibid.*, p. 336.

her face (*l'instructive laideur d'un visage*) upon which '*tous les vices impriment leurs détestables promesses*'.<sup>334</sup> Anthea Callen has drawn out the visual resonances at stake between the profiles of these figures, claiming that by juxtaposing the *Physionomies de Criminels* with the *Petite Danseuse*, the former functioned to emphasize the 'anatomical and physiognomic signposting of degeneracy' at stake in the latter.<sup>335</sup> Callen then goes on to highlight the 'acute facial angle' of the wax sculpture (see detail figure 140).<sup>336</sup> Tilted at approximately 45°, her 'muzzle' bears an unmistakable resemblance to the ape occupying the lowest rung of the evolutionary model outlined by the Dutch anatomist Petrus Camper (figure 141) and which had, by the 1880s, become firmly entrenched within physiognomic discourse.

The *Petite Danseuse* is one of Degas' best known works and has generated a large amount of art historical literature.<sup>337</sup> But this sculpture merits further discussion within the context of this chapter in that it can be seen as the culmination of the artist's interest in the female adolescent body type which had begun almost thirty years previously. If the artist's uneasy life drawings of a pubertal female discussed earlier had demonstrated a profound sense of awkwardness and unfamiliarity on the part of the artist with regard to this body type, we see how it was one with which he was subsequently to become intimately acquainted. This is reflected in the large number of figure studies made in preparation for this sculpture (see for example figures 142 and 143) where the nubile form of a pubescent female has been skillfully traced from various angles. Indeed, this was a body over which the artist had been working obsessively during the course of the 1870s and 1880s in his myriad depictions of the young ballet *rats* who made up the ranks of the Paris Opéra. Here we see the pre-pubescent and pubescent young females engaged in the various activities which constituted their daily routine: tying the ribbons of their ballet pumps, warming up at the barre, adjusting their costume, yawning, stretching, preening, or simply taking a brief moment of repose (see for example, figures 144, 145 and 146).<sup>338</sup> Whilst Degas spent a great deal of time studying these girls *in situ*, he also hired these girls to pose privately for him. The model for the *Petite Danseuse* has been identified as one Marie von Goethem, a

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<sup>334</sup> Paul Mantz, 'Exposition des oeuvres des artistes indépendants', *Le Temps* (23 avril, 1881), p. 3, reprinted in *ibid.*, pp. 356-359.

<sup>335</sup> Callen, *The Spectacular Body*, p. 27.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>337</sup> Richard Kendall et. al, *Degas and the Little Dancer* (New Haven and London, 1988).

<sup>338</sup> The literature on Degas' dancers is huge and most scholars upon the artist touch upon this aspect of his artistic output at one point or another. See for example the various discussions in Armstrong *Degas*. For texts dealing explicitly with this subject see Lilian Browse, *Degas' Dancers* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959); Richard Kendall and Jill de Voynar, *Degas and the Dance* (New York and London: Harry Abrams, 2002), (esp. chapter 2 'Degas Backstage', pp. 62-87) and Eunice Lipton, 'At the Ballet: The Disintegration of Glamour', in *Looking into Degas*, 1986, pp. 73-115.

member of the Palais Garnier's corps de ballet who lived in Monmârtre close to Degas' studio.<sup>339</sup>

The *rat* – insofar as it is both a term of argot and an informal appellation marking out a historically specific social type – functions as an interesting counterpoint to the *voyou* which, as already noted, is a highly gendered construction. Indeed, if the young delinquent male was commonly associated with petty crime and violence, the principle source of corruption to which the young lower-class female was perceived to be vulnerable at this moment was prostitution. And while, as noted earlier, this is a point iterated by both Frégier and d'Haussonville, it is a link which is most compellingly dramatized by Zola through the character of Nana. A figure most familiar to us as operetta star and cocotte of his eponymous 1880 novel, the previous book in the Rougon-Macquart cycle *L'Assommoir* (1877) is notable here in that it is seen to stage the circumstances which brought Nana to this corrupt lifestyle. Sexually precocious from almost the day she was born (*elle avait de grands yeux d'enfant vicieuse, allumés d'une curiosité sensuelle*),<sup>340</sup> the young Nana quickly learns to use her feminine wiles to her best advantage. Seduced by the pretty charms and trinkets given to her by elder male admirers, prostitution is seen to offer Nana with the only route of escape from the abject conditions of her home-life and the unremitting drudgery of her low-paid factory job. Indeed, towards the end of the novel, when her in-laws the Lorrileux comment that Nana has turned out just as they had predicted, her step-father Lantier remarks dryly: '*la gamine était aussi trop joile pour foutre la misère à son âge.*'<sup>341</sup>

To be on stage (whether dancer or singer) was, due its public nature, an ambiguous profession for a woman at this time, which carried with it strong implications of sexual availability. This is borne out in numerous representations of the dancer in contemporary visual culture (figure 147). These images are, of course, more telling of the fantasies invested in this figure than contemporary social realities. Nevertheless, the *foyer de la danse* – where the well-heeled male *abonnés* could mingle with the young female dancers after the performance – was well-known as an arena for flirtation and one can be sure that certain relationships were formed as a result of the encounters enabled by this social space. These implications are certainly there in Degas' pictures of the Opera *coulisées* (figure 148), where there is usually a besuited male figure to be found lurking in the shadows somewhere. But they are made most explicit in a series of monotypes from the late 1870s (figure 149). These prints were made to illustrate Ludovic Halévy's *La Famille Cardinal*, a collection of short stories following the trails and tribulations of ambitious mother trying to secure rich patrons for her two teenage daughters, and which dealt precisely with the trysts and intrigues which went on backstage at the Opéra.

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<sup>339</sup> Theodore Reff, *The Artist's Mind* (New York: Harper and Row 1976), p. 245, n. 18 and 19.

<sup>340</sup> Emile Zola, *L'Assommoir* (1877), (Paris: Pocket, 1990) p. 319.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 459.

Thus, Degas was well aware of the connotations of sexual promiscuity associated with the figure of the young dancer. And whilst these are not explicitly intimated in the *Petite Danseuse*, the artist must surely have anticipated the response her appearance was likely to provoke when exhibited alongside the *Physionomie de Criminel*. For their part the critics did not disappoint. Amongst the many colourful insults levelled at the *Petite Danseuse* she was variously branded a ‘street-walker’ (*marcheuse*),<sup>342</sup> ‘a little Nana’ (*une petite Nana de quinze ans*)<sup>343</sup> a ‘flower of the gutter’ (*fleurette de ruisseau*)<sup>344</sup>, and a ‘flower of precocious depravity’ (*une fleur de déprivation précoce*)<sup>345</sup>.

Another interesting feature of the contemporary critical discourse on the *Petite Danseuse* was that many critics (despite the fact that this was explicitly indicated in the title of the work) were unable to definitively locate her in terms of age. Whilst some critics estimated the age of this ‘*enfant*’ or ‘*fillette*’ to be anywhere between eleven and fifteen, many others remarked on how much older than her years she seemed.<sup>346</sup> *Cambrée et déjà un peu lasse*,<sup>347</sup> as Paul Mantz baldly put it, while Joris-Karl Huysmans speculated that she might be the victim of a terrible malaise.<sup>348</sup> Elie de Mont did not feel that the title of the work functioned as an accurate description of the figure: ‘*La prévue que votre fillette de quatorze ans n’est pas vraie, c’est qu’elle n’a rien de jeune; ses maigreurs sont des sécheresses, ce sont les maigreurs, les raideurs de la vieillesse et non celles d’enfance.*’<sup>349</sup>

That the indeterminacy of the age of the *Petite Danseuse* constituted such a profoundly troubling aspect of this figure is indicative of a set of anxieties which map back onto the uneasy position occupied by the adolescent in mainstream discourse. But no one seemed to be able to put their finger upon the source of these anxieties at this moment. Indeed, for some commentators the inbetween-ness of this figure was seen to tip over into the realm of the abject (a zone where, as Julia Kristeva has discussed, that which falls outside the remit of the symbolic is relegated).<sup>350</sup> The ‘abject’ terms through which this figure was described by her first audience is symptomatic of an extreme form of anxiety

<sup>342</sup> Elie de Mont, ‘L’Exposition du Boulevard des Capucines,’ *La Civilisation* (21 April, 1881), p. 2. Reprinted in Berson, *The New Painting*, p. 361.

<sup>343</sup> Comtesse Louise, *Lettres Familières sur l’art: Salon de 1881*, *La France nouvelle* (1-2 mai, 1881), pp. 2-3. Reprinted in *ibid.*, pp. 356-359.

<sup>344</sup> Jules Claretie, ‘La Vie à Paris: Les Artistes indépendants’, *Le Temps* (5 avril 1881), p. 3. Reprinted in Berson, *ibid.*, p. 334-335.

<sup>345</sup> Paul Mantz, ‘Exposition des oeuvres des artistes indépendants’, *Le Temps* (23 avril 1881), p. 3. reprinted in *ibid.*, pp. 356-359.

<sup>346</sup> See for instance Joris Karl Husymans’ scathing critique of this figure in ‘L’exposition des indépendants en 1881’, *L’Art moderne* (Paris: Charpentier, 1883) pp. 225-257. Reprinted in *ibid.*, p. 348-355.

<sup>347</sup> Paul Mantz, ‘Exposition des oeuvres des artistes indépendants’, reprinted in *ibid.*, p. 356.

<sup>348</sup> ‘*La terrible réalité de cette statuette lui produit un évident malaise...*’, Joris-Karl Huysmans, ‘L’exposition des indépendants en 1881’. Reprinted in Berson, *ibid.*, p. 348-355.

<sup>349</sup> Elie de Mont, ‘L’Exposition du Boulevard des Capucines,’ *La Civilisation* (21 April, 1881), p. 2. Reprinted in Berson, *ibid.*, p. 361.

<sup>350</sup> See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

regarding the in-between and the indeterminate. These are brought to the fore by Henry Trianon, who was utterly appalled by this *'jeune monstre'*.<sup>351</sup> In his review published in *Le Constitutionnel* the critic describes at length the horrifying and grotesque ugliness of this freakish creature (*nous présenter une statuette de danseuse, il a choisit parmi les plus odieusement laides; il en fait le type de l'horreur et de la bestialité*), concluding that it had no place in an art gallery but should instead be exhibited as a medical or ethnographic curiosity.<sup>352</sup> Indeed, only one critic came anywhere close to apprehending what might be at stake here with the ominous verdict: *'jamais la disgrâce adolescente n'a été plus tristement rendus...'*<sup>353</sup>

### A topos of incompleteness

The *Physionomie de Criminels* and the *Petite Danseuse* can be seen here to represent the outcome of Degas' preoccupation with adolescence. A brief glance back at the artist's first tentative attempts to articulate this body throws into sharp relief exactly how far he had come since the mid-1850s, the date which marks the beginning of his concern with this theme. If the rudimentary life drawings of a pubertal female made in Rome bear witness to the artist's profound unease with regard to this body type, it was one which he was ultimately to 'master'. In the artist's ballet dancers of the late 1870s and 1880s we see how the form of the nubile adolescent female – manipulated into an endless array of poses and contortions – was rendered infinitely malleable under his grip. And while the glyph-like male epebes executed in preparation for the *Spartiates* are heavily derivative of idealized prototypes, the *Physionomie de Criminels* have a key role to play in the discursive constitution of a legible 'modern' adolescent subject with explicit associations of vice and criminality.

Degas' artistic practice is seen here to parallel the broader nineteenth-century cultural emergence of a modern adolescent subjectivity – but one must not forget the key role played by the *Spartiates* with regard to this discourse-in-formation. Indeed, it is this picture which must be seen as the real crucible of this subject's gestation. Marking out its inchoate beginnings, this canvas is the site where the ground of its possibility was first forged. But this was by no means an unproblematic or seamless passage and the irresolute surface of this picture surface stands as a testament to the intense difficulties at stake in this

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<sup>351</sup> Henry Trianon, 'Sixième exposition de peinture par un groupe des artistes: 35 boulevard des Capucines', *Le Constitutionnel* (24 avril, 1881), pp. 2-3. Reprinted in Berson, *The New Painting*, pp. 366-369.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.* Whilst the unfavourable terms through which this *Petite Danseuse* was described by her first audience are a long way from the ways in which she is perceived today perhaps a measure of this figure's monstrousness nature can be accounted for to a certain extent through the unconventional sculptural materials from which it was originally fabricated. The body was made from wax (tinted to resemble the colour of flesh), dressed in a silk bodice with a tulle skirt and a pair of fabric slippers, and had real hair attached to the head. The figure was exhibited in a specially made glass case. See Fiona Wissman, 'Realists among the Impressionists', in Moffett, *The New Painting*, pp. 337-352.

<sup>353</sup> Louis Enault, 'Chronique', *Moniteur des arts* (15 avril, 1881), p. 1. Reprinted in Berson, *The New Painting*, p. 339.

endeavour. The radical metamorphoses which have taken place upon the site of figures in the *Spartiates* are comparable to the drastic somatic transformations of puberty. The breaking of the voice, testicular enlargement, the onset of menstruation, the laying down of fat around the hips and painful swelling of breasts, are just some of the corporeal upheavals characterizing this phase of radical transition as the body undergoes the process of sexual maturation. The physiological alterations of puberty are thoroughly mapped in medical discourse.<sup>354</sup> Less accounted for, however, is the *psychic* turmoil of the adolescent who struggles in vain to make sense of what is happening to his/her own body. A period of rapid gestation, puberty is an intensely embodied experience, and (like parturition) marks an acutely corporeal moment within the 'history' or 'life' of the body. Swollen, sweating, fleshy, marked, aching, tender, flushed and bleeding, here is corporeality almost in excess; the soma at its most material.

In her sensitive, and still resonant account, of this phase Simone de Beauvoir has referred to the adolescent body as 'hysterical', in the sense that there is no distance between the psychic life and its physiological realization.<sup>355</sup> A compelling analogy, it is one which highlights just what is at stake for the adolescent subject implicated in the midst of the violent physical disturbances of puberty. In psychoanalytic terms puberty initiates a process of colossal psychic reorganization. A moment when parental identifications are redefined, this is a phase characterized by a 'tremendous loosening of the superego'<sup>356</sup> as the subject attempts to forge their own identity outside the family cell and may actively seek to break away from the influence and protection of their elders. Adolescence also marks a crucial juncture in the subject's psychosexual development. With the onset of puberty comes the (re)awakening of pre-genitality after the latency period which must, in turn, be integrated with genitality.<sup>357</sup> The seismic upheavals taking place at the level of the psyche during the pubertal phase have prompted Julia Kristeva's definition of the adolescent subjectivity as a 'crisis structure'.<sup>358</sup> While this is in keeping with the dominant conceptualization of adolescence in western thought since Rousseau's *Emile*, Kristeva's move is to pursue the productive possibilities of this metaphor. Adolescence is here a moment where 'the frontiers between differences of sex or identity, reality and fantasy, act and discourse, are

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<sup>354</sup> As Julia Kristeva has commented of this discourse 'science is not concerned with the subject...as site of proceedings'. Her comments concern the gestating female subject but are also applicable to adolescence. See 'Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini', *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Leon S Roudiez (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 237-270.

<sup>355</sup> De Beauvoir is referring here exclusively to the *female* adolescent. *Le Deuxième Sexe*. p. 95.

<sup>356</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'The Adolescent Novel', in James Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (eds) *Abjection, Melancholia, Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 8.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8. For an outline for the Freudian model of psychosexual development to which Kristeva adheres see Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' (1905), *Standard Edition*, vol. 7, pp. 123-230.

<sup>358</sup> Kristeva, 'The Adolescent Novel', p. 9

easily traversed without one being able to speak of a perversion or borderline.<sup>359</sup> It is Kristeva's characterization of adolescence as a porous and fluid transitional space, the site of transaction, negotiation and interchange, which mirror the transformations at stake upon the site of the figure in the *Spartiates* – the site upon which past and future, history and modernity, tradition and innovation are literally seen to collide.

The adolescent, insofar as it inhabits a body in a transitory state, is the nexus of various temporalities: *une fois pubère, l'avenir non seulement se rapproche: il installe dans son corps... le présent ne lui apparaît que comme une transition*. Although this is manifested most obviously in terms of the palpable physical changes characterizing this phase of rapid transition, it is an idea which also bears interesting psychic ramifications. The adolescent is literally torn between two places: childhood and adulthood, and the process of detachment from parental omnipotence (whether that be understood in terms of the Oedipal family unit or the maternal body) which is a defining feature of this moment is one that is profoundly ambivalent. Indeed, while this predestined disaffiliation may be eagerly anticipated by the impatient teenager – eager to leave behind a phase which it perceives itself to have outgrown – it is one which is inevitably tempered by a profound sense of nostalgia or 'homesickness' for that which it has left behind. The adolescent's psychic predicament perfectly mirrors the quandary with which Degas was confronted at the beginning of his career. That the artist had progressively come to realize that History painting was defunct is nowhere better demonstrated than by the *Spartiates* itself – a picture which functions as a self-immanent critique of this genre and its outmoded figurative rhetorics. The centuries-old artistic legacy bequeathed to Degas by his predecessors is a burden he felt extremely acutely, and the artist would never manage to discard completely his early classical training or veneration of past masters to whom he would always remain indebted. While Degas (perhaps, better than anyone) apprehended that the process of extrication from obsolete institutional conventions was an imperative endeavour, the classical tradition enshrined in the Academy bore with it the onerous weight of history and tradition and was not something that could be cast off lightly or relinquished without cost.

While much of this chapter has been dedicated to emphasizing this picture's precocious *modernity* (the casting-off of historical dress, the picture's indeterminate and peripheral setting and the effacement of the timeless profiles of classical beauty), it is time now to consider the cost of this transition. A symptom of Degas' investment in the classical tradition and his inability to relinquish it completely is to be found in the ancillary grouping of elders in the distance to which I drew attention to earlier (see detail figure 150). This sub-grouping remains the most classically evocative part of the picture. Dressed in full-length togas, the expressionless faces of these figures bear a peaceful, vacant serenity, while their

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<sup>359</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

graceful postures and frozen gestures call to mind the eloquent bodily rhetoric of antique statuary. In this configuration there are also a number of clearly identifiable references to past precedents. The figure of Lycurgus, for instance, is directly lifted from a figure on a Greek ceremonial relief at the Louvre (reproduced here in an engraving (figure 151)), while the seated figure to his left on the Chicago canvas, as we saw in the introduction, references the muse Euterpe from Raphael's *Parnassus*.

If these references were the means through which the artist paid his respects to his artistic forebears, what is most interesting about this configuration is its evolution within the gestation of the *Spartiates* as a whole. Present from the earliest studies of this work, it is a detail which remained virtually unchanged in the midst of the radical figurative alterations taking place across the rest of the picture as the work progressed through its different stages. If these upheavals are analogous to '*les orages de la puberté*'<sup>360</sup> (as the *Dictionnaire des Sciences Médicales* describes the physiological turbulence of this moment), then this configuration functions as the stilled centre of the picture; the calm eye of the storm. Lifted from the Chicago canvas, this pictorial 'anchor' was transferred directly onto the National Gallery painting. (Further evidence of Degas' attachment to this configuration is indicated by the fact that the artist retained the paper through which this procedure was enacted (figure 152). This thin scrap of paper was reserved and reused again, the classical grouping marked out here transferred a second time onto another piece of paper (figure 153) and subsequently worked upon, as seen in the careful description of the folds of drapery with coloured sanguine crayon.<sup>361</sup>) The figures constituting this grouping upon the surface of the picture – organized along an entirely separate spatial plane – inhabit an island of isolated tranquillity. Effectively cut off by a gulf of empty space dominating the middle of the composition, this sense of spatial remoteness is underscored by their implied temporal removal. The figures form a self-contained mini-tableau characterized by a silence and stillness reminiscent of a Poussin painting. Entirely disengaged from the action at the front, this configuration is a world away from the disjointed poses, uncertain movements and jarring, fragmentary gestures of the confrontation staged in the foreground. Their costumes and hairstyles connote the timeless world of the classical and function within the picture like a pocket of lost historical time, an anachronism – harking back to an outmoded classical past that had never existed, or at least existed no longer. Framed against a moment when it was no longer possible to foster their illusion, we might see this group as the last poignant remainder of a lost classical world – a fantasy which the artist was unable to relinquish completely, and to which he would always remain half in thrall.

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<sup>360</sup> *Dictionnaire des Sciences Médicales*, p. 594.

<sup>361</sup> N M Ittman, 'A Drawing by Edgar Degas for the *Petites Filles Spartiates Provoquant des Garçons*,' *Register of the Museum of Art, University of Kansas*, vol. 3, no. 7 (Winter, 1966), pp. 38-47.



As this thesis broadly argues, the 1860s is a historical moment corresponding to Degas' own artistic formation. It is this period of maturation which can be productively compared to adolescence. But adolescence is, by its very definition, a transient phase and takes its place amongst a series of psychic separations and transitions defining the passage from birth to death, and through which the subject is required to work. This idea can be mapped back on to the artist's own narrative of creative development: just like adolescence, Degas' own artistic formation was a phase through which he too would ultimately pass. Degas' role in Art History as one of Modernism's key progenitors is firmly secured (as it was even within his own lifetime). But his inability to ever finish the *Spartiates* stands as testament to a deep seated ambivalence with regards to the aggressive disassociation of one's practice from past artistic traditions that this status inevitably entailed. Here Kristeva's description of the adolescent as 'a topos of incompleteness' perfectly mirrors the psychic irresolution at stake upon the surface of this picture. In this respect it is highly significant that the *Spartiates* was never varnished.<sup>362</sup> Applying varnish to a canvas after it has been completed serves a number of practical functions. But, depending on the nature of investment in the work, it is also an immensely freighted pictorial gesture in that it forecloses the possibility of further revisions or alterations. This was certainly the case for Degas with regard to the *Spartiates*. For him to apply a coat of varnish over this picture surface would have sealed off his connection with the past for good and thus represented an act of symbolic closure that he was simply not able to make. Degas instead kept this work close at hand in the studio where it remained for him a space in which this irrevocable break would never have to be taken. His endless reworking of the picture offered a way through which he was able to refute the inevitability of this severance – a moment which (even if only in the illegible no-mans land of this picture) was endlessly deferred and forever delayed.<sup>363</sup> By keeping possession of the *Spartiates* throughout his life, and holding it in a perpetually suspended state of partial completion, Degas was able to celebrate the flux of becoming that is the defining feature of adolescence whilst holding on to the myriad possibilities and infinite potential embodied by the evanescent moment.

As argued in the introduction, the *Spartiates* is the locus of the artist's shifting identifications, and his subjectivity is implicated everywhere within this picture. Although he was ultimately to align himself with the figure of the staid Lycurgus, the picture was to remain the site upon which he could still detect the semblance of his own reckless juvenescence (the defacement of the classical ideal enacted upon the site of the figures in the foreground is the ultimate '*je m'en fous*' to the onerous weight of this historical tradition

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<sup>362</sup> Bomford et al., *Degas*, p. 78.

<sup>363</sup> Tamar Garb has compellingly discussed the intersection of psychic irresolution and pictorial 'unfinished' in her essay on Mary Cassatt's 1889 portrait of her mother. See 'Blank Mourning: Portraiture and Separation', in *The Painted Face: Portraits of Women in France, 1814-1914* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 101-138.

in whose shadows (*sous les yeux*) the young apprentice was initially obliged to function). Perhaps it would not be too much then to see in the figure of Degas' David, whom we saw at the very start of this chapter, an unconscious phantasmatic identification on the part of the novice artist with this slightly hesitant youth. And while, as he approaches unfamiliar territory, he seems to flounder momentarily, it is this unassuming figure who holds the promise of the future. Poised at the brink of something momentous, he is a cipher of adolescence – encapsulating all its unrestrained energy and burgeoning but as-yet-unrealized potential.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE: *SCÈNE DE GUERRE AU MOYEN-ÂGE***

*There is no more painful turmoil and confusion than when a city burns. And one's heart rebels in far too violent agony at the sight of such a senseless spectacle. What is revealed then, in the red glow of flames and in the acrid smoke, is the symbol of war as crazy and brutal as fire and as dark as the smoke dimming the sky. The luminous balance of life is broken, because there is no one whose eyes are not burned by the light of the intense flames and whose flesh is not wounded by this bloody cruelty.*

George Bataille 'Notre-Dame de Rheims'.<sup>364</sup>

A scene of devastation (figure 154). Three men on horseback dressed in medieval costume depart by way of a dusty track. But these are no knights in shining armour come to rescue their damsels in distress. Leaving in their wake a trail of destruction, one aims a last parting shot at a random victim as his fellow perpetrator looks on. The last of this infernal trio carries away his booty straddled indecorously astride his mount. Under the watch of a Gothic cathedral in the distance, a burning village smoulders, its acrid smoke spreading ominously across the sky. Writhing in the aftermath of their collective violation a series of prostrate female figures litter the ravaged landscape. One is tied naked to the carcass of a burnt tree, another almost trampled upon by the hoof of a stampeding horse. Opposite, a figure hugs a mound of earth, face buried in the dirt. Next to her, a pair lie on their backs unconscious. At the far left two figures, wracked with shame, drag themselves away, limping from the scene. Their furtive departure rings of shame: Adam and Eve departing in disgrace after their expulsion from Eden.

In this scene of rape and pillage the female body is hunted down like prey. Exploited, degraded and humiliated. Stripped and spat upon. Tortured, tied up, robbed and beaten. Denuded of dignity, discarded and forsaken, this here is femininity's utter debasement and abjection; the *membra disjecta* of the female body lies scattered like shrapnel across the picture surface.

*Scène de guerre au moyen-âge* was the picture with which Degas finally made his long-awaited for Salon debut in the summer of 1865. The medium is described in the Salon *livret* as a pastel and listed accordingly under the *dessins* of that year (a portmanteau which encompassed media as diverse as watercolour, porcelain, miniatures, enamels and stained

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<sup>364</sup> Reprinted in Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press 1989), pp. 15-19.

glass; i.e. that which could not be classified under the privileged rubrics of 'peinture' or 'sculpture').<sup>365</sup> The matt surface of this picture would, at first glance, indeed appear to be pastel. However, it is in fact *essence*; a technique where oil paint is applied to the canvas and the excess oil blotted off. There is no record of where the picture was hung at the Salon, although one can assume it was exhibited in some minor annexe gallery of the Palais des Champs-Élysées. It was inevitably painting which pulled the crowds at the Salon, and Manet's *Olympia* was the canvas which single-handedly stole the show that year.<sup>366</sup> Degas' belated Salon debut was a damp squib in comparison. Indeed, in all the extensive critical literature generated by the Salon that year there is not a single comment to be found relating to *Scène de Guerre*.<sup>367</sup>

Besides the perfunctory entry in the Salon *livret* there is not much information to be gleaned from other sources of primary documentation regarding this picture. After its brief outing at the Salon the painting returned to the studio and did not see the light of day again until over fifty years later when it was sold at the artist's posthumous atelier sales under the title *Les Malheurs de la Ville d'Orléans*. Here it was bought by the Musée de Luxembourg along with *Sémiramis Construisant Babylone* – presumably as representative examples of the artist's 'early work'.<sup>368</sup> But whilst *Sémiramis* and the *Young Spartans* are, as we have already seen in the preceding chapters, firmly established within the Degas folklore, there is no mention of *Scène de Guerre* to be found in any of the anecdotal literature on the artist. If the accounts and memoirs of those who knew the artist personally are anything to go by it would seem that this was a work with which they were simply not acquainted.<sup>369</sup>

Degas' early commentators did not have much to say about this work either and it not until 1967 that we find the first extended commentary on the picture. This was provided by the French art historian Héléne Adhémar who, in an article published in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, interpreted its subject as an 'allegory' of the American Civil War.<sup>370</sup> As justification for this claim the author cites a misreading of the picture's title as it was listed in the atelier sales catalogue, claiming that the '*Ville d'Orléans*' should instead read '*Nlle Orléans*'. From this Adhémar goes on to claim that the picture must be seen to refer to the Battle of New Orleans when the city was captured by Union soldiers on 1 May 1862. It is well known that the inhabitants of the city subsequently suffered under the harsh martial law of General Franklin Butler and Adhémar cites his infamous decree that all women

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<sup>365</sup> *Explication des ouvrages de peinture, sculpture, architecture, gravure et lithographie des artistes vivants exposés au Palais des Champs-Élysées le 1er mai 1865* (Paris, 1865).

<sup>366</sup> TJ Clark, 'Olympia's Choice', *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), pp. 79-146.

<sup>367</sup> Boggs, *Degas*, ex. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984) p. 107.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>369</sup> Jeanne Févre and Daniel Halévy, for example, make no mention of the work.

<sup>370</sup> Héléne Adhémar, 'Edgar Degas et 'La scène de guerre au moyen-âge'', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, LXX (November, 1967), pp. 295-298.

showing contempt or hostility to Union soldiers should be treated as ‘a woman of the town plying her provocation’.<sup>371</sup>

Based only on an unsupported speculation regarding a title which Degas himself did not even attach to the work, this is a somewhat tenuous link to make. However, it is one which is given a certain amount of plausibility in view of the artist’s intimate biographical connections with the city of New Orleans.<sup>372</sup> Degas’ mother Celestine Musson, a French Créole, was born in the city and many of his maternal relatives still resided there. Moreover, the Mussons were directly affected by the events of the American Civil War. The husband of his first cousin Estelle was killed at the Battle of Corinth and in 1863 she, along with her sister and mother, subsequently sought refuge in France with their extended family. During their eighteen month stay Degas kept in regular contact with the three women, and visited them frequently in Bourg-en-Bresse where they had made their temporary home. From surviving letters it would appear that Degas grew extremely close to the Mussons and surely heard from them first-hand accounts of the violence and civil unrest afflicting his mother’s homeland. It was during a visit to them in January 1865 (just four months before *Scène de Guerre* was exhibited at the Salon) that Degas executed a sombre group portrait of the three Musson women (figure 155). As they metered out the days in the oppressive tedium of their cloistered existence, their despondent attitudes clearly indicate the toll recent experiences had taken upon them.

Adhémar’s reading of *Scène de Guerre* subsequently became the generally received interpretation of the picture.<sup>373</sup> However, I would maintain that hers is not an entirely convincing – much less satisfactory – argument, and is an interpretation which has functioned primarily for those who seek solace in a historical and biographical descriptive context in order to ‘explain’ or find some theoretical justification for this picture’s highly disturbing subject. For those less interested in establishing a narrative framework through which to understand *Scène de Guerre*, the picture has invariably been taken as proof of Degas’ reputed hostility towards the opposite sex – or else seen to illustrate his preoccupation with themes of sexual conflict and antagonism.<sup>374</sup> Although I would disagree with the idea that the sadistic encounter staged in *Scène de Guerre* can be reduced to a manifestation of the artist’s reputed ‘misogyny’, the unsettling inter-sexual dynamics at stake in the picture demand further exploration. I would therefore like to open up an alternative route into the picture by attending to a hitherto neglected aspect of the picture: its medieval-ness. It is, I

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<sup>371</sup> Butler quoted in *ibid.*, p. 295.

<sup>372</sup> See John Rewald, ‘Degas and His Family in New Orleans’, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, XXX (August 1946), pp. 105-206.

<sup>373</sup> Richard Thomson, did not agree with the allegorical interpretation, but was unable to provide an alternative explanation. See *Degas: The Nudes* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), pp. 48-51.

<sup>374</sup> See for example Quentin Bell and Norma Broude, cf. Chapter 2, n. 40 and 41.

believe, via a detailed exploration of this subject that we might begin to account for the disturbing nature of the picture's theme.

Although the medieval references of *Scène de Guerre* were dismissed by Adhémar as nothing more than an allegorical 'disguise', they must have held a certain significance for the artist. It was, after all, a historical epoch to which he explicitly referred in the title under which he presented the work at the Salon. The medieval aspects of the picture were taken a little more seriously by the curators of the 1988 Degas exhibition, who even went so far as to consult two prominent medievalists about what this 'strange scene' might be seen to reference.<sup>375</sup> They came back with the (somewhat predictable) conclusion that the picture did not depict a 'precise historical event'.<sup>376</sup> Certainly, there are too many inconsistencies and anachronisms at the level of historical detail within the picture for it to be legible as a depiction of a specific event within the Middle Ages. The detail at the level of costume and accessories, for instance, does not add up. While two of the men sport 'Robin Hood' style costumes replete with plumed hats, the middle figure wears the full body armour (sans helmet) characteristic of heavy cavalry. The weaponry too is inconsistent. The size of bow and arrow used by the figure in the yellow jerkin, for example, is too cumbersome to be effectively manipulated on horseback and more like that used by an archer on the ground. Whether or not these discrepancies were intentional or not, it is clear that Degas was not overly concerned with historical detail when assembling this picture. While in the preliminary stages of *Sémiramis* and the *Young Spartans* Degas undertook detailed archaeological research for each (even if this is not much in evidence on the 'final' canvases); there is almost nothing in his notebooks relating specifically to *Scène de Guerre*, save for a few cursory sketches of medieval costume (see figures 156 and 157).

Perhaps then, if historical accuracy was not Degas' main concern neither should it be ours – in which case it would seem that seeking to pin down its subject to a depiction of a precise historical event is to utterly defeat the point. However, I see this as no reason to disregard the explicit medieval references in this picture (even if they are historically inaccurate!). Rather I take it as my cue to explore the compelling imaginative terrain that this historical epoch opened on to for Degas. In choosing a medieval theme for its subject the picture mobilizes a rich repository of historical desires and anxieties associated with this period and engages with a completely different set of fantasies than the classical subjects which were the mainstay of History painting. While we have already seen how Degas was seduced by the charms of antiquity, it will presently become clear that – at least for a time – the medieval world exerted a certain hold upon his imagination too.

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<sup>375</sup> Boggs et al., *Degas*, p. 105.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

Degas' engagement with the Middle Ages must be understood in relation to the way in which this historical period was understood and represented in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>377</sup> Denigrated by the Enlightenment, the medieval period was subsequently 'rediscovered' in the early nineteenth century which promoted a more romantic image of the infamous 'dark ages'. The historical revivalism of the medieval period in France at this moment led to a renewed interest in its early literary heritage. New editions of post-classical texts were made widely available to the public. This was also the period which gave birth to the Gothic novel, of which the best known example was *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831). Hugo's atmospheric recreation of medieval Paris under the watch of the immense cathedral was designed with the explicit intention of kindling public interest in the preservation of France's Gothic monuments and is reflective of a wider contemporary concern regarding the state of national buildings – many of which had been seized from the hands of the crown and clergy during the Revolution and subsequently fallen into disrepair through vandalization and neglect. Viollet-le-Duc was also an important advocate of the Gothic at this moment. It was he who was primarily responsible for convincing the Academy of the national importance of this architectural style.<sup>378</sup>

It also was during the first half of the nineteenth century that a wide range of artefacts from the Middle Ages were made accessible to the public for the first time. The Musée de Cluny, originally established by the private collector Alexandre Du Sommerard, was taken over by the state after his death in 1844 under the curatorial direction of his son. Housed in a former Gothic residence used by the Abbots of Cluny, the museum aimed to bring the Middle Ages alive for the nineteenth century visitor, providing, as Elizabeth Emery and Laura Morowitz have put it: 'a total environment in which the visitor could imaginatively occupy the role of a lord or knight'.<sup>379</sup> The ways in which the museum's showcasing of objects conspired to render this experience as vivid as possible for the visitor is seen in a contemporary engraving (figure 158). Purporting to be the chamber of François I, the room is crammed with a wide variety of objects: furniture, sculpture, armour and tapestries jostle for space alongside myriad other smaller *objects d'art*. While this somewhat chaotic arrangement of medieval artefacts may seem today as nothing more than an overly earnest attempt at historical simulation, it seemed to produce the desired effect upon the

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<sup>377</sup> For the literature upon this subject see: Elizabeth Emery and Laura Morowitz, *Consuming the Past*, esp. chapter 1, 'The Middle Ages belong to France: Nationalist Paradigms of the Medieval'. (Ashgate: London, 2004), pp. 1-12. See also, Claire A Simmons, 'Introduction' in *Medievalism and the Quest for the 'Real' Middle Ages* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001) and Janine R Dakyns, *The Middle Ages in French Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

<sup>378</sup> See Bruno Foucart, 'Viollet-le-Duc et la Restauration' in *Les Lieux de Memoire*, Pierre Nora (ed.) vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), pp. 612-649.

<sup>379</sup> Emery and Morowitz, *Consuming the Past*, p. 67.

nineteenth century spectator.<sup>380</sup> Jules Janin likened his visit to stepping into the Middle Ages (*vous vous trouviez en plein moyen-âge*<sup>381</sup>) whilst Emile Deschamps described his experience as being ‘enveloped’ by the good old chivalric times (*vous êtes envelopés de bons vieux temps chevalresques*<sup>382</sup>).

It was also during the nineteenth century that the medieval period became an object of serious historical research for the first time, a collective project which led to the formation of a recognizable medieval discourse to which we are heir today. Concerted efforts were also made to make this knowledge available to a wider audience, and a whole genre of books appeared around this time which aimed to take the study of the Middle Ages outside the domain of the specialist and make it accessible to the general public. One such publication is Paul Lacroix’s *Le moyen âge et la Renaissance: moeurs, usages et costumes au moyen âge et à l’époque de la Renaissance* (1834) which contains detailed information on all aspects of medieval daily life such as hunting, martial tactics, costumes, recreational activities, food and cookery. Amply illustrated with detailed engravings (represented here by an engraving showing the different kinds of helmet worn in medieval combat (figure 159)) historical compendiums such as this were just the thing that the History painter would have consulted in the search for the right amount of authenticating detail to lend his work a necessary credibility.

Another direct consequence of the nineteenth-century cult of medievalism was a series of attempts made by certain scholars to enlist this renewed public interest in the Gothic to the service of fostering a collective sense of national pride and identity. Whilst this is clearly in evidence in the writings of Viollet-le-Duc, another important text indicative of this tendency is François Guizot’s popular *Histoire de France (racontée à mes petits-enfants)* (1869). Told in the style of a bed-time story to his grandchildren, the book begins with a gentle lecture on the importance of educating the young in their national heritage. Guizot’s text was instrumental in fostering a general familiarity with this period but its underlying agenda can be read as a concerted effort to entrench a Gallic historical narrative in the collective nineteenth-century French psyche. In this respect the Middle Ages play a crucial role in constituting the very foundations of this narrative. For Guizot it is with the Gauls that the true cultural origins of modern France are to be located. The first volume of this

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<sup>380</sup> For a detailed analysis of the Musée de Cluny’s attempts at historical recreation see Stephen Bann, ‘Poetics of the Museum: Lenoir and Du Sommerard’ in *The Clothing of Clío: A Study of the Representation of History in the nineteenth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 77-92. See also Dominique Poulot, ‘Alexandre Lenoir et les Musées des Monuments Français’ in *Les Lieux de Memoire*, pp. 497-531.

<sup>381</sup> Jules Janin quoted in Poulot, ‘Alexandre Lenoir et les Musées des Monuments Français’, p. 522.

<sup>382</sup> Emile Deschamps, ‘Visite à l’hôtel de Cluny’ (1834), quoted in Bann, ‘The Poetics of the Museum’, p. 82.



book is devoted to the country's turbulent early history from which, despite a series of threats and invasions from external forces, France emerges intact and victorious.

There is no concrete evidence of a direct encounter on the part of Degas with any of the above cited texts. And, although it was no more than a stone's throw from his Lycée, we cannot even be sure that the artist ever visited the Musée de Cluny and immersed himself in the '*bons vieux temps chevalresques*'. However, the medievalism of the nineteenth century filtered and pervaded many aspects of French culture and there are numerous sketches and jottings dotted amongst the pages of the artist's early notebooks which demonstrate an easy acquaintance with a wide variety of cultural and literary references to the Middle Ages. These include transcriptions of a long passage from Brantôme's *Vies des dames galantes* (1665)<sup>383</sup> (a text which I will discuss in more detail later), a sonnet by the sixteenth-century Italian poet Tasso<sup>384</sup> and a series of enthusiastic notes and sketches relating to a performance of Schiller's *Mary Stuart* which the artist saw in 1855.<sup>385</sup> In addition there are several doodles of scenes from the *Divine Comedy*. These include sketches of Lake Cocytus (figure 160),<sup>386</sup> Dante conversing with Paolo and Francesca<sup>387</sup>, Matilda picking flowers in the sacred wood<sup>388</sup> and Dante and Virgil at the entrance to Hell (the latter of which Degas would work up on a full scale canvas (figure 161)).<sup>389</sup> There is even a detailed copy of a tapestry (figure 162) depicting a hunting scene designed by the sixteenth-century Flemish artist Benjamin van Orley (figure 163).<sup>390</sup>

Paintings based on medieval subjects also have their own historical lineage within French art. Although there are certain instances to be found in History painting before the Revolution, it was during the Restoration that such works really proliferated.<sup>391</sup> With the reinstatement of the monarchy in 1814 the French government sought to promote a return to conservative values whilst re-establishing a sense of its national identity. Consequently, the Davidian *grand-machines* espousing their republican politics through the vehicle of heroic classical narratives fell out of favour and scenes and subjects from Gallic history gained prominence. Especially popular were scenes illustrating episodes from the life of Henry IV,

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<sup>383</sup> Nb 12, pp. 21-23.

<sup>384</sup> Nb 6, p. 72.

<sup>385</sup> Nb 3, pp. 87 and 96.

<sup>386</sup> Nb 18, p. 116.

<sup>387</sup> Nb 10, p. 29.

<sup>388</sup> Nb 10, p. 6.

<sup>389</sup> Nb 11, pp. 9, 11, 17 and 21.

<sup>390</sup> Nb 18, p. 113.

<sup>391</sup> For an overview of this subject see Nadia Tscherny and Guy Stair-Sainty, *Romance and Chivalry: History and Literature Reflected in Early Nineteenth-Century French Painting* (New Orleans: New Orleans Museum of Art, 1996). See also Beth S Wright, *Painting and History During the French Restoration: Abandoned by the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Todd Porterfield 'Troubadour', in Susan Siegfried and Todd Porterfield, *Staging Empire: Napoleon, Ingres and David* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania University Press, 2006), pp. 141-148.

such as the monumental *Représentation de l'Entrée d'Henry IV à Paris* (1817) by François Gérard (figure 164). Commissioned for the Maison du Roi at Versailles, this painting is little more than barely disguised Royalist propaganda designed with the explicit intention of enforcing a link between the first monarch of the Bourbon line (*le bon roi Henri*) and that of the present King Louis XVIII. The monarchy also sought to reinstate Christian values by promoting a revival of the Catholic faith. Victorious scenes from the Wars of Religion, the Hundred Years war and the Crusades became common themes; the patriotic deeds of French kings and martyrs providing a stark contrast to the pagan subjects of antiquity. It was a nostalgic image of the Middle Ages as an epoch of piety and religious devotion which had first emerged in the literature of the early nineteenth century such as François-René de Chateaubriand's *Génie du Christianisme* (1802) and which can be seen to have directly inspired the so-called *troubadour* genre of painting.

Although many of these artists had been trained in David's atelier, the *troubadours* sought to disassociate themselves from the austerity of Neoclassicism. Believing that the monumentality of its brand of large-scale History painting served only to distance and alienate the spectator, the *troubadours* dealt instead with more 'anecdotal' subject matter, favouring themes such as chivalry and courtly love which promoted refined sentiments such as courage, honour and generosity. This we see clearly in a painting by one of the genre's most prominent practitioners Jean-Philibert Dumet (figure 165). However, the *troubadour* mode was short-lived and had fallen out of fashion by the mid-nineteenth century, remaining a minor genre that ultimately did not pose a challenge to classicism, which had always remained the dominant force within the Academy.

Ingres is the most interesting figure to consider in relation to this genre, not least because he is the one artist who perhaps had the most direct impact upon Degas. Although classical subjects account for the vast majority of Ingres' artistic output, he also produced several works relating to episodes from the History of the French monarchy, such as *Don Pedro de Tolède baisant l'épée d'Henry IV* (1819) (figure 166), *Henry IV recevant l'ambassadeur d'Espagne* (1817) and *L'Entrée du Dauphin futur Charles V à Paris* (1821). In addition there also a number of works relating to post-classical literary subjects; *Le Songe d'Ossian* (1812), *Paolo et Francesca* (1819) (figure 167) and *Roger Délivrant Angélique* (1819) (figure 168). Produced for the most part between the Restoration years (1819-1824), the highly coloured almost 'decorative' surfaces of these tableaux, together with their stylistic naïveté, patriotic subject matter and anecdotal nature of the events depicted are entirely in keeping with a *troubadour* sensibility.<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>392</sup> See 'Un 'nouveau' troubadour,' in Victor Poméride et al., *Ingres* (Paris: Musée du Louvre, 2006), pp. 214-223.

With Ingres however, one detects a series of references to the darker elements of the Middle Ages; aspects of this episteme that had been suppressed for the most part by the loyal *troubadours*. This is brought to the fore most clearly in *Paolo and Francesca* and *Roger Déliverant Angélique*, a pair of works which dramatize the dialectical tension characterizing representations of the medieval period in the early nineteenth century which oscillated between two extremes: unbridled violence and depravity on the one hand and chivalry and religious piety on the other. We might see this pair of radically opposing images of vice and virtue personified in the figures of Joan of Arc and Gilles de Rais each of whom, in the nineteenth century, held their own peculiar cult status and were objects of intense fascination.<sup>393</sup>

*The Middle Ages, in Bataille's system of historical reference, occupies the position of greatest taboo. First, it is the period of uncontested, victorious Christianity. ... The Middle Ages of 'Notre-Dame de Rheims' is white, luminous, pious and monarchical, that of 'La Tragédie de Giles de Rais' will be nocturnal and feudal. ... The locus of the strongest taboo is the place also of the most astounding crimes.*

Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture*<sup>394</sup>

*Paolo et Francesca*, (Ingres executed several versions of this theme) for instance, refers to the forbidden love of Paolo Malatesta and Francesca da Rimini. The couple are depicted by Ingres sharing an illicit kiss. But their moment of tenderness is overshadowed by the jealous brother and husband Gianciotto lurking behind them. Functioning within the picture as the ominous portent of their death, Giancotto refers us back to the larger narrative context from which this motif is taken. While the protagonists of Ingres' tableau are nominally based on actual historical characters, their story was most familiar through Dante's *Inferno* in which their illicit love is recounted to the narrator by a wretched Francesca whom he meets upon his journey into the underworld on the second circle of Hell.<sup>395</sup>

For his 1819 *Roger Déliverant Angélique* Ingres utilized another medieval source: Ariosto's fantastical epic poem *Orlando Furioso* (1516). Set against the turbulent reign of Charlemagne, the poem contains scenes of graphic violence characteristic of the Carolingian literary tradition whilst also borrowing elements from the Arthurian romance. Although this poem can be understood as an attempt to integrate the two different genres, its narrative also works to undermine the rules of chivalry according to which the latter

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<sup>393</sup> See Georges Bataille, *The Trial of Gilles de Rais*, trans. Richard Robinson, (Los Angeles: Amok, 1991).

<sup>394</sup> Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p. 37.

<sup>395</sup> Dante, *Inferno*, Canto V, reprinted in Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy* trans. Charles S Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 51.

romantic tales were codified. In the courtly romance the feminine was traditionally represented through the figure of the unattainable lady admired by her knight from afar. But in a reversal of the power dynamics conventionally represented as structuring inter-sex relationships, it is the male figure who here takes the subordinate role. Enslaved in a relationship which offers no possibility of consummation, the lover's desire, sublimated into the elaborate rhetorics of romance, remains endlessly deferred and perpetually unrequited; at the mercy of the whims of the older, and often already-married, object of desire to whom he pays court. While Angelica also functions within Ariosto's text as a desired object of sorts, she is pursued in an altogether more forceful and aggressive manner than the means by which the gallant knight woos his lady. As a hunted object of prey, the behaviour of the succession of male pursuers from whom she flees marks a series of violations of chivalrous codes of conduct. At first pursued by the two enamoured cousins Orlando and Rinaldo, Angelica manages to escape their clutches only to fall into the hands of an evil magician who tries to rape her. Subsequently captured by natives she is then chained to a rock off the Irish coast as a sacrificial offering. It is at this point when she is discovered by Roger who, taking a fancy to her, then decides to ravish her himself.

*Paolo et Francesca* and *Roger Déliverant Angélique* were amongst several works by Ingres exhibited at his retrospective at the 1855 *Exposition Universelle*.<sup>396</sup> The twenty-one year old Degas attended the exhibition and, although making many copies of the works displayed here, seems to have been particularly struck by the figure of Angelica of whom he made a detailed sketch (figure 169).<sup>397</sup> This figure would eventually find its way into his own work, as seen in *Scène de Guerre* where the female body bound to a tree (see detail figure 170) is strikingly reminiscent of Ingres' Angelica. Degas' enduring fascination with this picture would lead him to copy various details from it again in 1869 when it was on display at the Musée de Luxembourg.<sup>398</sup> In later life Degas would ultimately come to acquire a miniature version of the painting, (now at the National Gallery) together with a sinuous compositional drawing.<sup>399</sup>

Susan Siegfried has highlighted the function of the female body in both *Paolo et Francesca* and *Roger Déliverant Angélique*, commenting upon how their 'affectivity' is 'achieved sadistically, through the suffering of women.'<sup>400</sup> This is particularly evident in the latter which, as Siegfried argues, takes its cue from the inherent sadism embedded in the narrative

<sup>396</sup> For more on the Ingres retrospective at 1855 Exposition see Patricia Mainardi, *Art and Politics of the Second Empire: The Universal Expositions of 1855 and 1867* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1997), pp. 49-61.

<sup>397</sup> Nb 2, p. 48.

<sup>398</sup> Nb 15, pp. 2, 8, 16 and 38.

<sup>399</sup> See Ann Dumas, *The Private Collection of Edgar Degas*, ex. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997), pp. 140-141.

<sup>400</sup> Susan Siegfried, 'Ingres and the Undoing of Narrative', *Art History*, vol. 23, no. 5 (December 2000), p. 654-680.

of Ariosto's poem. The moment when Roger first comes upon the enchained Angelica is here highly eroticized. The ninety-seventh canto provides a lingering description of her naked body reflecting the erotically invested look of the knight surveying his prey while the inopportune princess cowers shamefaced under his probing gaze. What we might think of as a 'symbolic violation' at stake in this text is mirrored in Ingres' picture, where Angelica's futile attempt to hide her face is counteracted by the full frontal view of her naked body afforded to the viewer as their 'gaze travels up and down her body against her will'.<sup>401</sup>

I would argue, however, that the inherent violence at stake in this sadistic operation is diffused to a certain extent as it is played out within the context of this particular narrative scenario. In relation to this point Siegfried has noted how the artist successfully captured something of the 'parodic tone' of the original text.<sup>402</sup> This is not difficult to see: the encounter between the damsel in distress and her rescuer are here inflated to almost comic proportions. While the phallic imagery of Roger and his trappings are ridiculous in their excess, Angelica, for her part, appears as the ultimate in feminine passivity, wearing an improbably docile expression as her head lolls limply back. The figure of Roger might also be understood as a lampooning of the traditional image of the 'knight in shining armour' – uncomfortably trussed up and perched precariously upon the roaring hippogriffe as he gingerly attempts to attack the sea-orc with his ludicrously gigantic spear. In these ways the sadistic violence at stake in Ariosto's original narrative is effectively diffused by the picture's comic elements in what adds up to a fantastical and utterly incredible scenario.

But while the sadistic element of Ariosto's narrative is reined in and effectively mitigated to a certain extent by Ingres, it is in *Scène de Guerre* where it is seen to emerge in all its force. As Degas pursued the picture's motif of the bound and humiliated female figure, this compelling image of feminine dejection was to be elaborated upon in cruel and disturbing ways.

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<sup>401</sup> Ibid., p. 672.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid., p. 673.

*Une dame de bonne part, au massacre de la Saint-Barthelemy, ayant été ainsi forcée, et son mary mort, elle demanda à un homme de sçavoir et de conscience si elle avoit offensé Dieu, et si elle n'en seroit point punie de sa rigueur, et si elle n'avoit point fait tort aux manes de son mary qui ne venoit que d'estre frais tué. Il lui respondit que, quand elle estoit en ceste besogne, que, si elle y avoit pris plasir, certainement elle avoit peché; mais, si elle y avoit eu du dégoust, c'étoit tout un. Voilà une bonne sentence!*

Seigneur de Brantôme, *Vies des dames galantes*.<sup>403</sup>

As already demonstrated, the image of the Medieval period as an epoch of indiscriminate violence and cruelty produced by the Enlightenment had been dispelled in various ways across the first part of the nineteenth century. However, it was an image which still held a powerful resonance, and for most the mention of France's medieval history was still to evoke the country's bloody religious wars which were waged across much of the sixteenth century. The most infamous event from this epoch is surely the St Bartholomew's Day massacre which, triggered by a failed assassination attempt on the Huguenot leader Admiral de Coligny in 1572, ultimately led to a large scale butchering of Protestants in towns and cities across France. (Contemporary accounts report that the rivers were so clogged with corpses that no one could eat fish for months after).<sup>404</sup> The massacre had, by the nineteenth century, assumed something of mythical status in French history. Retold and embellished in great detail by Prosper Mérimée in *Chronique du règne de Charles IX* (1829) and Alexandre Dumas in *La Reine Margot* (1845) (both originally published as *roman feuilletons*) it remained very much alive in the contemporary historical imagination.<sup>405</sup>

The strong resonance which the events surrounding St Bartholomew's Day held at this moment is also reflected in the sizeable entry devoted to it in the *Grand Dictionnaire*. Here we find a detailed account of events, together with graphic descriptions of the wholesale violence inflicted upon the Huguenots as the monarchy watched from the windows of the Royal Palace:

*On éventrait les femmes encientes pour arracher de leurs flancs les petits huguenots, qu'on jetait a la voracité des pourceaux et des chiens. Dans certains maisons ou tout avait péri, on emportait les petits enfants dans des hottes et on les jetait du haut des ponts a la rivière, comme des portées d'animaux. De petits misérables de dix ans étranglaient des enfants au berceau, ou les trainaient par les ruse au cord au cou. De tous côtes, le meutre, le pillage, le viol, la dévastation des maisons; les ruisseaux*

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<sup>403</sup> Brantôme *Vies des dames dalantes* (1665) (Paris: Adolphe Delahays, 1857) pp. 30-31.

<sup>404</sup> See Denis Crouzet, *La nuit de la Saint-Barthélemey: Un rêve perdu de la Renaissance* (Paris: Fayard 1994).

<sup>405</sup> For more information on the historical reception of these works see 'Introduction' in *La Reine Margot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. vii-xxiv.

*étaient gonflés de sang et le vomissaient à flots dans le fleuve, qui roulait incessamment des cadavres.*<sup>406</sup>

I do not wish to propose that *Scène de guerre* directly refers to the carnage of St Bartholomew's Day. What interests me most about this excerpt is how the medieval period is explicitly affiliated with sexual violence. Taking its place as an integral part of the proceedings, the violation of the female body is put on a par with the pillaging of land and property (*le meurtre, le pillage, le viol, la dévastation des maisons*). Indeed, if one compares Larousse's account of this massacre to any other of the innumerable historical conflicts and combats recounted within the myriad volumes of this compendium there is no instance in which sexual violence is foregrounded in quite the same way. Even in its account of the 'enlèvement' of Sabine women the *Dictionnaire* is at pains to stress that they were merely held hostages and that no form of sexual coercion was involved.<sup>407</sup>

Nineteenth century accounts of the St Bartholomew's Day massacre, such as that cited above, are less valuable for their historical accuracy than they are for the ways in which they bring together the various fantasies (violent, sexual and sexually violent) which had accrued themselves to the medieval epoch at this moment. A prime example of the ways in which the medieval period functioned as a site of displacement for such fantasies in the nineteenth century is provided by Delacroix's *L'enlèvement de Rébecca* (1846) (figure 171). Based upon an episode from Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, the painting shows Rebecca being abducted by two Saracen slaves at the command of the Christian knight Bois-Guilbert who had long coveted her. While the 'medieval' offered Delacroix with a justified pretext for the exploration of sexually violent fantasies, this epoch is seen to function in much the same way for Degas. In terms of subject there are many similarities between the subject of *Scène de Guerre* and *Rébecca* and I would argue that it was by tapping into the sexually sinister or 'nocturnal' side of the Middle Ages fantasized by the nineteenth century that the artist began his initial incursions into the theme of female debasement.

The sexual politics of the Middle Ages and medieval cultures of violence have recently become the subject of various sustained historical enquires.<sup>408</sup> One scholar who has dealt explicitly with the subject of sexual violence during this period is the French social historian Georges Vigarello. As noted in his important book *Histoire du Viol* (1988) the medieval world had no word as such to designate 'rape' (*viol*) as we understand it today.<sup>409</sup> Although feudal law did recognize certain forms of sexual violence as punishable crimes,

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<sup>406</sup> See entry under *La Nuit de la Saint-Barthélemy* in Pierre Larousse, *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1866), vol. 2, p. 279.

<sup>407</sup> See Larousse, *Grand Dictionnaire*, vol. 14J, p. 10.

<sup>408</sup> See Valetin Groebner, *Defaced: The Visual Culture of Violence in the Late Middle Ages*, trans. Pamela Selwyn (London: MIT, 2004).

<sup>409</sup> It is not until the penal law codes of 1791 where rape as a punishable offence is named explicitly for the first time. See Georges Vigarello, *Histoire du Viol*, (Paris: Sueil, 1988), p 104.

these cases were rarely brought before the court. Silenced due to the shame brought upon themselves by their disgraceful association with what was seen as a moral offence rather than a violent crime, victims were often reluctant to denounce their perpetrators.<sup>410</sup> When cases of female rape *were* brought to trial the assailant was often not convicted. The woman was generally regarded as an unreliable witness, and (especially if she was not a virgin) was likely to be held partially culpable for the act in which she was assumed to be complicit. As Vigarello goes on to note, it was sodomy and sexual crimes against children which were considered the most shocking and reprehensible forms of sexual violence at this moment, as it was such acts which disturbed social order and perverted the dominant power hegemony. Indeed, it was under the charge of abduction (*rapt/raptus*) that cases of sexual violence against women were taken most seriously. Here it was the act of theft, (rather than the personal injury done to the victim) that was deemed to be the most reprehensible part of the act. This reflects the juridical status of women within the *ancien régime*, who had no autonomous rights as such but were defined only in relation to their Master (father/husband/Seigneur) whose property they came under. In some cases this status may have worked to serve as a form of protection. Wrong done to the woman was wrong done also to her 'protector' and as a result crimes committed against married women carried more weight than those done to the female who 'belonged' to no one.<sup>411</sup> But equally, they rendered the female vulnerable to sexual exploitation by her Master who retained the right to exercise his power upon those bodies in his possession at his own discretion. Although the *droit de seigneur* may actually refer to any number of privileges the Lord of the Estate held over his subjects, it has subsequently become a commonly understood euphemism for the *jus primae noctis*: the deflowering of a virgin on her wedding night.<sup>412</sup> It is widely disputed just how commonly this 'right' was actually exercised by the feudal Lord. Nevertheless, the *jus primae noctis* had come to function as an infamous leitmotif of this historical epoch during the latter part of the nineteenth century. This is exemplified by a passage in Michelet's *La Sorcière* (1863) which gives us the pathetic story (*On voit d'ici la scène honteuse...*)<sup>413</sup> of a trembling groom presenting his terrified bride at the door of their Lord's chateau immediately after their nuptials. Greeted by the ribald guffaws of the assembled company (*'on imagine les rires des chevaliers, des valets, les espiègeries des pages autour ces infortunés...'*)<sup>414</sup> the young man desperately offers up all his worldly possessions to them in the hopes of sparing his new wife. But his pleas at striking a bargain are in vain and he is left with no other choice than to leave her to their mercy (*de l'obliger à s'aventurer ainsi au hazard de ce que peut faire*

<sup>410</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 29-37.

<sup>411</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 45-49.

<sup>412</sup> Alain Boureau, *The Lord's First Night: The Myth of the Droit de Cuissage*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>413</sup> Jules Michelet, *La Sorcière* (Paris, 1862) p. 67.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.



*cette meute de célibataires impudents et effrénés*)<sup>415</sup> and beat a humiliated retreat back to his humble dwelling. In recounting this ‘*chose odieuse*’, Michelet’s sympathy falls firmly on the side of the exploited serfs. The story ends with the mortified bride returning home the next day to beg her husband’s pardon, whereupon the pair weep together inconsolably until the walls tremble.

This unfortunate episode must be framed against the wider political agenda of *La Souricière*; a text which functions as a polemic condemnation of the treatment of serfs by the ruling classes of feudal society. Here, Michelet would seem to be most preoccupied with the treatment of peasant women who, we are told, were held in the utmost contempt (‘*Elles n’avaient pas droit d’être respectées. Leur honneur n’était pas à elles. Servies du corps, ce mot cruel leur était sans cesse jeté*’)<sup>416</sup> and regarded as little more than objects to be exploited for the entertainment of their masters: ‘*Au dix-septième encore, les grandes dames riaient à mourir d’entendre le duc de Lorraine conter comment ses gens, dans des villages, paisibles, exécutaient, tourmentaient toutes femmes et les vieilles même*’<sup>417</sup>... *Le plaisir était dans l’outrage, à battre et à faire pleurer.* Michelet was the nineteenth century’s most vociferous denouncer of the Middle Ages. This is explicitly stated in the introduction to his *Renaissance* (1855), where feudal society’s oppressive structures are compared unfavourably to the democratic and enlightened ideals of Republicanism. This text can be seen to mark a decisive shift away from the earlier ‘Romantic’ image of this historical epoch imagined by Chateaubriand et al. which had held sway over the course of the preceding decades.<sup>418</sup>

Whilst a modern notion of ‘rape’ was clearly a radically alien concept in the Middle Ages, what we find instead is a suggestive constellation of signifiers alluding to female violation in medieval French. The pervasive linguistic metaphors of sexual violence embedded in various discourses at this moment have been traced by the historian Catherine Gravdal in her book *Ravishing Maidens* (1991). One term which held a particularly rich semantic meaning at this moment was the verb ‘*esforcer*’, as in ‘*fame esforcer*’ (to force a woman). Derived from the Latin ‘*fortis*’ (strong, powerful, mighty) this resonates, as Gravdal argues, with ‘distinctly positive connotations of military heroism’.<sup>419</sup> As an image of strident and powerful masculinity is here bound up with chivalric codes of conduct and knightly valour, the semantic slippage at stake here might be taken as indicative of a culture in which forced coitus has its place as only one of many forms of violence and exercises of power. Another important term within the loaded medieval vocabulary of sexual violence is ‘*raptus*’

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<sup>415</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>418</sup> This is a shift which is also apparent in Michelet’s own writing. See Dakyns, *The Middle Ages in French Literature*. pp. 43-57.

<sup>419</sup> Catherine Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval Literature and Law* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1991), p. 3

(abduction), a direct derivative of the Latin *'rapere'*, itself bearing many suggestive connotations: 'to carry off or seize; to snatch, pluck, or drag off; to hurry, impel, hasten; and finally to abduct (a virgin).'<sup>420</sup> The implications of 'taking away' and forced removal might be seen as akin to the act of theft. (As we have seen it was when acts of sexual violence against women within feudal society were legally designated as *raptus* that they carried the most weight).<sup>421</sup> Closely related to this notion of *'raptus'* are the Old French *ravir* (to take, or carry off by force) and *'ravissant'* (to carry someone or something off by force), the meanings of which, as Gradval demonstrates, evolve and develop over the course of the twelfth century becoming explicitly associated with forced coitus. The author then goes onto note an interesting etymological development taking place in the thirteenth century with the emergence of *'ravisement'*. Originally referring to the action of carrying off a woman, the term subsequently acquires a specifically spiritual meaning when it comes to refer to the action of transporting or carrying off a soul to heaven, whilst also standing for the religious ecstasy associated with this spiritual form of ascension. These meanings gradually filter into secular language and by the fourteenth century *'ravisement'* is commonly taken to mean a state of sexual pleasure or rapture. Charting this series of semantic *glissements* reveals how, over the course of the medieval period, the notion of a violent abduction against one's will is gradually elided with the participant's willing surrender and the ecstasy ensuing from their capitulation. The resonant and powerful poetic rhetorics through which sexual violence enacted upon the site of the female body is articulated during the medieval period opens up a compelling imaginative terrain that can be productively mapped onto *Scène de Guerre*. But in order to elaborate upon the thematization of sexual violence within the medieval period in more detail, I would like to single out for further discussion one text in particular: Pierre de Bourdeille's *Vies des dames galantes* which is cited in the epigraph to this section.

De Bourdeille, commonly known as Seigneur de Brantôme, was a sixteenth century aristocratic soldier-courtier and lifelong devotee of Marguerite de Valois. After a riding accident ended his military career Brantôme retired to his estate to write what seems to have been intended as a candid account of his life and times. *Vies des dames galantes* was reprinted several times throughout the nineteenth century as part of the *Garnier frères* series of French Classics and there is convincing evidence to suggest that Degas was familiar with this text. Sometime during 1858 he copied from it a long passage describing Mary Stuart's emotional departure from France in 1561.<sup>422</sup> Although this patiently transcribed notation takes its place alongside countless other literary references dispersed amongst the pages of the artist's *carnets*, it merits consideration as more than an offhand reference. Indeed, it

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<sup>420</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>421</sup> See Vigarello, *Histoire du Viol*, pp. 45-49.

<sup>422</sup> Nb 12, pp. 21-23.

would seem that the young Degas had a certain investment in this tragic historical figure. As mentioned earlier the artist had been deeply moved by Adelaide Ristori's performance in Schiller's *Mary Stuart* and Linda Nochlin has made a convincing case that it was this tragic sixteenth-century heroine who provided a source of inspiration for a portrait of his paternal aunt Laura Bellelli, the unhappy protagonist of his *La Famille Bellelli* (1858-1867).<sup>423</sup>

For all this, however, there is no concrete indication of a direct engagement with some of the more violent and sexually explicit scenes of this book to be found in Degas' *carnets*. *Vies des dames galantes* nevertheless was well known for its salacious content in the latter part of the nineteenth century and it is hard to imagine how anyone in possession of this book would be able to resist pausing upon some of the numerous explicit passages contained within it. Written in a light-hearted and jovial tone the book is a dizzying litany of tales of romance, treachery, infidelity, lust and cruelty and contains extremely graphic descriptions of the sexual life of the nobility which are recounted by the author with undisguised relish.

The dominant trope within this text is the figure of 'Woman', who is exalted and denigrated by turns. Although the author would seem to be in thrall to the '*galante*' and '*honneste*' ladies to whom the book is nominally devoted, there is also a strong sadistic element to the narrative. Here the book's first discourse: '*sur les dames qui font l'amour et leurs maris cocus*' is the most telling. Although these wives are applauded for their craftiness in hatching ever more ingenious plans to deceive their unsuspecting husbands, they inevitably get their comeuppance as the men they have cuckolded wreak their vengeance in all manner of cruel and imaginative ways. There is a tangible sadistic pleasure at stake in the graphic and detailed descriptions of the ways in which these punishments are meted out. One cuckolded husband imprisoned his adulterous wife in a darkened attic, feeding her small but lethal doses of poison over the course of a year, during which time he paid her frequent visits and took great pleasure in taunting her that this slow and painful death was no more than she deserved. Another confined his wife to her bedchamber keeping her alive on a meagre diet of bread and water, whereupon he visited her each evening, made her strip naked, and beat her with no mercy until he was satisfied. We are also told of a Dalmatian lord who killed his wife's paramour and then forced her to sleep every night with his putrefying body, and a woman forced to drink daily from the skull of the lover her husband had killed.

But the most extreme tale of revenge recounted in the chapter is the tale of an Albanian knight and his adulterous wife who, upon discovering that his wife had been unfaithful, initially took his revenge by killing her lover. The knight, however, was not able

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<sup>423</sup> See Linda Nochlin, 'A house is not a home: Degas and the subversion of the family', in *Representing Women* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999) pp. 152-179.

to find consolation in this act, as he took his wife's cheating as a personal indictment of his sexual prowess (of which he was extremely proud). Thus, in order to punish her further he sought out a team of well-hung and burly men (*un douzaine de bons compagnons, et fort ribauts, qui avoyent la réputation d'estre bien et grandement proportionnez de leurs members et fort adroits et chauds à l'execution*) whom he hired for a fee. Locking them in a room with his wife and leaving her to their mercy (*la leur abandonna*) he requested that they all do their duty – with double payment if they accomplished their task well. The men set upon her one by one with such force and violence that they killed her (*la menèrent de telle façon qu'ils la rendirent mort*), much to the satisfaction of her husband who, having been watching closely all along, at her last breath threw in her face the jeer that if she was so fond of other men then she might as well take her fill (*il luy reprocha...que puisqu'elle avoit tant aymé cette douce liqueur, qu'elle s'en saoullast*).<sup>424</sup> In this tale, the intersection of sex and violence is thrown into sharp relief as they meet in the most brutal and aggressive ways upon the site of the female body; a collective exercise of masculine power and domination where the woman's debasement finds its ultimate denouement in her death.

One might be tempted to argue that the first discourse of Brantôme's book is nothing more than a selection of bawdy anecdotes. However, these are, without exception, at the expense of the female protagonist and upon a closer reading a common thread running through these stories is revealed, where the debasement and humiliation of the female protagonist is frequently associated with a cruel form of exposure (one that is more often than not enacted by her husband). This is made clear in the tale of a prince in bed with his wife one morning. When his knights came into the bedroom to collect him for a hunting trip the prince pulled back the sheets on the spur of the moment (*il leva si promptement la couverture*) to reveal his naked wife (who was holding his member and had not had time to remove her hand) laughing as he did with the words: '*Et bien Messieurs, ne vous ai-je pas fait voir choses et autres de ma femme?*'<sup>425</sup> This is just one of innumerable examples which are all seen to play out the same operation of exposure on which these sadistic narrative scenarios hinge and invariably deployed to the same effect: each time the libidinal charge at stake here is derived from the humiliation felt on the part of the female protagonist.

This sadistic operation which we see played out time and time again in the *Vie des dames* is symptomatic of a sexual pathology identified by the late-nineteenth century German sexologist Krafft-Ebing as 'Candaulism'.<sup>426</sup> The name of this perversion is derived from the eponymous King Candaules of Herodotus' famous tale (a myth to which

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<sup>424</sup> Brantôme *Vies des dames galantes*, p. 31.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>426</sup> Richard von Kraft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: A Medic Forensic Study* (New York: Pioneer, 1947).

Brantôme himself makes explicit reference in the book's first discourse).<sup>427</sup> As the legend goes, the Lydian monarch was so proud of his wife's beauty that he boasted of her to everyone, one day even going so far as to insist that his servant Gyges see for himself. Gyges was reluctant to do so as he did not wish to dishonour the Queen. However, he was also scared to disregard the wishes of the King, who hatched a ploy that one night the servant should hide behind the door of the royal bedchamber in order that he might watch unseen the Queen undressing before bed. But all did not go to plan on that night. The Queen caught Gyges sneaking out of the room and knew at once that she had been tricked by her husband. The next day she summoned the servant and issued him with an ultimatum: her sense of violation was so profound that she could not allow two men with knowledge of her body to exist in the world, and the servant must choose which of them must die. Ultimately Gyges chose to betray the King and follow the wishes of the Queen who insisted that he be killed in the same manner by which she had been shamed. Thus, the following night Gyges hid behind the very same door. Waiting until the King had fallen asleep, he then stabbed him to death.

The fable of Candaules is an enduring myth whose exotic historical subject and voyeuristic scenario was, not surprisingly, an appealing subject for artists and writers in the nineteenth century. Théophile Gautier's historical novel *Le Roi Candaule* appeared in 1844 and Gérôme exhibited a *néo-grec* version of this work at the Salon of 1859 (figure 172). This was a subject that also attracted Degas, who briefly toyed with the idea of executing a canvas on this theme. In the  *carnets*  there are several drawings of what seems to be Queen Nyssia in a bedchamber (figures 173 and 174) (whose pear-shaped form is heavily derivative of Ingres' *Valpinçon Baigneuse* which Degas had recently copied (along with Angelica) at the Exposition Universelle (figure 175). Although the artist sketched this female figure from various angles, her sideways-turned head and startled posture would indicate that these drawings refer to the moment when she is discovered by Gyges.<sup>428</sup> In addition, Degas also made several sketches of furniture and accessories based on engravings of Greek antiquities (figures 176 and 177), with which he presumably intended to decorate the Queen's bedchamber.<sup>429</sup> He even went so far as to execute a compositional oil-sketch of this subject (figure 178).<sup>430</sup>

<sup>427</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, Book 1, 4-7. Reprinted in *Herodotus*, trans. J Enoch Powell, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1949), pp. 3-7.

<sup>428</sup> Theodore Reff provides a short discussion of this work, which he interprets as being directly based upon Gautier's novel. See 'Degas and the Literature of his time', in *Degas: The Artist's Mind*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) pp. 150-1. See also Richard Thomson, *Degas: The Nudes*, pp. 30-35.

<sup>429</sup> These are based upon engravings from Pierre d'Hancarville *Antiquités étrusques, grecques et romaine*, 4 vol. Florence, 1801-1808.

<sup>430</sup> See Degas Nb 6, pp. 63-62 and 60-54. The compositional drawing is reproduced in Philippe Brame and Theodore Reff, *Degas et Son Oeuvre: A Supplement*, (New York and London: Garland, 1984), p. 23.

The pervasive rhetorics of female debasement dramatized in medieval discourse would seem to have constituted a large part of what initially attracted Degas to this historical epoch. However, they were themes which the artist was unable to follow up or articulate by way of traditional narrativizing devices, as the sketches relating to the never-executed King Candaules bear out. But although this work takes its place here as just one of many half-baked plans and abandoned projects scattered across the pages of the artist's early notebooks, the myth of Candaules was not completely discarded by Degas who retained this narrative's essential leitmotif: that of the mortified female figure, pursuing it far beyond the realm of the original historical narrative from which it was initially derived.

### *miser à nue*

*Scène de Guerre* stages a galling enough scene of feminine abjection. But it is in the preparatory drawings for this work that the rhetorics of female debasement are mobilized in all their force. Most of the poses are based on figures on the canvas itself, although the sheer quantity of these drawings (numbering around thirty in total), and their repetitive iteration of a series of recumbent poses far exceed the orthodox function of preparatory studies. Confronting these works in the opulent surroundings of the Louvre's Cabinet des Dessins is an utterly bewildering experience; paging through box after box, one prone female figure after the other with only minute variations here and there. After a while this compelling series begins to take on a life of its own. Detached from any relation to the painting the original reason for consulting these drawings is forgotten entirely as this chilling hermetic sequence demands to be considered in its own right as an autonomous body of work. Whilst the painting at least provided some semblance of narrative to justify the poses, these figures are all the more unsettling when viewed separately on paper. For it is here, where these bodies are mercilessly stripped of extraneous detail – and the gaze is honed exclusively upon the site of the figure – that the sheer *violence* at stake in these drawings emerges in all its force. The extreme process of narrative expunction witnessed here enforces the figurative rhetorics of stripping (enacting the very same sadistic gesture performed by the courtly protagonists of Brantôme's anecdotes) to which these figures have also been subjected. Deprived of any protective covering to ensure their modesty they are brutally *miser à nue* – a process of 'stripping bare' literally enacted in the two pairs of drawings (figures 179 and 180 and figures 181 and 182).

In *The Pleasure of the Text* (*Le plaisir du texte*) (1973) Roland Barthes asks: '*is not the most erotic portion of the body where the garment gapes?*'<sup>431</sup> He then proceeds to liken the erotic anticipation at stake in the unveiling of the body enacted in the corporeal striptease to the

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<sup>431</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 10.

narrative suspense of the novel.<sup>432</sup> In both cases the libidinal charge at stake is heightened by the deferral of gratification: ‘*the entire excitation takes place in the hope of seeing the sexual organ (schoolboy’s dream) or in knowing the end of the story (novelistic satisfaction)*’.<sup>433</sup> This is an erotic strategy clearly at play in the various scenarios of erotic unveiling already discussed. But the preparatory drawings for *Scène de Guerre* are, by stark contrast, marked by an aggressive refutation of the elaborate and protracted *mise en scènes* of erotic inveiglement at stake in the symbolic rhetorics of erotic seduction and narrative desire. The ramifications of the brutal procedures of *déshabillement* enacted upon the site of the female body in these drawings – together with the nature of Degas’ own subjective investment in them – will be addressed in detail in the final part of this chapter. Before that however, I would like to consider the formal possibilities which this extrusion of narrative scenario opened up for the artist. By getting rid of extraneous descriptive detail and dispensing with any semblance of ‘literary effect’, Degas was free to devote his sole attention to elaborating a mortified corporeal rhetoric of the female body.

*Elles glorifient même le dédain de la chair, comme jamais, depuis le moyen âge, artiste ne l’avait osé!*

Huysmans, *Certains* (1889).<sup>434</sup>

Degas’ pictorial style has often been linked to that of the European pre-Renaissance. This was a connection made explicitly by the German art historian Jules Meier-Graefe in one of the first monographs to emerge upon the artist after his death:

*What is Gothic in Degas is Gothic in the severest sense. Gothic line, but tenser, more jagged, more shadowy than any of the primitives of France in whose art there is always the semblance of a distant smile. Gothic art without its fervour – Degas remains cold even in intoxication. He displays glowing colours but remains personally untouched to the point of cruelty. Degas rejected all softness, he seized an ankle but not the flesh. The puppets which nestle softly together in Ingres, move by taut wires in Degas, and their motion is the dance of death. Not a sound emanates from their mummified faces. Bones have expressions and human backs are bent in anguish, arms howl and legs whine while his machinery continues its motion.*<sup>435</sup>

This passage forms part of a general overview of the artist’s work, although it is a description which would seem to have been written with the awkward bodily syntax

<sup>432</sup> For a fascinating study of the interrelation between textual narratives and the body, see Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, Harvard University Press, 1993), esp. Chapter 1, ‘Narrative and the Body’, in pp. 1-27.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>434</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Certains* (1889), (Paris: Plon, 1980), p. 267.

<sup>435</sup> Julius Meier-Graefe, *Degas*, trans. J Holroyd Reece, (New York: E Benn Limited, 1923), p. 109.

characterizing the representation of the female body in the artist's later work specifically in mind. Indeed, the 'Gothic' – a term immediately evocative of the suffering bodies and mortified flesh of medieval religious art, together with its severe formal rhetoric and awkward corporeal expressiveness – would seem a particularly apt visual paradigm to invoke in relation to the contorted and indecorous posturing of Degas' female figures.

As Carol Armstrong has demonstrated, Meier-Graefe's description owes much to earlier accounts of Degas' work. Most notable here is that of Degas' contemporary Joris-Karl Huysmans, in particular his response to the series of nudes which the artist exhibited at the last Impressionist exhibition in 1886 under the collective title: *Suite de nus de femmes se baignant, se lavant, se séchant, s'essuyant, se peignant ou se faisant peigner* (a group of works which included *Le tub* (figure 183)).<sup>436</sup>

The identification of Degas' figurative imagery with that of the Middle Ages is made on numerous occasions by Huysmans in his 1889 *Certains*. As we see in the epigraph cited at the start of this section, this was an association made in order to articulate something of what he saw to be the insistent debasement of the feminine at stake in this oeuvre. Armstrong also draws attention to the ways in which Huysmans' highly charged visceral descriptions of the forms and flesh of Degas' nudes (which, she argues, deploy a Bahtkian language of the 'grotesque') work explicitly to affiliate the pictorial visual language deployed here with that of the so-called European 'primitives' such as Matthias Grünewald, Rogier Van der Weyden and Hans Memling, with whose work Huysmans had recently come in contact on a trip to Germany.<sup>437</sup>

Whilst Huysmans' characterization of Degas as a 'modern primitive' initiates a new kind of critical language through which the artist's work would subsequently come to be understood, it must also, as Armstrong has argued, be taken as part of his negation of the positivist and realist concerns through which it had *previously* been read (a school of thought associated with the writing of Edmond Duranty and Hippolyte Taine with which he himself had earlier been associated). Indeed, as she then goes on to remark: 'the art of the primitives was attractive to Huysmans because of its premodernism and its marginality, and

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<sup>436</sup> For a discussion of these works see Chapter 4, 'Against the Grain: J K Huysmans and the 1886 Series of Nudes', in Carol Armstrong, *Odd Man Out* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 157-210. For other recent critical literature on Degas *Bathers* see Carol Armstrong, 'Edgar Degas and the representation of the female body', in Susan Suleiman (ed.) *The Female Body in Western Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 223-242. See also relevant chapters in Eunice Lipton, *Looking into Degas: Uneasy Images of Women and Modern Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Charles Benheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1989); Anthea Callen, *The Spectacular Body: Science Method and Meaning in the Work of Degas* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995); Heather Dawkins, *The Nude in French Art and Culture, 1870-1910*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and Richard Thomson, *Degas: The Nudes*.

<sup>437</sup> See discussion in *ibid.*, p. 193.



more importantly because of the 'against-the-grain' expressionistic content of its realism.<sup>438</sup> In this respect *Certains* must be understood in relation to the emerging discourse of Symbolism together with a renewed interest in pre-Renaissance northern European art characteristic of this artistic movement which materialized over the last two decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>439</sup> As this fascination with *les Primitifs* is a largely *fin-de-siècle* phenomenon, it would thus be anachronistic to read the associations of the Gothic at stake in Degas' oeuvre (particularly his early work) in terms of a conscious referencing on his part. Aside from a copy of Van der Weyden's genteel *Madonna* at the Louvre (figure 184) there is no evidence of an engagement with the artists of the Northern Renaissance 'discovered' by Huysmans to be found in his work. Indeed, this kind of art was largely unknown to (and certainly unappreciated by) a mid-nineteenth-century French audience.

While the identification of Degas with a visual vocabulary of the Gothic made by both Huysmans and Meier-Graefe undoubtedly serves to highlight something of the inherent *cruelty* at stake in Degas' formal procedures, it is one which their writing repeatedly conflates with the artist's 'misogynism' – a misogynism that is read in exclusively biographical terms. Degas' misogyny has come under sustained feminist critique in recent years.<sup>440</sup> One of the most convincing arguments refuting this myth has been put forward by Carol Armstrong who has argued that any misogynism at stake in Degas' work should be considered: 'a representational matter'.<sup>441</sup> In agreement with Armstrong on this point, I would argue that it is an understanding of the (symbolic) cruelty enacted upon the site of the female body in *Scène de Guerre* as being embedded in the artist's formal strategies – rather than a direct expression of any personal revulsion he may have felt towards the opposite sex – which offers the most productive way forward.<sup>442</sup> (In any case I would not wish to simplify Degas' practice as being strictly 'misogynistic' – as the final part of this chapter will demonstrate it is infinitely more complex and problematic than this). This is not something

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<sup>438</sup> Ibid, p. 178.

<sup>439</sup> See Emory and Morowitz, 'Packaging the *Primitifs*: The medieval artist, the *Neo-Primitif* and the art market', in *Consuming the Past*, pp. 37-60.

<sup>440</sup> See Norma Broude, 'Degas' 'Misogyny', *Art Bulletin*, LIX, 1977, pp. 95-107.

<sup>441</sup> Armstrong makes the point that is Huysmans *own* 'misogyny' that is more at issue in his discourse upon the artist's *Bathers*. See her discussion in *Degas*, pp. 190-192. See also Charles Bernheimer, 'Huysmans: Writing Against (Female) Nature', in Suleiman, *The Female Body in Western Culture*, pp. 373-386.

<sup>442</sup> I situate my argument here in relation to the recent feminist literature on Degas' representation of the female body which addresses the complex problematics of artist's 'misogyny' or misogynistic formal strategies together with issues of female spectatorship. As well as Armstrong's writing upon this subject see Anthea Callen, 'Degas' Bathers: Hygiene and Dirt—Gaze and Touch', in *The Spectacular Body*; Heather Dawkins, 'Grief and Fascination', *Differences*, vol. 4, no. 3 (Fall 1992), pp. 66-90 and Griselda Pollock, 'Degas/Images/Women; Women/Degas/Images: What Difference does Feminism Make to Art History?', in *Dealing with Degas: Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision*, Richard Kendall and Griselda Pollock (eds.) (New York: Universe, 1991), pp. 22-42.

to be disregarded, as certain feminist scholars have done.<sup>443</sup> Rather I would maintain that there is something profoundly disturbing at stake in Degas' representations of the female body and that it is one's responsibility to try to unpack what is at stake in the frequency and manner with which this body is depicted as an object of denigration and derision. While this tendency is brought to the fore in the artist's later nudes and the critical discourse they generated, I would argue that these works must be understood as part of a continuous project of female debasement which was initiated several decades earlier with *Scène de Guerre* and which, in turn, is rooted in the period of his most formative artistic training and the broader culture from which they were produced.<sup>444</sup>

The representation of the body in medieval religious painting, with its iconography of human suffering, apocalyptic imagery of wretched souls condemned to hell and representations of the Fall serving as a constant reminder of man's fundamentally accursed condition whilst on earth was, in mid-nineteenth century artistic discourse, posited as antithetical to the image of the body in antiquity which had revered and venerated the human form. Thus, this kind of art fell outside, or was at best marginal to, the orthodox academic canon as it stood at this moment. This is clearly illustrated in Charles Blanc's *Grammaire des Arts des Dessin...* (1867) in which the Middle Ages are the repressed seam of his trajectory; a lacuna or blind spot within his narrative of art. Discussing the primitive forms and techniques of the late medieval and early Renaissance artists, this period is summarily dismissed as a long night of darkness before the artists of the sixteenth century rediscovered the lost ideals of Antiquity:

*'Cedependant, après les longues tristesses du christianisme, l'humanité dut se réveiller un jour avec des sentiments que l'antiquité n'avait point connus ou du moins qu'elle n'avait pas manifestés dans son art: la mélancholie l'inquiétude vague, les tourments de la superstition, toutes les ombres du coeur. Lorsque la Grèce ressuscita en Italie, lorsque Athènes s'appela Florence, la lumière antique reparut, mais à travers les voiles du sombre moyen âge, et cet alors que le premier des grands génies modernes, Léonard de Vinci, apporta dans la peinture une lueur nouvelle, et trouvant l'éloquence de l'ombre fit entrevoir que le clair-obscur saurait exprimer les profondeurs de la reverie comme celles de l'espace, et, avec tous les reliefs du corps, toutes les émotions de l'âme ...'*<sup>445</sup>

<sup>443</sup> See for example Norma Broude, 'Degas' Misogyny'.

<sup>444</sup> It is important to note that themes of misogyny and female debasement were pervasive cultural tropes in nineteenth-century artistic and literary discourse – a context within which Degas' own practice must be situated. See Armstrong, *Odd Man Out*, p 191. On a more polemic note Régis Michel's 2000 exhibition at the Louvre *Posséder et détruire: Stratégies sexuelles dans l'art d'Occident* aimed to highlight the pervasive misogyny of western art. Degas is one of the key figures seen to exemplify this tendency. See Régis Michel, *Posséder et détruire* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2000).

<sup>445</sup> Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des Arts de Dessin*, (1867) p. 583

The trajectory of artistic development outlined by Blanc is one inherited directly from Vasari whose *Vite* charts the gradual progression of Italian art from its primitive beginnings with Cimabue and Giotto, to its culmination in the early sixteenth century with Michaelangelo. Indeed, as Erwin Panofsky has argued, within the Vasarian teleological historical narrative, the Gothic functions as the antithesis (or ‘absolute zero’) of the *perfectta regola dell’arte* which the art of the *cinquecento* came the closest to realizing.<sup>446</sup> As Blanc’s excerpt cited above makes clear, the nineteenth century continued to worship at the altar of the Italian High Renaissance. Michelangelo, Leonardo and Raphael (the Academy’s Holy Trinity) are repeatedly singled out for the highest veneration and the *Grammaire* is supplemented with numerous engravings of their ‘masterpieces’, such as Raphael’s *School of Athens* (figure 185), which function within the text as aspirational ideals for the artist to model his work upon. Blanc’s *Grammaire* outlines the prevailing art historical narrative at this moment and provides a fairly accurate reflection of the Academy’s conservative aesthetic values. Even if Degas was not directly familiar with this text, the *Grammaire* can be seen to broadly reflect the traditions in which he was schooled.<sup>447</sup> Within the *Ecole’s* practical training programme, art predating that of Raphael hardly figured either. Its awkward, schematic rendering of the figure could not compare with the graceful forms of classicism and thus had no place within the novice’s copying regime.<sup>448</sup> The sole reference to Gothic art to be found amongst the pages of Degas *carnets* is a copy of a statue of Clovis II from the tomb of Dagobert I in St-Denis (figure 186)<sup>449</sup>

There is, however, some interesting evidence of an engagement with *quattrocento* art to be found within the artist’s early notebooks. Although a taste unfashionable at the time, the artist’s predilection for the ‘Italian Primitives’ (*les primitifs*) was inherited from his father and subsequently nurtured by his first teacher Louis Lamothe. Amongst the pages of a notebook which Degas used during his brief time at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1855 (where he seems to have spent most of his time copying from engravings and reproductions), we find fragments of Perugino’s *Ascension of Christ* (1515)<sup>450</sup>, Gozzoli’s *Drunkenness of Noah* (1470), Masolino’s *St Catherine and the Wheel* (1428)<sup>451</sup> and Fra Angelico’s

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<sup>446</sup> See Erwin Panofsky, ‘The First Page of Giorgio Vasari’s ‘Libro’, in *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, (New York: Doubleday, 1955) pp. 206-265.

<sup>447</sup> For a detailed study of the art theories of Charles Blanc and their influence in the nineteenth-century see Misook Song, *The Art Theories of Charles Blanc: 1813-1882* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1984).

<sup>448</sup> For the influence of Raphael in the French classical tradition see Martin Rosenberg, *Raphael and France: The Artist as Paradigm and Symbol* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State Press, 1994) and Jean Cuzin, et. al., *Raphaël et l’art Français*, ex. cat. (Paris: Galleries national du Grand Palais, 1983).

<sup>449</sup> Nb 2, p. 39.

<sup>450</sup> Nb 11, pp. 64, 66, 71-73, 91-2.

<sup>451</sup> Nb 2, p. 12.

*Agony in the Garden* (1450).<sup>452</sup> The artist also made a series of copies after Mantegna's *Crucifixion* (1457) at the Louvre. The best known of this group is the compositional *esquisse* (figure 187). But most interesting in this context are several detailed figure studies of the crucified body to the right of Jesus (figure 188) which demonstrate a concerted attempt to get to grips with Mantegna's figurative rhetoric of pain and suffering.<sup>453</sup>

Soon after Degas left for Italy, and from the fevered notes he wrote whilst following the well trodden trail of the Grand Tour, it is clear that the art of the early Renaissance he encountered on his way made a deep impression upon him. Passing through Orvieto on his way to Florence from Rome he was particularly struck by Luca Signorelli's Last Judgement fresco cycles (figure 189) of which he made several sketches and detailed written observations.<sup>454</sup> Representative of this group is a disturbing detail from *The Damned* (figure 190) in which we see a naked female being carried away by a monstrous creature with horns and wings.<sup>455</sup> From there he went directly to Assisi where he made detailed copies of various fragments from the Arena Chapel (figure 191) including one depicting the figure of St Francis expelling the demons from Arezzo (figure 192).

Degas' engagement with the art of the early Renaissance is seen to filter through to the notes and sketches relating to *Scène de Guerre*. These references are seen most clearly in a compositional pencil sketch (figure 193) where the bare twisted trees and burning fires on the horizon are strongly redolent of the *quattrocento's* apocalyptic imagery. This drawing (like the aforementioned Mantegna copies) is especially notable for its stylistic attempts to imitate the simple visual language of the 'primitives' and its rudimentary figurative forms. (Confirmation that this compositional sketch is the expression of a wilful and deliberate naivety on the part of the Degas, rather than technical incompetence, is to be found in the merest glance back over the batch of finely detailed and technically consummate compositional sketches the artist had executed in preparation for *Sémiramis* only a couple of years earlier). The attitudes of these stiffly posed figures, for which Degas executed several separate preparatory sketches, are also strongly resonant with early Renaissance imagery which Degas had copied assiduously in Italy. This is seen particularly in the beseeching posture of the female figure looking up to heaven, and the schematic expressions of horror and fear illustrated by those huddled round the tree, which are vaguely resonant of the tired apostles keeping watch over Jesus in Fra Angelico's *Agony in the Garden* (1450) (figure 194).

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<sup>452</sup> Nb 2, p. 9.

<sup>453</sup> For a discussion of the representation of pain and suffering in western culture see James Elkins, *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis*, (Stanford, CA: California University Press, 1999).

<sup>454</sup> For a transcription of these passages see Reff, *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas*, vol. 2, pp. 67-72.

<sup>455</sup> For a commentary upon Signorelli's fresco cycle at Orvieto Cathedral see Jonathan B Reiss, *The Renaissance Antichrist: Luca Signorelli's Orvieto Frescoes*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

This compositional study, however, represents only the earliest stage of the picture's development. The overall atmosphere of this composition is characterized by a serenity reminiscent of early Renaissance frescoes. The disturbing pretext of violation which was to be dramatized in the later version is here much less explicit. This we see, for instance, in the transformation of the two horse-backed riders to the right of the drawing. Resembling the proud Florentine noblemen of Gozzoli's *Journey of the Magi* (figure 195) which Degas had copied in Florence (figure 196), their demeanour indicates nothing of the violent aggressors as whom they were to be subsequently recast. Most startling, however, are the series of radical alterations to which the female figures have been subjected. Whilst in the earlier version they are, for the most part, huddled together in a group, their redistribution across the surface of the Salon picture refuses any such sense of community. Furthermore, the relatively restrained figurative rhetoric of suffering depicted in the compositional study gives way, subsequently, to a much more extreme corpus of imagery. This we see most clearly in a number of individual preparatory studies (figures 197, 198 and 199). The contorted poses and pained grimaces of these figures are closely affiliated with the wretched souls dragged kicking and screaming into the bowels of the underworld familiar to us from innumerable representations of Judgement Day.

Most of the direct references to the pictorial style and iconography of the *quattrocento* were gradually diluted and filtered out as the work evolved. The rudimentary representational style of the early Renaissance masters which Degas had mimicked in the compositional sketch is nowhere in evidence upon the Salon canvas. Similarly, the tortuous postures of the preparatory drawings were radically toned down and restrained. Although these drawings provide the basis for several of the figures in *Scène de Guerre*, a peculiar process of eroticization is at stake in this transition, as the attitudes of despair which the artist had initially drafted were overlain with the sexualized semiotics of the female nude. The disconcerting effects produced by the co-existence of these radically different figurative rhetorics is brought to the fore in a comparison between the previous preparatory study and a detail of a figure in *Scène de Guerre* (figure 200) on which it is based. While Degas retained the crouching pose of abjection he had outlined in a preparatory study, the figure was subsequently furnished with a cascade of bright red hair and thus inflected with connotations of abandonment which are far more overtly sexual in nature. The same effects are also evident in the pose of the prostrate female body on the right of the picture (figure 201). Although her tormented facial expression is directly based on the earlier preparatory drawing (figure 202) it is one which sits uncomfortably alongside the lower half of the body which is sexualized in accordance with nineteenth century conventions: the firmly defined haunch, clearly defined waist and shapely legs all direct quotations from the classicized

rhetoric of the frontal reclining nude as illustrated by Alexandre Cabanel's *Naissance de Vénus* (figure 203).

Whilst we see here how the numerous references to early Christian art which Degas had in mind when he initially began work upon *Scène de Guerre* were progressively tempered and mediated, one clearly identifiable reference to the religious art of the *quattrocento* remains. This is seen in the departing couple on the left of the picture which I pointed out at the start of this chapter (see detail figure 204), a pairing which bears a striking resemblance to Masaccio's ignominious Adam and Eve (figure 205) from the Brancacci Chapel at the Church of Santa Maria del Carmine. Although there are no direct copies of the *Expulsion* in Degas notebooks, the artist had surely seen this fresco during his extended stay in Florence.

Masaccio's *Expulsion* (1422) refers to the third chapter of Genesis where Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden of Eden as God's punishment for eating from the forbidden tree of knowledge.<sup>456</sup> What is interesting about this founding narrative is how the first man and woman's sense of shame is conceptualized through a semantics of hiding and covering. When Adam and Eve, after eating the forbidden fruit, were filled with shame at their nakedness, their immediate response was to *cover* themselves with fig-leaves (Genesis, 3:7). Similarly when God called out for Adam, he *hid* amongst the trees (3:11). The association of corporeal shame with the impulse to conceal is reiterated in Masaccio's fresco where Eve is depicted covering her breasts and pudenda while Adam hides his face in his hands. But Masaccio's Adam and Eve also carry an iconographic freight of shame. As Luciano Berti has pointed out, the figure of Adam references two mortified male prototypes – Marysas and Christ.<sup>457</sup> Indeed, the legendary satyr of Greek mythology flayed alive by Apollo and his skin nailed to a tree, and the iconography of crucifixion have provided Western culture with two of the most enduring symbols of corporeal humiliation.<sup>458</sup>

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<sup>456</sup> Of all the recent literature on shame the most valuable text is Claire Pajaczowska and Ivan Ward (eds), *Shame and Sexuality: Psychoanalysis and Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2008). The essays by Claire Pajaczowska and Griselda Pollock in particular have helped me to think through the cultural history of shame and its intimate association with sexuality. This book is the published papers of the 'Shame and Sexuality' conference held at the Freud Museum in 2005 and I thank Claire Pajaczowska for making these papers available to me before the publication of the book.

<sup>457</sup> See Luciano Berti, *Masaccio* (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1967), p. 97.

<sup>458</sup> The association of shame and skin are discussed by Steven Connor in 'The Shame of Being a Man', *Textual Practice*, 15 (2001), pp. 211-30. For more on the cultural iconography and phantasma of 'flaying' see Claudia Benthien, chapter 4, 'Flayings: Exposure, Torture, Metamorphosis' in *Skin: On the Cultural Border Between Self and World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 63-94.

Eve too is based upon a previous prototype. Shielding her genitals with her hands this is a gesture which directly imitates that of the Venus Pudica.<sup>459</sup> But this pose as it is utilized within the context of Masaccio's fresco carries a very different set of associations than it did within that of ancient Greek culture from which it originated. Although the gesture of covering demonstrated, for instance, by the *Capitoline Venus* (figure 206) was understood to signal an awareness of nudity and the need to conceal certain parts of the body, this was interpreted in the nineteenth century as deriving from a sense of propriety or modesty (*pudeur*).<sup>460</sup> Underpinning this notion is a belief in the Greek ideal as representing an uncorrupted form of nudity, and it was a nostalgic image of antiquity as a prelapsarian civilization which functioned as a stark contrast to the world after the Fall where nakedness was reconfigured as something inherently shameful (*honteuse*). The imbrication of shamefulness and nudity embodied by the figure of Eve which gradually emerges in Christian iconography is nowhere better illustrated than in Masaccio's *Expulsion*.<sup>461</sup>

It is impossible to know the extent to which Degas was aware of the historical baggage of shame attached to the figures of Adam and Eve which I have just outlined. Nevertheless, I would maintain that the departing couple on the extreme left of *Scène de Guerre* can be understood as a conscious reference to this fresco detail. I would also argue for the significance of the fact that this quotation was retained, whereas the other borrowings from early Italian art exhibited in the early stages of this work were occluded as it gradually evolved. Indeed, it would seem that, for Degas, Masaccio's mortified Adam and Eve exemplified something about the way in which the body was configured in Christian art – namely the way in which *shame* was so deeply imbricated within its fabric. But while Masaccio's Adam and Eve may have provided the artist with an initial motif of shame, my primary interest concerns the ways in which it was elaborated upon and transmuted within the larger project of *Scène de Guerre*, a work which was to be gradually infiltrated by a figurative rhetoric of mortification and debasement. But the explicit association of shame with femininity played out here also reflects something about the precarious status of the nude in mid-nineteenth century French culture where, as we shall now see, shame and modesty were the pre-eminent themes structuring the critical discourse upon the female body.

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<sup>459</sup> Berti, *Massaccio*, p. 97.

<sup>460</sup> For notions of shame, and their cultural significance in Ancient Greece see Douglas Cairns, *Aidos: The Psychology and Ethics of Shame in Ancient Greece* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993). For the signification of *pudeur* in the nineteenth century see entry in Larousse, *Grand Dictionnaire*, vol. 13, p. 396.

<sup>461</sup> For a captivating analysis of the iconography and functions of images of Eve and Venus during the Renaissance see Patricia Rubin, 'The Seductions of Antiquity', in *Manifestations of Venus: Art and Sexuality*, Caroline Arscott and Katie Scott (eds.), (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 24-38.

*'sa Vénus ne naît pas, elle se reveille'.*

Maxime du Camp, 'Salon de 1863'<sup>462</sup>

The problematic status of the aesthetic category of the nude at this moment is familiar to us by now, and has been well theorized. Jennifer Shaw and Ann McCauley in particular have demonstrated the historical 'crisis' of the genre at this moment, framing their discussion against the context of the critical debate engendered by the nudes exhibited at the Salons of the 1860s – a discourse which compellingly articulates a loss of conviction in the academic rhetoric of the ideal.<sup>463</sup>

Aesthetic theory since the Renaissance had posited that art should transcend the representation of mere 'nature'. Derived from the platonic notion of the 'idea' as a 'perfect cognition of a thing based upon nature,' the goal of the artist was to achieve the delicate balance between the 'real' and the 'ideal'.<sup>464</sup> First articulated by Bellori in the seventeenth-century, this notion of art was to become the founding principle of academic theory and would be reasserted almost verbatim over two hundred years later by Charles Blanc in the *Grammaire* which states that: *'La juste définition de l'art se trouvera donc entre la traduction littérale et la paraphrase éloquente: L'ART EST L'INTERPRETATION DE LA NATURE.'*<sup>465</sup> But this was an equilibrium which had always been held in a perpetually uneasy balance, and one that was rendered even more precarious when the female body was at stake. Not only this, but it was a balance which was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain in the mid-nineteenth century, where the nude was to become the locus of the disintegration and collapse of Blanc's outmoded defence of the Ideal.

The perceived failure of Art to life, the representation of the female body into the realm of the Ideal at this moment is summed up succinctly by Maxime du Camp in his scathing critique of the 1863 Salon Venuses in the *Revue de Deux Mondes*:

*'Un peinture d'histoire prend une femme nue, en fait le portrait avec quelques modifications le plus souvent inspirées par la réminiscence des maîtres, puis il dit: C'est Vénus! Non point. C'est un modèle et rien de plus.'*<sup>466</sup>

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<sup>462</sup> Maxime du Camp, 'Le Salon de 1863', *Revue de Deux Mondes* (June 15, 1863), p. 33.

<sup>463</sup> See Ann McCauley, 'Sex and the Salon: Defining Art and Immorality in 1863', in Paul Hayes Tucker (ed.) *Manet's Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and Jennifer Shaw, 'The Figure of Venus: Rhetoric of the Ideal and the Salon of 1863', *Art History*, XIV, 4 (December, 1991), pp. 540-70. These, in turn, build upon a larger feminist literature on the representation of the female body in art and visual culture. See for example, Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Kathleen Adler and Marica Pointon (eds.) *The Body Imaged: The Human Form and Visual Culture since the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) together with relevant works by Tamar Garb and Griselda Pollock listed in the bibliography.

<sup>464</sup> For a discussion of the currency of these terms in nineteenth century artistic discourse see Tamar Garb, 'Renoir and the Natural Woman', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1985), pp. 2-15.

<sup>465</sup> Blanc, *Grammaire*, p. 10.

<sup>466</sup> Maxime du Camp, 'Le Salon de 1863', p. 892-3.



This was a common criticism levelled at the nudes exhibited at the Salon of that year and is most clearly articulated in the response to Paul Baudry's *La Perle et La Vague* (figure 207). The clear signs of the model's individuality and contemporaneity impinged upon an abstracted notion of the Ideal and the general critical consensus was that this figure did not deserve the title of the Nude. Jules Castagnary criticized the figure for resembling a *'modiste parisienne'*.<sup>467</sup> The nude's provocative mode of address was another problematic feature of Baudry's *Venus*. This was seen to detract attention from the purely aesthetic faculties that Art was supposed to address and – in its appeal to more 'base' desires – indicative of the contemporary degeneration of the nude.

The licentiousness, or *'décadence'* of these contemporary Salon nudes was understood by some critics as symptomatic of the social maladies and loose moral standards of contemporary society. This connection is made explicit in P J Proudhon's encounter with Baudry's *Venus* which he recounts in the following terms:

*'A l'exposition de 1863, que je n'ai parcourue qu'une fois d'un pas très-rapide, il y avait dans la grande salle, à la place d'honneur, une figure de femme nue, couchée et vue de dos, que j'ai supposé être une Vénus Callipyge. Tout en exhibant ses épaules, sa taille souple, sa riche croupe, cette Vénus, par un effort de bon volonté, tournait la tête du côté du spectateur: yeux bleus et malins comme ceux de l'Amour, figure provoquante, sourire voluptueux; elle semblait dire, comme les trotteuses du boulevard: Veux-tu venir me voir?'*<sup>468</sup>

Proudhon's description works as a powerful desublimatory narrative of the nude. Upon first entering the exhibition hall where he sees the nude occupying the 'place of honour' he presumes that he is beholding a classical *Venus* rightfully venerated on her pedestal. But this chimera is quickly destroyed. With a 'turn of her head' the vision of the ethereal goddess by which he was initially seduced comes crashing down as the figure is revealed to be nothing more than a common 'streetwalker'. Reduced to a purveyor of sex Proudhon disallows the fantasy of the nude as an emblem of chastity and beauty. It is clear that for him such virtuous qualities embodied in the classical *Venus*es are no longer sustainable in the face of contemporary sexual immoralities which have irrevocably tarnished her image.

<sup>469</sup>

Thus, we find Maxime du Camp in 1863 affirming that the essential pre-requisite of the nude is chastity: *'une des premières qualités de l'art, la principale peut-être, est la chasteté. Les oeuvres des maîtres sont chastes, parce qu'elles ont été conçues par des esprits vraiment doués du sens de*

<sup>467</sup> Jules Antoine Castagnary, 'Salon de 1863', in *Salons* (Paris, 1892), p. 113.

<sup>468</sup> P J Proudhon, 'De la prostitution de l'art' (1863) in *Du principe de l'art et de sa destination sociale* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1865), p. 237-8.

<sup>469</sup> The *Venus de Milo* was held up as the pinnacle of the Ideal in France at this moment. For the historical reception and cultural meanings of this figure see Caroline Arscott and Katie Scott, 'Introducing *Venus*' in *Manifestations of Venus*, pp. 1-23.

*l'idéal*.<sup>470</sup> But this is an attribute which, he laments, is lacking in contemporary representations of the nude and is symptomatic of a sense of lost innocence which, for him, is epitomized by Cabanel's somnolent Venus who is a mere travesty of the chaste goddess that she purports to be. Du Camp's comment tallies with the way in which Eve is portrayed in Charles Blanc's elaboration of the Fall outlined on the first pages of the *Grammaire*. This begins with an evocative description of Adam in the Garden of Eden:

*'La tradition biblique nous représente l'homme, nouveau venu sur la terre, comme habitant d'un jardin des délices, qui est planté des plus beaux arbres de la création, arrosé de fleuves, peuplé de toutes les bêtes des champs et de tous les oiseaux du ciel. Ce maître de l'Eden, vivant sous l'oeil de Dieu, ne connaît que le bonheur, la grace et l'amour; le mal lui est étranger, la difformité lui est inconnue, et, au contraire il a pour compagne une femme qui est la beauté même.'*<sup>471</sup>

Adam is firmly established here as the innocent party. But his bliss is soon corrupted by the arrival of Eve:

*Elle est chassée du Paradis; elle voit disparaître ces campagnes enchantées, jusqu'alors inaccessibles à la laideur et à la douleur, et la voilà replongée aux milieu d'une nature inclément, encore émue des ses derniers catachysmes. Maintenant, à travers les générations qui vont se succéder, persistera un souvenir obscur de cette calamité originelle, dont la cause est la faiblesse de la première femme.'*<sup>472</sup>

Through Blanc's repeated use of the female pronoun, Eve is effectively held solely responsible for her and Adam's expulsion from paradise, and thus entirely culpable for the ensuing sins of the world. While in Blanc's opinion Woman should, by rights, be condemned to universal disgrace, he then proceeds to assert that her fundamentally accursed condition can be overcome through the transformatory power of Art, whose goal is to recover the ideal forms of a lost primordial beauty. But these forms are not to be found in a flawed and imperfect world. Rather, Blanc urges the artist to look at the fragments bequeathed by antiquity, as it is only in these '*precieux vestiges [where] quelques traces de sa beauté première*' may be divined.<sup>473</sup> Thus, as the artist strives to emulate the ideal forms of the exemplary prototypes of the ancient Greeks, the dignity of the naked body is preserved by the exercise of decorum and modesty. As Blanc states elsewhere in the *Grammaire*: *la pudeur ... elle est l'inverse de la naïveté, ça où l'innocence fini, la pudeur commence.*<sup>474</sup> This is a telling statement. Simultaneously acknowledging humanity's irretrievable lost innocence and the inherent shame associated with nakedness, it also betrays the ever present cultural

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<sup>470</sup> Maxime du Camp, 'Le Salon de 1863', p. 902.

<sup>471</sup> Blanc, *Grammaire*, p. 6.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid. p. 7

<sup>474</sup> Ibid. p. 27.

anxieties relating specifically to the naked *female* body – against which the genre of the nude must constantly guard. Indeed, I argue that the denigration of the nude at stake in the Salon criticism of the early 1860s hinges precisely *upon* shame and its intimate association with femininity. And whilst these anxieties underwrite much of the contemporary nineteenth-century discourse upon the nude (where they remain, for the most part, implicit) they are brought to the fore in Gérôme's *Phryné avant l'aréopage* (figure 208) exhibited at the Salon of 1861 and compellingly dramatized in the derisory critical response it generated.

*Une pauvre honteuse qui se cache...*<sup>475</sup>

The painting is based on the legend of the Greek hetaera Phryne who was famed for her beauty throughout Athens. She was reputedly the model whom Praxiteles used for his Aphrodite of Knidos and, as reported by Pliny, it was the vision of Phryne bathing naked in the sea at the festival of Poseidon which inspired Apelles' celebrated *Venus Anadyomene* at Pompeii. The subject of Gérôme's picture refers to the moment when Phryne was brought before the judges of Athens. Accused of heresy for profaning the sacred Eleusinian Mysteries, Phryne was defended by her patron and advocate Hypereides who took off her clothes in order to reveal her glorious beauty to the judges (other accounts report that it was Phryne herself who took off her clothes). They, in turn, were so astounded by her beauty that they acquitted her immediately.

In this famed myth of antiquity Phryne's nudity serves as a vindication of her goodness. She was not ashamed to stand naked before the judges and reveal her beauty in all its naked glory as it was precisely her beauty which signified her moral virtue. But Gérôme's picture subverts the moral of this allegory where the sadistic *frisson* at stake in the rhetorics of forcibly de-robing a lone female figure before an all male audience implicit in this narrative is played out to the maximum. Hyperides is cast here as violator and attacker rather than defender as he whips away Phryne's cloak with a sadistic flourish (a gesture described by the *Grand Dictionnaire* as: '*plein de véhémence*').<sup>476</sup> For her part Phryne instinctively covers her face, a motion that is at once an attempt to shield herself from the penetrating gazes of the judges who surround her and admission of mortal shame at her nakedness. Whilst in the original version it is precisely the unveiling of her nudity that revealed Phryne's inherent dignity, in Gérôme's interpretation the act is dramatically recast as a violent means of exposure. Indeed, the admission of the innate shame of the female body, indicated by Phryne's reflexive gesture of concealment, was precisely what was so

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<sup>475</sup> George Jeannot, 'Souvenirs de Degas,' *Revue Universelle*, LV (1933), pp. 152-74, 280-304.

<sup>476</sup> Larousse, *Grand Dictionnaire*, vol. 12, p. 901.

problematic about Gérôme's interpretation of the narrative. Thoré-Bürger angrily condemned the painting as a scabrous mistreatment of this classical legend:

*'Malheureusement, M Gérôme n'a ni le sentiment de la beauté, ni le sentiment de la humanité, ni même l'instinct de la civilisation grecque, qu'il denature misérablement. C'est absolument contraire aux moeurs de la Grèce, le pays de l'art par excellence où la beauté toute seule était victorieuse de tout. En Grèce, devant une belle femme, ou seulement une belle forme quelconque, le sentiment universel fut toujours l'admiration et le respect.'*<sup>477</sup>

He then went on to criticize the physical imperfections of Phryne's body, which hardly aspired to the image of the legendary Greek beauty upon whom it was purportedly based:

*'Il est vrai que cette Phryné de M Gérôme est très-mal dessinée, mal établie sur ses jambes, et ankylosée dans ses genoux terreux. Avant de la dépouiller de ses draperies, le peinture aurait dû lui pincer un peu les genoux et les attachés des extrémités inférieures. Sans doute elle ne ressemble guère aux statues qu'en fit Praxiteles et qui furent adorées dans les temples.'*<sup>478</sup>

The review then concluded disparagingly that *'de cette sublime allégorie antique, M Gérôme a fait une petite caricature...'*<sup>479</sup> Thoré-Bürger's condemnation of *Phryné* resounds alongside the dissent voiced by other Salon reviewers who criticized Phryne's meagre and pathetic body (her knees were found to be particularly at fault) and the open-mouthed response of the judges which was deemed as much too lecherous.<sup>480</sup>

Alongside the unfavourable critical reception *Phryné* provoked at its Salon appearance in 1861 it is interesting to consider a comment made by Degas about Gérôme's licentious treatment of the nude in a conversation between the two artists reported by Charles Jeannot:

*'Phryné était une des glories de son temps à cause de la beauté de son corps. On a l'honorait en Grèce comme ces gens-là savaient honorer la beauté. Tous les philosophes se faisaient gloire de de la connaître. Que dire que du peintre qui a fait 'Phryné devant l'aréopage' une pauvre honteuse qui se cache? Phryné ne se cachait pas, ne pouvait pas se cacher, puisque sa nudité était précisément la cause de sa gloire. Gérôme n'a pas compris et a fait de ça tableau, par cela même, un tableau pornographique.'*<sup>481</sup>

Anecdotal evidence suggests that there was no love lost between Degas and Gérôme. As discussed in chapter 1, it was precisely the peddling of bastardized classical narratives on

<sup>477</sup> Thoré-Bürger, 'Salon de 1861', in *Salons de W Bürger, 1861 à 1868* (Paris, 1870), pp. 16.

<sup>478</sup> George Jeannot, 'Souvenirs de Degas,' p. 174.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid.

<sup>480</sup> For the rest of the critical response to *Phryné* see Léon Lagrange, 'Salon de 1861', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (June 1, 1861); Théophile Gautier, *Abécédaire du Salon de 1861* (Paris, 1861); Claude Vignon, 'Un visite au Salon de 1861', *Le Correspondant* (May 1863) p. 158 and A J Du Pays, 'Salon de 1863 – La Mythologie et l'Allégorie', *L'Illustration* (May 30, 1863), p. 348.

<sup>481</sup> George Jeannot, 'Souvenirs sur Degas,' *Revue Universelle*, LV (1933) p. 172.

which Gérôme traded that Degas deplored. The artist's opinion of Gérôme's *Phryné* chimes perfectly with the derisory critical response levelled against it by the critics. Like them he took the figure of Phryne as exemplary of the depths to which the Nude had plummeted in the mid-nineteenth century; a moment when Praxiteles's glorious vision of a goddess emerging fresh from the water had been reduced – as he so appropriately put it – to: '*une pauvre honteuse qui se cache*'. However, it is a comment which sits bizarrely alongside the insistent process of denuding to which the nude has been subjected in the preparatory drawings for *Scène de Guerre*, and it is exactly what is at stake in this project of relentless debasement which the final section of this chapter will now turn to explore.

*Le Nu était chose sacrée, c'est-à-dire impure... Le Nu n'avait en somme que deux significations dans les esprits: tantôt, le symbole du Beau; et tantôt celui de l'Obscène.*

Paul Valéry, *Degas, Danse, Dessin*.<sup>482</sup>

Whilst the high esteem in which Degas held the Greek ideal is made apparent in his comments regarding the venerable Phryne of classical legend, the artist began his career at a moment when the chastity of the Nude – as epitomized by the appearance of Manet's *Olympia*, at the Salon of 1865 – had been irrevocably besmirched.<sup>483</sup> Nevertheless it was a fantasy of primordial beauty which continued to exert a powerful and tenacious hold on the artist's imagination. The apprehension that the graceful prototypes bequeathed by Antiquity, whose dry engraved forms he had spent hours transcribing as a novice, no longer had any currency was difficult come to terms to with and the artist's early fidelity to the ideal was not something that could be surrendered without cost.

Degas, however, was discerning enough to recognize that he could no longer labour under the illusion of the Ideal, and that to continue trading in these worn-out rhetorics (as Gérôme and the other *Pompier*s were seen to do) was – as indicated in his virulent denunciation of *Phryné* – tantamount to sacrilege. But such was his investment in the Nude that he took its contemporary debasement as a kind of personal indictment. To see the object which he had held so sacred dishonoured in such a manner was, for him, as if his own vestal had been despoiled. But his was not the sympathetic reaction of Michelet's pathetic serf who greeted his mortified maiden with open arms the morning after their wedding night. Rather, Degas' response is closer to that of Brantôme's Albanian knight

<sup>482</sup> Paul Valéry, *Degas, Danse, Dessin* (Paris: Galimard, 1965), p. 105.

<sup>483</sup> Incidentally, the appellation 'Phryné' was a common nineteenth-century euphemism for a prostitute. For the standard art historical text on the demise of the academic nude at this moment see TJ Clark, 'Olympia's Choice', in *The Painting of Modern Life*. For a feminist critique of Clark's reading see Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 158-9.

whose accursed virility was only able to find recompense in the debasement of his loved object a thousand times over. Like him, Degas wanted for himself the pleasure of stripping his bride bare.

It is here that we can really get to the heart of what is *sadistic* in *Scène de Guerre*; the relentless debasement of the loved object at stake here finding its true correlate in the writings of the Marquis de Sade.<sup>484</sup> The Sadean strategy was revealed by Pierre Klossowski in his discussion of *Justine ou Les infortunes de la vertu* (1787), a novel which charts the travails of its eponymous twelve-year-old maiden whose quest for virtue is beset by vice at every turn. Klossowski understands Justine to function for Sade as the image of the Virgin. This ‘incarnation of celestial purity’, initially functions as an object of veneration and adoration (just as the Ideal had for Degas). But as the Virgin it is an ascetic body devoid of carnal passion, it is a figure which ultimately exasperates virility.<sup>485</sup> Thus, the Virgin is seen to function in Sade’s writing as an inherently paradoxical creature who: ‘instead of exalting [virility] over and above the instinct for procreation, turns it against this instinct’.<sup>486</sup> Subsequently: ‘the effect of this image is to associate virility intimately with the practice of cruelty’, and for the accursed male subject, it is the exercise of cruelty which becomes the means through which to overcome the loss of this beloved object.<sup>487</sup> As Klossowski sums up: ‘Accursed virility discharges its cruelty on the object that escapes it and finds in that cruelty and exaltation that it has been refused in love.’<sup>488</sup> It is precisely this project to which *Justine* is devoted – the greater part of the novel is given over to detailed accounts of the various forms of sexual humiliation to which the young female protagonist is subject – and I would argue that it is a very similar strategy of debasement at play in *Scène de Guerre*. Although the cause of accursed virility may be slightly different in each case (whereas for Sade it is born of pure frustration, for Degas it appears that there is something closer to disillusionment or betrayal at stake) the response is just the same: the unrestrained exercise of cruelty upon the site of the beloved object. Indeed, if the classical ideal had, for Degas, become so degraded then his solution was to destroy all but the very last vestiges of these illusions by actively participating in its dethronement. Left with no other choice than to render the Ideal utterly extinct, he thus summarily appointed himself as the executioner of the nude, with *Scène de Guerre* – his very own *Justine* – a project dedicated to its systematic destruction.

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<sup>484</sup> Pierre Klossowski, *Sade, My Neighbour*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991).

<sup>485</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>486</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>487</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

*Il semblait qu'excédé par la bassesse de ses voisinages, il eut voulu user de représailles et jeter à la face de son siècle le plus excessif outrage, en culbutant l'idole constamment mènagée, la femme, qu'il avait lorsqu'il la représente, en plein tub, dans les humiliantes poses de soins intimes.*

Huysmans, *Certains* (1889)<sup>489</sup>

If the Salon picture stages the relentless tracking down – or better to say *raptus* – of the female body, then it is the preparatory drawings which must be seen to savour the prolonged aftermath of their capture. Hostages to his will, it is here that Degas sharpened his tools and set to work on his anatomy of destruction. But this is no indiscriminate form of violence exercised upon the bodies of these sacrificial victims. Instead we witness the subjection of these figures to a series of tortuous formal procedures, which (to borrow a metaphor from Régis Michel) might best be described as akin to an entomologist slowly pulling the wings off a butterfly.<sup>490</sup>

Aesthetically very beautiful, these drawing demonstrate a profound regard for the integrity of the figure, and insofar as they are – on the face of it at least – in compliance with the academically sanctioned aesthetic conventions governing the representation of the nude, they warrant the title of *académies* (see for example figures 209 and 210). Certainly, they would hold up to comparison with even the most sublime Ingres nude (figure 211). But submerged within this fatally seductive suite of drawings the exercise of a restrained and insidious form of violence is at play, which stealthily utilizes the rhetoric of the ideal for its own destructive means. Witness, for example, the finely drawn vestiges of drapery, which cling to the lower half of the body (figure 57) in a manner recalling Ingres opulent *Odalisque* (figure 212). But this is no indolent courtesan luxuriating *allongée* in the oriental seraglio. If the reclining pose of the female nude is that traditional posture of femininity signalling invitation, openness and compliance, then the inherent passivity of this recumbent pose is here pursued to its most violent extremes by implications of enforced supplication.

In terms of its singular dedication to the destruction of the beloved object, *Scène de Guerre* is a project we might productively think of as *iconoclastic*. The remorseless stamping out of the sacred image that the iconoclast makes his destructive work is analogous to the insistent vandalising of the nude by Degas within this oeuvre. Indeed, these nudes are literally *defaced*. Most are turned away from us: the side of their faces form a featureless precipice. Some bury their heads in the ground. Others cover them with their arms or hands or explicitly turn their faces away via repeated gestures of *détournement*. Others have been literally decapitated. A socket protrudes as if the head has been violently yanked off

<sup>489</sup> Huysmans, *Certains*, p. 23.

<sup>490</sup> Degas collectionne les baigneuses comme un entomologiste les papillons. Puis il les dissèque in vivo, le pinceau à la main. Michel is talking about Degas late *Bathers*, but this metaphor holds true for the *Scène de Guerre* drawings. See Michel, *Posséder et détruire*, p. 189.

(figure 212). If a glimpse of the model's physiognomy might momentarily surface, it is promptly smudged with a finger-tip – effaced and quickly rendered indistinct (figures 214 and 215). Their visages subject to various means of violent obliteration, these figures are ultimately rendered anonymous. The identities of the models who posed for these drawings are forever lost to history. Indeed, these figures are well and truly desecrated. Their faces rubbed in the dirt, feet and fists digging into the mud, the nudes gravitate towards the spatial axis of horizontality that Bataille designated as the *bassesse* as they writhe amongst the dust with the earthworms.<sup>491</sup> Even the only upright figure in this sequence is held there only by force (figure 216). Lolling limply we witness her inexorable descent to the ground (figure 217); the operation of lowering played out in this temporal sequence emblematic of the unrelenting desublimation to which all these figures have been subjected.

Amongst these drawings the artist's most violent and explicit imagery of the female body (see figure 218) is to be found. Legs violently splayed open and fleshy vulva thrust towards us, the indecorous poses illustrated in these drawings encroach upon the realm of the obscene or pornographic. It is interesting to compare this drawing with an earlier study of the same pose (figure 219), a figure which exhibits a series of direct references to the traditional rhetoric of the reclining nude. See for example the semblance of a blissful expression etched upon the face and the prominently displayed rounded pelvis upon which our gaze is invited to fall. But any residual sense of gracefulness possessed by the figure here was soon wiped out, and the unselfconscious pose of the nude replaced by the unconsciousness lassitude of death. The body itself was also subjected to a series of violent alterations: witness the dislocation of the left arm, the unceremonious yanking back of the neck and the aggressive flattening out of the breasts. From a comparison between the two drawings there is also a clear stiffening of posture (as if rigor mortis had already set in) and the 'weighing down' of the figure to impart a sense of chilling lifelessness. This sense of deathly inertia is enforced by the spatial shift this figure has undergone. Whilst in the earlier version it was orientated towards the horizontal axis of the picture plane (in accordance with the classical pose of the reclining nude), it was subsequently rotated to be closer in alignment with a vertical axis. The vertiginous foreshortening deployed here brings to mind Mantegna's recumbent *Cristo in Scruto* (1480) (figure 220), a picture whose violently compressed perspective Julia Kristeva has described as compelling recognition 'with a brutality which borders on the obscene'.<sup>492</sup> As the semiotics of the nude are interwoven with the iconography of the corpse there is something similarly obscene at stake in Degas' inert and bloated figure. What it would seem the artist offers us here is nothing other than

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<sup>491</sup> For a compelling study on Bataille's thought see Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A Users Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

<sup>492</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Holbein's *Dead Christ*', in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 117.



the nude thoroughly made over and left for dead, its cadaver laid out on the mortuary slab ready for interment.

But elsewhere within this oeuvre are a series of details which fail to meet the dictates of the unremitting sadistic cruelty (ordered to the point of extinction) upon which this project would seem to be predicated. Nestling amongst this figurative topography of degradation and debasement one stumbles upon several disquieting moments of tenderness: the silent enveloping of skin over the body's armature, stretched taut over pelvic bone, clavicle and rib cage (figure 221). We witness the detailed tracing of the nude's feminine bodily contour; poised upon the delicate curve of a calf muscle, lingering over a rounded breast or carefully delineating the arch of the back (figure 222). Delicate shadings transmute into gentle caresses bestowed upon the body's most intimate areas: a finely detailed aureole, the hollow of the navel, the crease of an underarm. These highly charged erotic vestiges (which, it would seem, the artist was powerless to refrain from rendering) constitute a series of details which exceed the terms of the misogynistic formal strategy through which they have been previously understood. Betraying an investment that cannot be reduced to the purely sadistic I am tempted to read these eroticized '*punctums*' as traces of the fetishistic; symptomatic of the refusal to relinquish the loved object which one prized and cherished so much (disavowal), whilst also indicative of an attempt to compensate for the mortal violence enacted upon this sacred and venerated body (a form of commemoration).<sup>493</sup>

*Sade's characters acquire the habit of fictitiously losing by lingering over their victims: I wish that you unendingly cease to exist so that I could unendingly lose you, unendingly destroy you.*

Pierre Klossowski, *Sade my Neighbour*.<sup>494</sup>

Fetishism – insofar as it can be understood as a form of idolatry – is set against iconoclasm.<sup>495</sup> This would then complicate the received reading of Degas the sadist/iconoclast/misogynist.<sup>496</sup> If the nineteenth century was the harbinger of the ideal nude's ultimate demise, then these drawings dramatize the hour of its death. By playing out the extended protraction of this body's last gasp at the very point of its dissolution this is seen to represent an atropaic strategy functioning to ward off the inevitability of the ideal's

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<sup>493</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism' (1927), vol. 21, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, (London: Hogarth, 1959), pp. 147-58.

<sup>494</sup> Klossowski, *Sade, My Neighbour*, p. 112.

<sup>495</sup> As Carol Armstrong has noted: 'Fetishism is defined by the worship of an 'idol' – an object whose value is derived from its status as a sign for something, outside, beyond, and different from itself, something which it isn't...' *Degas*, n. 40, p. 281.

<sup>496</sup> Indeed, as Armstrong notes elsewhere: 'Misogyny is also tied to the negation of idolatry...in this regard the image of woman is equated with a canon of illusionistic fetishes, and she becomes the principal object of a form of iconoclasm', *ibid.*, p. 191.

ultimate extinction – albeit in full knowledge that this is an utterly futile endeavour. Indeed, these bodies are not *quite* dead, and upon further scrutiny perturbing signs of life emerge from amongst these drawings. These are most evident at the extremities of the body; witness the tensed grip of a fist clutching a sheet in (figure 223), or the flexed toes and arched instep of the foot (figure 224). There is even a resuscitation of sorts at stake between two figure studies (figures 225 and 226). Whilst one would appear to be a direct copy of the other, upon closer scrutiny the latter is revealed to have been worked upon in more detail and undergone a series of discreet modifications. Indeed, it is precisely these barely discernable variations between the two drawings through which the subtle process of revivification and (re)eroticization becomes apparent: the indication of the genital area by a dark triangular shadow; the defined left breast and elaboration of detail around the nipple which now stands clearly erect. The face is here completely obscured but the hands are much more clearly articulated; the formless appendages of the previous drawing replaced by carefully delineated feminine fingers creating a sensuous interplay of surface against the nape of the neck and the suggestive tumbling hair in the midst of which they are positioned. As these drawings are seen to stage the nude lingering at the threshold of death – or upon the brink of erotic ecstasy (*la petite morte*) – they represent a body which is seen to open onto a kind of *jouissance*.<sup>497</sup> This is a *jouissance* which can be understood most literally as a form of erotic pleasure – a more or less explicit indication of which we find in the sudden appearance of a lower leg (figure 73) thrown into the air as if by some involuntary jolt or spasm. Certainly, the corporeal histrionics of these figures take their place as part of a highly sexualized representational tradition of suffering female bodies where the experience of intense physical pain is seen to spill over into an orgasmic sexual ecstasy. The attitudes illustrated in these drawings are comparable to the sensuously writhing *Femme piquée par un serpent* (1843) by Jean-Baptiste Clésinger (figure 227) and the convulsive tremours of Bernini's *St Theresa* (1652) (figure 228), as they are retrospectively seen to pre-empt the flailing contortions of Charcot's hysterics (figure 229).<sup>498</sup> But while this *jouissance*, indicative of a realm beyond the symbolic or the rational and mundane, may be disruptive enough in itself, it is a *jouissance* which is ultimately circumscribed within a phallic register.<sup>499</sup>

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<sup>497</sup> For the classic studies on the interrelation of sex and death see Georges Bataille, *L'Erotisme* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1957) and *Les Larmes d'Eros* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1961).

<sup>498</sup> This latter connection has already been made in relation to Degas' later imagery of the female body. Carol Armstrong has compared the 'strange semiotics' of the female body exhibited in the artist's brothel monotypes to contemporaneous representations of hysterical attitudes illustrated in the treatises of Charcot and Richer, See *Degas*, p. 186-187. Anthea Callen has also drawn the same comparison. See *The Spectacular Body*, pp. 50-53.

<sup>499</sup> For Lacan's famous reading of St Theresa as the embodiment of feminine *jouissance*. see Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX Encore, 1972-3*, trans. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York and London, WW Norton, 1998).

It was for remaining precisely within the terms of ‘phallogocentrism’ that Régis Michel was taken to task by Linda Nochlin and Abigail Solomon-Godeau for his reading of the *Scène de Guerre* figure studies in their review of Michel’s 2000 Louvre exhibition *Posséder et Détruire*.<sup>500</sup> Michel is the only scholar to have provided anything like a substantial commentary upon these works, (a substantial selection of which were included in the exhibition) and his essay ‘Degas, l’exhibitioniste’ published in the accompanying catalogue, provides one of the most compelling exegeses upon the artist in all of the literature his work has generated. However, Michel’s discourse repeatedly falls back upon the familiar tropes and clichés of the artist’s putative misogyny and for all this riveting essay’s interpretational brilliance and theoretical sophistication, it must be said that his is an argument which ultimately rests upon a denial of female subjectivity. Like Huysmans before him the female body as represented by Degas, is for Michel ‘*comme animal*’.<sup>501</sup> In response to the pessimistic conclusion of Michel’s essay, Nochlin and Solomon-Godeau have attempted to recover a measure of agency on behalf of the violated female subject of *Scène de Guerre* by arguing for the possibility of an identification on the part of Degas with the ‘violated rather than violator’.<sup>502</sup> Whilst the repeated occlusion of the model’s face in these drawings amounts to the elision of subjectivity for Michel, for Nochlin and Solomon-Godeau it is taken to be ‘expressive of great suffering and the abjection of the violated subject’.<sup>503</sup> However, I am not entirely convinced by this argument, which would only seem to reverse the terms of what they perceive to be Michel’s own interpretational bind. As a rejoinder to this I would argue these readings do not have to be mutually exclusive. Whilst I would agree with Michel that these drawings constitute a project of debasement dedicated precisely to the absolute obliteration of female subjectivity, I would also maintain this does not automatically preclude the possibility of an identification on the part of the artist-subject Degas with these prostrate female bodies – albeit that the identification at stake here is one that is not necessarily empathetic. Thus, in order to account for both of these interpretational possibilities it is necessary to broaden the terms of the debate surrounding these drawings as it stands at present and it is by reframing the terms of the *jouissance* that we are able to move beyond the reductive terms of an exclusively phallic register. The inability of psychoanalysis to conceive of *jouissance* beyond the terms of phallogocentrism (as epitomized by Lacan’s eulogization of Bernini’s St Theresa) has come under sustained critique by feminist scholars.<sup>504</sup> It is Denis Hollier, however, who pursues the paroxysmal

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<sup>500</sup> Linda Nochlin and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, ‘Sins of the Fathers’, *Art in America* (December 2000), pp. 92-101.

<sup>501</sup> Michel, *Posséder et détruire*, p. 187.

<sup>502</sup> Nochlin and Solomon-Godeau, ‘Sins of the Fathers’, p. 99.

<sup>503</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>504</sup> See for example Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (London: Allen

effects of *jouissance* to its most dislocating extremes by linking it with Bataille's notion of eroticism. Indeed for Hollier, their effects are all but synonymous. Eroticism for Bataille is motivated by the desire to regain a lost continuity with other beings.<sup>505</sup> While this can be brought fully about only in death, it is the glimpse of a possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the discrete self which is eroticism's primary aim. But by its very definition this is a state of being that can only be achieved by sacrificing one's self-possession, the full cost of which is put thus:

*The erotic effect can be defined as the loss of what is proper: the simultaneous loss of cleanness in filth and of one's own proper identity in an expropriating violation. Being is dissolved, carried away by the action of dissolute existence. Eroticism opens beings to a slippery action where they give themselves over and are lost, where their excess leaves them wanting.*<sup>506</sup>

*Jouissance* is conceived of here as an essentially *ruinous* force: it 'proceeds by breaking up the body's unity, literally dislocating it'. It is first of all destructive and it destroys body image.<sup>507</sup> The extraordinary passage by which Hollier then proceeds to wrest *jouissance* from the phallic is worth quoting in its entirety:

*Jouissance functions, therefore, from this perspective, as the loss of an organ. There is no organ for jouissance: Jouissance is produced where there is not (or no longer) an organ, in the interstices, the slashes, cuts, incisions and other differential organic places. If genitality (subject to reproductive finality) is accomplished in the basis of (genital) organs adapted to that purpose, sexual difference is inscribed in differences marked by active absences (or losses) of organs. It is not a question of unimaginatively reducing the sacrificial game staged in sexual relations to the assertion that the penis knife relentlessly attacks its female victim: this version remains too dependent upon organic structure, it subjects difference to zones that one can locate organically, it fetishizes sexual difference. Whereas this difference is only the point of departure for an infinite multiplication of organic differences inscribing themselves onto the form of a body to loosen this form. The victim in this sacrifice could not be solely the feminine partner (which always implies the identification between victim and 'executioner'). Jouissance is cruel because it transgresses the human body, does not respect its form, and through a hundred metamorphoses sets free the animality that is penitentiary architecture contained.*<sup>508</sup>

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Lane, 1974); Jacqueline Rose and Juliet Mitchell, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne* (London: Macmillan, 1982); Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990) pp. 175-6 and Jane Gallop, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter's Seduction* (London: Macmillan, 1992).

<sup>505</sup> See Bataille, *L'erotisme*.

<sup>506</sup> Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p. 74.

<sup>507</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>508</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

The piercing imagery through which Hollier's stunning critique of phallogocentric *jouissance* is articulated here is strongly resonant with the dominant terms through which Degas' relationship with the female body (at least in his representations of the nude) is characterized. The gendered roles of 'executioner' and 'victim' ostensibly offers such a perfect paradigm through which to account for the violence enacted upon the site of the female body in *Scène de Guerre* that to make any attempt to salvage the work from these terms is rendered counterintuitive. While in this respect I would side with Michel's interpretation of *Scène de Guerre* (a work which, as he puts it: *ne saurait être plus phallique*<sup>509</sup>), I believe that the terms of his argument can be extended further by seeking to account for Degas' own subjectivity amidst the expropriating violation enacted upon the site of these drawings. In this respect the recumbent corpse-like figure (figure 230) mentioned earlier comes to assume a renewed significance. By far the most galling image of the *Scène de Guerre* drawings, it is also notable amongst this series in that it is the only pose not to appear upon the canvas surface. The fatal logic of Degas' deleterious project of feminine denigration stops at the site of this distended body. Representing the termination of his swansong to the ideal nude, it is with her that the artist arrived at the point of no return. But this figure symbolizes the end point of narrative in another important way: she stands for the trauma of castration. If it was carnal knowledge of the female body at which Degas was getting through the process of unveiling enacted in the *Scène de Guerre* drawings, then this figure does not disappoint. With splayed legs and genitals thrust in full view this is the castrated female *par excellence* – as she throws the full horror of this primal scene back in the face of the spectator.<sup>510</sup> While for Freud, sexual curiosity was inextricably bound up with intellectual curiosity, a primal desire to *know*, what is revealed in the fullness of this knowledge is a trauma from which the subject can never recover. Indeed, these drawings ultimately surrender themselves to the inevitable loss which they dramatize. It is nothing other than artist's *own* subjective deliquescence at stake in the aftermath of the dissolution of the nude that is fantasized on the site of these drawings, buried amidst the deluge of his feminine *membra disjecta*.

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<sup>509</sup> Michel, *Posséder et détruire*, p. 182.

<sup>510</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' (1905) vol. 7, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, (London: Hogarth, 1959), pp. 123-230.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **FAMILY ROMANCES: *LE JOCKEY TOMBE***

*One day Philonicus the Thessalonian brought a fine black stallion to King Philip and offered it to him for a price. The king's grooms tried to mount the creature but to no avail. The horse resisted violently and none of them were able to tame him. King Philip was vexed and ordered the horse to be led away, but his son Alexander who was nearby said to him: 'what a horse you are losing because, for lack of skill and courage, your men cannot manage him.' At first Philip held his peace, but as his son often let fall such words he replied: 'Do you find fault with your elders because you believe you know more than they do, or can manage a horse better?' 'This horse at any rate I believe I could manage better than the others have,' the young prince replied. The assembled company laughed at his effrontery but King Philip permitted him to try his luck with the animal. With that Alexander went over to the steed and took hold of his bridle rein. He turned the animal towards the sun whilst protecting his eyes and speaking to him gently, for he had noticed that the horse was only afraid of his own shadow. He then proceeded to walk the horse towards his father who was speechless with amazement over that which he had just witnessed. When Alexander had dismounted the horse the King kissed him with tears of joy in his eyes and exclaimed: 'My dear son, seek out a kingdom equal to thyself for Macedonia has not room for thee.' The horse was named Bucephalus and from that moment on would never leave Alexander's side. He accompanied the Macedon King on his military campaigns, whose Empire would extend from the deserts of Egypt, to the rivers of Mesopotamia, and across the vast plains of Persia as far the Punjab. But Bucephalus was fatally wounded at the Battle of Hydaspes where the Indian monarch Porus put up a fierce resistance to Alexander's army. The Great King was distraught at the loss of his beloved companion and founded a city in his honour upon the west banks of the Hydaspes river where the horse had fallen.*

Plutarch, 'Life of Alexander'<sup>511</sup>

Degas' formative *Alexandre et le Bucéphale* (ca. 1859) (figure 231) numbers amongst the half-finished, abandoned historical canvases on which he was at work during the 1860s. Almost nothing is known about the picture, although its subject corresponds to an episode from Plutarch's *Greek Lives*. But like the *Young Spartans* (also ostensibly based upon a passage from the same text), this picture is far from a faithful or orthodox rendering of the words of the ancient biographer. Most striking here are the ways in which the two main

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<sup>511</sup> Glossed from Plutarch, 'Life of Alexander'. Reprinted in *Lives*, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 7, with an English translation by Beradotte Perrin (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 225-439.

protagonists fail to meet their heroic characterizations in the *Lives*. In Degas' picture Alexander is cast as a meek and rather apprehensive youth; there is not much in this insipid figure to remind us of the desire for power and fighting spirit of the choleric young prince described to us by Plutarch. And Bucephalus, although we see only his head, is more of a shy young colt than the mighty steed of classical legend.

The relationship between the two figures is also rather curious. In the *Lives*, we are told how Alexander tamed the horse through gentleness and empathy – as opposed to the forced coercion and brutality exercised by the King's men. But in Degas' interpretation this demonstration of tenderness towards the animal would seem to be at the cost of leaving the future king rather vulnerable, the mastery over the horse ultimately achieved in Plutarch's account undermined here by Alexander's rather uneasy grip on the horse and his faltering stance upon the ground. In any case both figures are denied centre stage, relegated to the left margin of the picture surface by the spectators fronted by the elderly King Philip, who loom large in the foreground opposite. Staged as a confrontation between young and old, an encounter in which one is pitted against many, Degas here taps into something of the intense familial rivalry at stake between the precocious young prince – eyes firmly set on his father's kingdom – and the august King of Macedon upon which Plutarch's narrative is structured.

This is brought to the fore in the passage cited above, but the mutual threat posed by father and son to one another takes on a much deeper significance when understood within the wider context of the biographical narrative of which it forms a part. Indeed, the relationship between the two males is characterized in the 'Life of Alexander' chiefly in terms of a power struggle. In anticipation of his later greatness Plutarch tells of how, when Alexander entertained the Persian ambassadors at the Royal court in his father's absence, the envoys were most impressed by his intelligence and maturity, and regarded the much talked about ability of Philip as nothing compared to his son's potential for greatness. And when Alexander heard news of the Kings' victories in foreign lands he took no pleasure at all from this, remarking gruffly that Philip's conquests were made only in order to prevent his own future achievements and that his father intended to leave nothing for him.

But what is most interesting here is how this rivalry between father and son is complicated within the wider political and familial network in which it is implicated. When Philip's wife Olympias was pregnant with Alexander a series of ominous portents served to drive the King from their marital bed (even leading him to doubt the paternity of his unborn child). Effectively creating a rift between the couple, even before Alexander came into the world the King was made aware of the potential threat posed by his son to his own status and existence. Nowhere is this more evident than in Philip's response to Alexander's taming of Bucephalus, in whose ambiguous words of praise, *My dear son, seek out a kingdom*

*equal to thyself for Macedonia has not room for thee*, are couched the order of his son's banishment from his kingdom. Philip was right to fear his son who would go on to leave a historical legacy which would dwarf that of his own. But Alexander was also endangered by the deeds of his father – particularly by the offspring of his successive marriages whom he suspected Philip wished to name as heir in his place, thereby usurping his own rightful claim to his father's kingdom.

The network of intra-familial tensions, rivalries and conflicts dramatized in Plutarch's account of the life of the young Alexander take the form of a veritable 'family romance'. In Freudian terms, the family romance refers to a variety of conscious childhood fantasies commonly involving scenarios where the child's real parents ('of whom he now has a low opinion') are substituted by those of a 'higher social standing'.<sup>512</sup> Motivated by an awakening sense of dissatisfaction with the actuality of his familial circumstances, it is important to note that the de-idealization of the child's mother and father at stake here is often brought about by the advent of a younger sibling who demands a stake in the parental love and attention of which the eldest child was previously the sole recipient. Consequently, day-dreams associated with the family romance frequently turn upon the child imagining either that he is adopted, or that his other siblings are bastards. While Freud understood these fantasies to be essential in the painful process of the subject's negotiation of his autonomy outside the domain of parental omnipotence, his model of the family romance has been successfully adapted to encompass political and artistic models of authority, lineage and affiliation.<sup>513</sup> For Degas too, the family romance is seen to provide a productive paradigm. The various psychoanalytic themes it foregrounds – the weight of the Oedipal, the power of fantasy, the process of affiliation, the highly charged nature of sibling rivalry and the fundamental role of identification in the constitution of subjectivity – constitute a number of highly pertinent issues at stake in the artist's oeuvre which I wish to explore within the context of this chapter.

Degas' negotiation of the terms of his formal practice in relation to the legacy bequeathed by his illustrious artistic forebears (the ideal forms of classical antiquity, Raphael, Ingres, etc.) has been discussed extensively in the preceding chapters of this dissertation. As we have seen this was an intensely fraught endeavour, characterized by a profound ambivalence on the part of Degas, as he sought to break out of what he perceived to be the constraining limitations of this endowment, whilst at the same time seeking to

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<sup>512</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Family Romances* (1909) vol. 9, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, (London: Hogarth, 1959), pp. 237-241.

<sup>513</sup> See Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1992). See also Norman Bryson, *Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) and Thomas Crow, *Emulation: David, Drouais, and Girodet in the Art of Revolutionary France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), although the paradigm of the family romance is not explicitly stated in these latter texts.



carve out a place within the very same tradition he set out to critique. The final chapter of this thesis, however, will seek to explore the ways in which the artist positioned himself within the nexus of a hierarchical social system that is much 'closer to home' by demonstrating how the family cell functioned for Degas as an important formative crucible within which he negotiated his own artistic identity and subjectivity.

The ways in which Degas' formative artistic output constitutes a set of highly cathected identificatory sites is perfectly illustrated in *Alexandre et le Bucéphale*, where the unassuming figure of Alexander can be seen to function as the cipher through which the artist's own subjectivity is unconsciously refracted across the encounter staged in the foreground. This is an identification similar to that at stake upon the figure of the young David in *David et Goliath* discussed in chapter 2. It would seem that these young male figures, both represented at formative but decisive moments of their illustrious lives, represented something of deep personal significance to Degas at the beginning of his artistic career. But what is most interesting about *Alexandre et le Bucéphale* is how the twenty-five year old artist restages Plutarch's portrait of Alexander for his own ends. Whilst nowhere in the 'Life of Alexander' is the future king and military leader's destiny for greatness ever in any doubt, the same cannot be said for the way in which he has been portrayed by Degas. This maladroit youth does not immediately inspire much confidence, but what it would seem is being asked of us here it that we do not lose faith in the potential of this nascent figure to deliver upon his future promise, even if that is a promise which remains unfulfilled for the time being. The conviction required of the viewer here is one that held a strong resonance for the artist within the context of his own personal circumstances at this moment. As discussed in the introduction, the artist laboured away for most of the 1860s without managing to produce anything of much substance. Although Degas' family had the financial means to indulge him in his artistic pursuits and maintained high hopes and ambitions for their 'Raphaël', Edgar's repeated failure to produce anything fit for exhibition at the Salon was the cause of much anxiety, particularly for the artist's father. His anxieties were also expressed in no uncertain terms to Edgar, whom he would frequently counsel to become a portrait painter – a *métier* which provided a measure of financial security.<sup>514</sup>

In the light of this, I do not think it is too far-fetched to read *Alexandre et le Bucéphale* as a tangential reflection upon the strained relations between *père et fils* Degas at this moment. Indeed, the picture foregrounds the confrontation between Philip (Auguste) and Alexander (Edgar) at the expense of occluding the ostensible subject indicated by the picture's title (Bucephalus is accorded only a peripheral role) and which stands out as the

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<sup>514</sup> Undated and unpublished letter from Auguste Degas to Edgar Degas. Cited in part in André Lemoisne, *Degas et son Oeuvre*, (Paris, 1946-9), vol. 1, p. 30.

most arresting encounter in the midst of the picture's narrative and compositional confusion. In this standoff between father and son it is Philip who is cast as the dominating character. There is something palpably menacing about his bulky countenance. Cutting a voluminous figure in his black garb, his sinister air is enforced by the fact that we, as spectators, cannot see his face. While the fullness of his expression is something to which only Alexander is privy, it clearly has the effect of producing in his son a profound sense of unease as he wavers in the face of his father's unflinching gaze.

I mentioned earlier that there are certain similarities between the encounters staged in *Alexandre et le Bucéphale* and *David et Goliath*. However, the forbidding presence of Philip poses a far more significant problem to Alexander than the withering figure of the Philistine giant ever did to David. Goliath is nothing more substantial than a formless mass receding from view on the horizon, whereas Degas' Philip of Macedon is accorded an altogether more clearly defined identity. Although we cannot divine his physiognomy, this balding, bearded and rotund figure bears more than a passing likeness to Auguste Degas as we see from a slightly later portrait by his son: *Lorenzo Pagans et Auguste Degas* (figure 232). A shared intensity of bearing between the two figures is also clear to see in this comparison. In the light of this family resemblance it will prove illuminating to situate Degas' image of the Macedon patriarch directly in relation to the crop of omnipresent elders scattered across the artist's early oeuvre. We have already met one such character: the Spartan legislator Lycurgus (figure 233). Silently presiding over the carefree bantering of the youngsters in the foreground of the *Spartiates*, he functions as the picture's authoritative figurehead in a similar way to the elderly King Philip in *Alexandre et le Bucéphale*. This idea is given further plausibility by the existence of a detailed study of King Philip amongst the preparatory sketches for this work (figure 234). Dressed in a classical toga, this commanding figure exhibits marked similarities to that of Lycurgus.

The recurring figure of the paterfamilias chez Degas, however, is represented most frequently in the guise of senior family members. Prominent amongst this group is the portrait of his paternal grandfather Hilaire Degas (figure 235) which Degas made at his villa in the Neapolitan countryside where he was summoned in the summer of 1857. As we see in the preliminary sketches relating to this picture in the artist's *carnets* (figure 236), this is a work which owes much to Titian's portrait of Pope Paul III (figure 237) – a portrait which the artist had been studying closely at the Museo di Capodimonte during his stay (figure 238). But while this papal image initially provided the young artist with a patriarchal motif *par excellence*, Degas' portrait of his grandfather is altogether more pontifical than Titian's hunched and decrepit Pope. While the latter appears to be on the verge of implosion, Hilaire Degas (gold-topped cane resting under firm grip on his lap) holds fast to his authority. That the ageing church Father is almost ready to accede the papal seat is brought

into sharper focus in the following portrait: *Pope Paul III with Alessandro and Ottavio Farnese* (1546) (figure 239) where he is attended to on either side by his direct heirs. While his nephew Alessandro, dressed in red cardinal's vestments, waits stoically in the shadows, there is something inauthentic about Ottavio's overly attentive kowtowing. His devious scheming however, is offset by the knowing eyes of the patriarch who appears fully cognizant of the eagerness with which his grandson would jump into his chair once it became vacant. Degas also made a detailed copy of this family portrait during his stay, although it is clear from his portrait of Hilaire that the eldest grandson and namesake of the eminent Degas patriarch was strictly prohibited from entertaining similar designs on the family seat.<sup>515</sup> Indeed, while one might argue for a certain geniality on the part of Titian's *Papa*, the clearly discernable twinkle in the eye of this sixteenth-century pontiff could not be further from the censorious regard of Hilaire Degas, whose heavy-lidded sockets fix the spectator with the kind of steadfast, implacable stare that we might imagine corresponding to the unseen gaze at stake between father and son in *Alexandre et le Bucéphale*.

Another family portrait of note is that of the artist's paternal aunt Stefania and her two daughters: *La Duchesse de Montejasi Cicerale et ses filles Elena et Camilla* (1876) (figure 240). Dressed in mourning costume, the corpulent Duchesa, enthroned at the centre of the composition, has literally ousted her pretty and vivacious young daughters to its extreme periphery via the very same formal strategy of marginalization to which Alexander has been subjected in *Alexandre et le Bucéphale*.<sup>516</sup> In both pictures these black-clad figures are posed in relation to their offspring as immovable obstacles. But what interests me here the most are the different ways in which these sons and daughters negotiate themselves with respect to these incarnations of parental dominance. In the case of the *Cicerale* family portrait it would seem that each daughter represents dichotomous responses to the matriarch's supremacy: utter acquiescence and sedition. Elena's unfocussed gaze stares gormlessly at nothing, whilst the altogether more pert Camilla (cocked-forward head insolently popping out from behind her sister) functions as a subtle figure of pictorial rupture. Alexander, on the other hand, occupies a far more hesitant and uncertain position in relation to his proximate elder. Indeed, it is precisely this young boy's ambivalent stance that may give us some indication of what is at stake in the complex and highly charged processes of identification in which

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<sup>515</sup> See Nb 8, p. 14 for the copy.

<sup>516</sup> The figure of the Duchesa in this portrait bears comparison with that of Laura Bellelli in the artist's earlier *La Famille Bellelli* (1858-1867). This pair of maternal figures (who can be described as nothing other than embodiments of sheer dolour) are seen to perform a similar role, where their function within the pictorial structure of which they form a part is that of a vortex or centripetal energy drain. For an extended discussion of the *Bellelli* family portrait see Linda Nochlin, 'A house is not a home: Degas and the subversion of the family', in *Representing Women* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999) pp. 152-179. For a nuanced mediation upon the figure of the maternal and its melancholic associations see Tamar Garb, 'Blank Mourning: Portraiture and Separation', in *The Painted Face: Portraits of Women in France, 1840-1914* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 101-138.

Degas was entangled during his early career with respect to the various figures of authority he encountered along his way.

It is within this context that *Alexandre et le Bucéphale* can perhaps be seen as Degas' silent entreaty to himself to have the strength of his convictions in the face of the host of intimidating authority figures with which he was confronted at this moment. Here, the figure of King Philip stands not only for the familial paterfamilias but also represents the historical lineage of eminent artistic patriarchs of whom Degas was also in awe. If this is the case, however, then *Alexandre et le Bucéphale* is a picture which is utterly unsuccessful in its assignment. This canvas was certainly never going to be the masterpiece with which Degas would make his mark on history (or even his longed-for artistic début at the Salon). The picture's lack of finish, obscure interpretation of the historical source upon which it is purportedly based and overall narrative illegibility would, for its contemporary audience, (like the rest of his History paintings) have simply failed to register. We do not know for how long Degas laboured over *Alexandre et le Bucéphale* or even what his family and close associates thought of it. However we might reasonably speculate that this obscure and nugatory canvas did nothing to alleviate his family's concerns with regard to his artistic potential. For all the young Degas' ardent desire for recognition this is a picture which singularly fails to live up to its promise. But *Alexandre et le Bucéphale* should not be disregarded out of hand for this reason and by framing this work within the context of Degas' work on equestrian themes it is seen to possess a much broader historical and artistic relevance. *Alexandre et le Bucéphale* is here a highly significant work as it represents the emergence of a theme which was to preoccupy the artist until the end of his life.

What is most radical about Degas' representation of Alexander and Bucephalus is its departure from the ways in which their relationship had previously been depicted. The marginalization of the two main protagonists to the extreme left of the picture surface is an unprecedented compositional gesture in itself but their relationship is undermined in many other important ways. In western visual culture Alexander is most commonly represented assertively astride Bucephalus as he charges fearlessly into battle. Thus, to depict Alexander (as Degas does) in such an insecure and vulnerable relation to his horse works to dramatically deflate the heroic image of the Great King. But the image of strident martial masculinity which Alexander has come to epitomize is rendered most problematic in *Alexandre et le Bucéphale* by the artists' radical demilitarization of this figure. Just what is at stake here is illuminated best through a comparison with an earlier pictorial precedent: Charles Le Brun's *Passage du Granique* (1664) (figure 241). Le Brun's canvas is the first of a monumental narrative painting cycle illustrating a series of triumphant events from

Alexander's military campaigns in Asia.<sup>517</sup> The two scenes, each relating to a different moment in the illustrious life of Alexander – one formative, the other climatic – could not be more divergent. While Le Brun's mode is celebratory and self-assured, Degas thematizes hesitance and unease. The heroic battle scene mounted by the *premier peinture du roi* is situated within a legible historical setting, whereas Degas has set his against a vaguely classicized bucolic *paysage* of indeterminate geographical location. Le Brun's *Passage du Granique* exemplifies the academic principles of a clearly legible multi-figured narrative tableaux – a composition in stark contrast to the illegibility of *Alexandre et le Bucéphale*, whose at-odds protagonists are implicated within an encounter that is obscure, fraught and internally conflicted. What emerges most forcefully from this comparison, however, are the radical disparities between the ways in which Alexander himself is represented. In *Passage du Granique* we witness the Emperor fully engaged in battle. Trampled natives underfoot, he occupies the very apex of the picture's compositional crescendo. The qualities of military leadership associated with Alexander in this picture are enforced further by the sword he wields aggressively and his ornate battle costume. One hardly need to labour over how Degas' Alexander – barefoot and wearing only a simple tunic – is a figure bereft of any such military trappings. He might as easily be mistaken for a lowly stable groom as a future King. It is also worth comparing *Alexandre et le Bucéphale* to the exultant apotheosis of Le Brun's painting cycle: *Entrée d'Alexandre dans Babylone* (1665) (figure 242). As Babylon marks the last bastion of his Asian conquest with which Alexander's dominion over the East is complete, the resplendent King is seen here elevated upon a gilded chariot as his lowly minions pay homage to him. Again, this image of Alexander's finest hour could not be further from Degas' humble and self-effacing young prince – a figure who has still yet to make his mark upon the world.

In these ways *Alexandre et le Bucéphale* represents a decisive rejection of the culturally over-determined martial masculinities through which the Great King had previously been portrayed. As demonstrated by Le Brun's painting cycle, Alexander is commonly depicted as a mature man in the midst of battle. And while representations of this figure as a youth are highly uncommon, we see once again how the theme of adolescence functioned as a productive topos for the artist.<sup>518</sup> Indeed, it was by recourse to this precarious phase of flux and transition – a moment before sexual difference is definitively 'fixed' – that which the artist's erosion of the militarized rhetorics through which Alexander had previously been portrayed was initiated.

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<sup>517</sup> See Donald Posner, 'Charles Lebrun's *Triumphs of Alexander*,' *Art Bulletin*, vol. 41, no. 3 (September, 1959), pp. 237-248.

<sup>518</sup> The notable exception is the Louvre's *Alexandre Guimet* (300BC). There are not direct copies of this work in Degas notebooks although it is highly likely that he was familiar with this celebrated work of classical sculpture.

*Le plus noble conquête que l'homme ait jamais faite et celle de ce fier et fougueux cheval, qui partage avec lui les fatigues de la guerre et la gloire des combats.*

Comte de Buffon, *L'Histoire Naturelle du Cheval* (1749)

In its recasting of the relationship between the male figure and his horse *Alexandre et le Bucéphale* marks a series of radical interventions into a time honoured iconographical tradition. As Degas' early *carnets* testify, the history of equestrian art was a genre in which the artist was well versed.<sup>519</sup> The rudimentary sketches of the Parthenon frieze made from plaster casts at the Ecole des Beaux Arts are amongst the first copies he ever made as a novice (figure 243). During his tour of Italy the artist also encountered various forms of equestrian portraiture. In Florence he copied Andrea Castagno's *Equestrian Portrait of Niccolò da Tolentino* (1455) (figure 244), Paolo Uccello's *Equestrian Portrait of the English Knight John Hawkwood* and Anthony Van Dyck's *Equestrian Portrait of Charles V* (1620) (figure 245). It was also here that the artist became acquainted with the genre of battle painting when he made a detailed copy of Uccello's *Battle of San Romano* (figure 246).

The equestrian portrait and military battle painting represented the elevated modes in which the horse figured in French art of the first nineteenth century, and thus represent a pair of genres with which Degas had inevitably to contend. The latter genre is exemplified by Jacques-Louis David's *Bonaparte franchissant le Grand St Bernard* (1801) (figure 247).<sup>520</sup> (Even if Degas was not directly familiar with this work there are countless other equestrian immortalizations of Napoleon of which he must surely have been aware). A testimony to the heroic beginnings of his Second Italian Campaign, Bonaparte is shown charging fearlessly over the Alps to meet his enemy on the back of a magnificent white steed. One arm controlling the powerfully rearing horse, the other raised authoritatively in the air, David's *Bonaparte* here fulfils the First Consul's own pictorial dictates that his soon-to-be *premier peintre* should depict him '*calme sur un cheval fougueux*'.<sup>521</sup> Positioned somewhere between portraiture and History painting, *Bonaparte* is an aggrandizing and highly contrived image whose meaning depends on a complex set of historical references. Although David's image draws on the elevated subjectivity of the monarchical equestrian portrait, Napoleon is reconfigured as a modern, and entirely secularized, '*grand homme*'. Trussed up in ornate

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<sup>519</sup> For an iconographical history of the horse see: John Baskett, *The Horse in Art*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006); Tamsin Pickeral, *The Horse: 30,000 Years of the Horse in Art*, (London and New York: Merrell, 2006) and Catherine Johns, *Horses: History, Myth, Art*, (London: British Museum, 2006).

<sup>520</sup> For existing commentaries upon this painting see: Todd Porterfield and Susan Seigfried, *Staging Empire: Napoleon, Ingres and David*, (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), pp. 17-19; Christopher Prendergast, *Napoleon and History Painting: Antoine-Jean Gros' 'La Bataille d'Eylau'*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); pp. 108-9 and 202-3; Dorothy Johnson, *Jacques-Louis David: Art in Metamorphosis*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 179-183.

<sup>521</sup> Etienne Delécluze, *Louis-David: son école et son temps*, 8 vols. (Paris: 1855), p. 233.

military dress, with golden cloak billowing around him, the commanding figure of the revolutionary General is set dramatically apart from the anonymous ranks of his infantry whom we glimpse beneath the front hooves of his horse.

The other brand of equestrian art which flowered under the First Empire was that of military painting.<sup>522</sup> 1801 marks something of a watershed for the *genre militaire* of the Napoleonic era with the exhibition of François Lejeune's *La Bataille de Marengo* (figure 248) and Antoine-Jean Gros' *La Bataille de Nazareth* (figure 249) at the official Salon of that year.<sup>523</sup> Whilst each canvas represents a concerted attempt on the part of each artist to resuscitate the discredited genre of battle painting, Gros and Lejeune drew upon radically different formal rhetorics in order to realize their ambitions (Siegfried has likened their respective efforts to 'rival siblings'<sup>524</sup>). Whilst today it is Gros who is the most highly regarded painter of the two, it was Lejeune's *Marengo* which was most easily legible to its contemporary audience. Adhering closely to the pictorial format of seventeenth century topographical battle painting set in place by artists such as Adam-Frans Van der Muelen, *Marengo* appropriated the same distanced 'birds-eye' viewpoint in order to provide a panoramic overview of the combat laid out before the spectator.<sup>525</sup> Lejeune's image of a well organized military operation could not be further from the image of martial combat with which we are presented by Gros. *Nazareth* here marks a radical departure from the existing conventions governing the representation of battle painting. Whilst this may be at the cost of sacrificing a certain pictorial legibility and narrative coherence, Gros's painting is an altogether more captivating and affectively charged image of war. Rejecting the detached viewpoint of conventional battle representations, the action is brought forward to very the front of the picture plane, and elicits a far more direct involvement on the part of the spectator. As one is almost engulfed by the dramatic scene, Gros evokes something of the chaotic and disordered realities of man-to-man military combat where French soldier and Oriental enemy intermingle with forceful viscerality.

As well as Gros and Lejeune, a whole raft of artists dedicated to painting Napoleonic exploits also came to prominence in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The canvases of Carle Vernet, François Gérard, Claude Gautherot, Charles Meynier, Jean-

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<sup>522</sup> For existing literature on military painting of the First Empire see, Arsène Alexandre, *Histoire de la Peinture Militaire en France* (Paris: Librairie Renouard, 1909); Prendergast, *Napoleon and History Painting*; Porterfield, *The Allure of Empire*; Susan Siegfried, 'Naked History: The Rhetoric of Military Painting in Post-revolutionary France', *Art Bulletin* 75 (June 1993), pp. 235-25; Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Extremities: Painting Empire in Post Revolutionary France*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002) and David O'Brien, *After the Revolution: Antoine-Jean Gros, painting and propaganda under Napoleon Bonaparte* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

<sup>523</sup> For a discussion of this painting see O'Brien, *After the Revolution.*, p. 57-8 and Susan Siegfried, 'Naked History'.

<sup>524</sup> Siegfried, *ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>525</sup> For a brief overview of the history of military painting and a discussion of Van der Meulen see O'Brien, *ibid.*, pp. 56-9.

Baptiste Debret, Pierre-Auguste Hennequin et al. are today regarded as little more than empty propaganda machines paying homage to the Emperor and extolling the glories of his overseas campaigns. Nevertheless it is important to note the crucial role played by the horse in this newly emergent *genre militaire*. This is exemplified by Claude Gautherot's *Napoléon harangue le 2ème corps de la Grande Armée sur le pont de Sechausen sur la Lech avant l'attaque d'Augsbourg le 12 October 1805*, (1808) (figure 250). Dominating the centre of the composition the commanding frontally-lit figure of the mounted Napoleon dressed in full military regalia parades majestically through the path his troops have parted for him. While the graceful horse he rides provides him with a privileged and elevated position, it also effectively serves to emphasize the disparity between the Emperor and his loyal troops. Standing attentively at his feet they wait in anticipation for the merest signs of recognition their commander might deign to dispense. In this respect the attitudes and expressions of the earnest foot soldiers at the right hand corner of the canvas are particularly poignant; such is the strength of their devotion and admiration that it borders upon abjection.

Military painting of the First Empire is notable for its maintenance of clear hierarchical martial structures, particularly where Napoleon himself figures. This we see clearly in Gautherot's *Harangue* where the rank of each soldier is clearly legible. The picture offers us a veritable spectrum of the *Grand Armée's* echelons which runs the gamut from its supreme commander Napoleon, across to his mounted *cuirassier*, right the way down to the lowliest of *fusiliers*. Hierarchical compositional structures such as that deployed in *Harangue* were instrumental in legitimizing Napoleon's claims to power and authority. The same legible military chain of command is also evident in Gros' *Napoléon visitant le champ de bataille d'Eylau le 9 février 1807* (1808) (figure 251).<sup>526</sup> The artist here draws upon established equine precedents for the representation of the Emperor ranging from Marcus Aurelius to Henry IV.<sup>527</sup> Exhibiting all the characteristics of the equestrian portrait, its invocation of the absolutist subject enshrined in this genre can be read as the effort to shore up Napoleon's authority in the face of widespread public disillusionment with his military ventures. But while Gros' representation of the horse-backed Emperor ministering clemency to the fallen in *Eylau* is entirely conventional in its utilization of the age-old equestrian semantics of power, it is a picture which is simultaneously seen to put them in grave jeopardy. This we see in the horse departing on the far right-hand side of the picture.<sup>528</sup> Its rider awkwardly facing backwards and held on either side by two soldiers constitute a disorderly configuration which destabilizes the composition's pacific gravitational centre which Napoleon himself occupies. The destabilization of a traditional equine iconography of

<sup>526</sup> For existing commentaries upon this picture see O'Brien, *After the Revolution* and Prendergast, *Napoleon and History Painting*.

<sup>527</sup> O'Brien, *ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>528</sup> Stephen Prendergast has also drawn attention to this pictorial detail. See discussion in *ibid.*, p. 189.



power in *Eylau* is at its most compelling, however, in the appalling heap of dead horses in the background which resonate poignantly with the snow-covered corpses of their fallen masters which the eye stumbles upon in the foreground. These shattered and broken horses are a far cry from the fighting stallions and graceful processional steeds populating the canvases of Napoleon's earlier military triumphs in which this animal had functioned as a crucial stabilizing figure. In this respect I am in agreement with Stephen Prendergast's interpretation of Gros's *Eylau* who claims that the presence of these procumbent horses within the picture can be seen to herald the incipient collapse of the Napoleonic military propaganda machine.<sup>529</sup>

It is Géricault however who pursues the unravelling of the heroic *genre militaire* to its most radical extremes. This is dramatized most compellingly in a pair of works the artist exhibited at the Restoration Salon of 1814: *Chasseur de la Garde* (1812) and *Cuirassier blessé, quittant le feu* (1814) (figures 252 and 253).<sup>530</sup> *Chasseur de la Garde* is a work which demands to be read under the terms of the military *genre équestre* – an obvious point of comparison here being David's portrait of the mounted Napoleon crossing the Alps discussed earlier. But the *Chasseur* dismantles this aggrandizing image of masculine power and strength in a number of important ways. For a start this work cannot be understood as a portrait (at least in terms of the conventional remit of this genre). Its subject is not a renowned military commander or general, but an anonymous young lieutenant. And although the dappled horse depicted here is just as '*fougeux*' as Napoleon's white steed, its rider is positioned in an altogether more unstable relation to his charger. In *Bonaparte* the feistiness of the horse in no way compromised Napoleon's power. Rather, the effortless control he is shown to exercise over the animal worked effectively to enforce his dominating presence and imperiousness of being. Géricault's *hussard*, by contrast, demonstrates no such authority over his animal. Indeed, it would seem that he has all but lost control of the buccaneering horse whose spindly legs flail wildly in all directions. In David's *Bonaparte* man and beast were conceived of as an invincible unity, but with Géricault this union has undergone an irreparable 'splitting', and rendered a relationship of radical precariousness. This is borne out by the *hussard's* perilously unstable balance upon his horse and anxious expression which anticipates his inexorable descent to the ground.

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<sup>529</sup> See Prendergast, *Napoleon and History Painting*, esp. chapter 7, 'World History on Horseback', pp. 189-207.

<sup>530</sup> For existing commentaries upon these works see Norman Bryson, 'Géricault and 'Masculinity'', in *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations*, Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey (eds.) (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press 1994), pp. 228-59; Thomas Crow, *Emulation: David, Drouais, and Girodet in the Art of Revolutionary France*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 283-289; Régis Michel, *Géricault* ex. cat. (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1991), p. 50, and Prendergast, *Napoleon and History Painting*, pp. 202-203.

The same disturbing psycho-pictorial effects of the *Chasseur* are also resonant in the *Cuirassier blessé*. Here we are presented with another image of a soldier struggling to keep control of a rearing horse. But this time the figure is dismounted. As we see in Gros' unfinished *Mustapha Pasha* (figure 254), the motif of the fallen cavalryman functioned as a common way through which to depict the vanquished enemy in military painting of the First Empire. However it is almost unprecedented to depict a member of the *Grand Armée* in this manner and is a move which mirrors the rapidly disintegrating *esprit de corps* of the Napoleonic military body politic. Whilst these implications of defeat are further enforced by the *cuirassier's* floundering stance and worried expression, one of the most remarkable features about this figure is the way in which he is seen to utilize his sword. Traditionally functioning as a defensive weapon to be wielded against the enemy, this 'phallic' appendage of military masculinity's elaborate armour is here deployed as a makeshift physical crutch. Although there are no visible signs of injury upon the soldier's body, the implications of wounded-ness suggested by the picture's title impart a pervasive sense of anxiety and unease. As Régis Michel has asserted, this picture is more indicative of a '*blessure morale*'.<sup>531</sup> In relation to this point it is important to bear in mind that these pictures coincide historically with the catastrophic demise of the Napoleonic Empire, whose irrevocable defeat was marked by the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. For Michel, the precarious teetering of horse and soldier upon the edge of a steep precipice are seen to personify the Empire's imminent collapse.

For a number of contemporary scholars, Régis Michel and Norman Bryson foremost among them, Géricault's artistic practice in the aftermath of Napoleon's surrender has been understood to function as an interrogation of the effects of this defeat, not just upon the physical body of the soldier, but its resonance within the whole military body politic.<sup>532</sup> It is the psychic repercussions of these failed Napoleonic campaigns and the accompanying sense of loss as it registers itself upon the site of the male body, which is explored in a series of compelling works such as *La Retraite de Russie* (1818) (figure 255) and *La Charrette de Blessés* (1818) (figure 256)). While these works dramatize the successive breaking down of the Napoleonic *corps militaire* (a metaphor of a 'body-in-pieces' pursued to its extremes in the anatomical fragments and body parts accompanying *Le Radeau de la Méduse* (1819) (figure 257)), the disintegration of the illusion of the body as a coherent entity dramatized here can be seen to reflect a radically collapsed masculine subjectivity in the absence of any imaginary ideal offering an image of fictive 'wholeness' with which it was

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<sup>531</sup> Michel, *Géricault.*, p. 50.

<sup>532</sup> See also Serge Guilbaut, 'Théodore Géricault: The Hoarse Voice of History', in Serge Guilbaut, et. al, *Théodore Géricault, The Alien Body: Tradition in Chaos*, ex. cat (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 1997), pp. 4-17.

previously able to identify itself.<sup>533</sup> Thus, as Géricault dramatizes the disintegration of the military ideal in the wake of the *Grand Armée's* comprehensive defeat he also, as Norman Bryson writes: 'records its mutilation and agony, a destruction that is at the same time military, political, and psycho-sexual.'<sup>534</sup>

What interests me most about Bryson's text is the way in which he foregrounds identification in the constitution of male subjectivity. These identificatory processes, not to mention their objects are, of course, entirely historically specific. With respect to the first decade (and a half) of the nineteenth century, masculine ideals were primarily militaristic and the Napoleonic cult of the glamourized citizen-soldier constituted a powerful source of these aspirational identifications.<sup>535</sup> The sheer intensity of these historical identifications with the ideal of a higher military imago, and the powerful force with which they 'bite' (as Bryson puts it) deep into the heart of the subject is highlighted by the awe and admiration felt on the part of the young Carl Schehl mentioned in his text as he witnessed Napoleon's troops riding into his city on horseback. Through the exultant terms by which the regiments are described: '*my joy was greater when the cavalry arrived...this was the most beautiful regiment I had ever seen...yes, I think they really were the most beautiful soldiers in existence...*' we see how utterly in thrall was this young subject to such an aspirational image of military splendour and thus gain some idea of the profound intensity with which these militaristic identifications have the capacity to be experienced on the part of the subject. For Norman Bryson, Schehl's subjectivity is described as 'a space of yearning for the command and magnificence they [i.e. the *corps glorieux* of the Napoleonic military regiments] alone possess'.<sup>536</sup> If it is the case that these identifications constitute the fundamental basis and support of the Imaginary then we can only begin to imagine how much is at stake when the imago of the militaristic ideal collapses. As Bryson then goes on to add: 'the *grand armée's* defeat is arguably different from previous military defeats in French history in that what had been at stake in the Napoleonic era was the masculine body itself, its strength and charisma, its capacity to generate from the body the imago of the super-masculine or the super-strong'.<sup>537</sup>

It is as an attempt to remake the shattered masculine imago in the aftermath of the collapse the heroic ideal previously enshrined in the Napoleonic military corps by which Bryson reads Géricault's paintings of riderless horse races, a series of canvases based upon the Barberi races of the Roman Carnival which the artist had witnessed during his stay in Italy. While the Baltimore canvas of this series (*La course de chevaux libres* (1817) (figure 258)

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<sup>533</sup> For existing literature on the *Radeau* and associated works see Grigsby, *Extremities* and Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, 'Géricault: politique et esthétique de la mort', in Régis Michel, *Géricault: ouvrage collectif*, vol. 1 (Paris: Documentation française, 1996), pp. 121-141.

<sup>534</sup> Bryson, 'Géricault and Masculinity', p. 248.

<sup>535</sup> See Abigail Solomon-Godeau. 'Genre, Gender and Géricault', in *Théodore Géricault*, Serge Guilbaut, et. al, pp. 94-115.

<sup>536</sup> Bryson, 'Géricault and Masculinity', p. 246.

<sup>537</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248

still retains the recognizably historically specific setting in which the carnival races took place, the scene is then subject to a process of idealization whereby the figures are progressively abstracted from their surroundings. The metamorphosis from the generic to the heroic is ultimately achieved in the final canvas of this series *Cheval arrêté par des esclaves* (1817) (figure 259) where, in an Arcadian fantasy landscape four monumental male nudes grapple gracefully with an elegant steed. The idealized profiles and muscular bodies of the male figures reference Hellenistic nude prototypes, whilst the horse's monumental sculptural form harks back to the idealized horses of the Parthenon frieze. In drawing so directly upon classical paradigms and visual rhetorics, this work can be read as an attempt to seek nostalgic solace from contemporary political realities in the mythical age of antiquity. While Géricault's earlier critique of military masculinity with *Chasseur de la Garde* and *Cuirassier blessé* had taken place through an undermining of the traditional power relation between man and horse, the *Barberi Race* picture series functioned as an arena in which he was able to reassert a symbolic sense of mastery over the horse and thus go some way to repair the damage previously done to the masculine ideal.

But Géricault also pursued the relationship between man and horse to its other logical extreme. This we see in his 1820 *Mazeppa* (figure 260), a picture which represents the ultimate subversion of the power balance through which their alliance is conventionally codified. The picture is based upon a play of the same name by Byron in which a young page is strapped to the back of a horse by a Polish count as punishment for an illicit affair with his wife. As *Mazeppa* mobilizes a set of fantasies which turn upon humiliation, capitulation and submission rather than (as with the *Barberi Race* series) mastery and domination, the image thematizes the powerful erotics associated with a surrendering of power. Indeed, the powerful *frisson* of this image lies in its overturning of culturally codified norms of masculinity and momentary 'casting off' of its masquerade of power.

*Mazeppa* and the *Barberi Race*, each representing the extremes of possible identifications between man and horse, can be seen as the attempt to negotiate a measure of immediate symbolic resolve in the traumatic aftermath of the failed Napoleonic military adventure (while the latter is reparative in motivation, the former can be seen to pursue the humiliating effects of defeat and subjection to its ultimate extremes). My primary interest, however, is with how male subjectivity was negotiated in art over the *longue durée* of the nineteenth century and the ways in which masculinity was reconfigured over the subsequent decades. For most artists post-1815 this necessitated a move away from the military arena. In the case of Géricault it was a temporary move across the channel which enabled him to revise the terms of his practice. In England the artist was able to explore a variety of subjects from contemporary life (which in France would have been dismissed as 'genre') by turning attention to the context of his immediate surroundings. Amongst the works dating

from this period are the bleak images of manual labour such as *Labourage en Angleterre* (1820-1) (figure 261) where the stallions and heroes of the *Barberi Race* series have given way to workaday horses and docile land labourers. These dismal landscapes, which offer an irrevocably pessimistic image of the human condition, a body broken by the drudgery of industrial toil and an alienated and demoralized subjectivity, can be seen to mourn the loss of a more heroic or elevating set of identifications which are no longer historically possible. Identifying the irredeemable bleakness at the heart of Géricault's industrial dystopia had led Régis Michel to comment that these works may be seen to constitute the 'work of mourning' (*travail du deuil*).<sup>538</sup>

It was in parallel with this depressing iconography of equestrian drudgery that Géricault made a series of pictures relating to the theme of horse-riding. Although these pictures are nominally devoted to the representation of an arena supposedly synonymous with cultivation, relaxation and enjoyment there is something profoundly melancholic at the heart of these works. The profound sense of isolation and emptiness characterizing Géricault's pictures on the theme of equitation is at its most poignant in the single figure studies. This we see in the solitary *Amazone sur un cheval pie* (1821-2) (figure 262). Trotting along against the backdrop of the gloomy country landscape, she embodies the same stoic anaesthesia of Géricault's proletarian land labourers. It is the *Jockey Montant un cheval de course* (1821-2) (figure 263), however, where this sense of desolation is brought to the fore most compellingly – a picture which must be read against the historical genre of the equestrian portrait in order to be understood in all its pathos. The *Jockey Montant* is seen here to articulate something of that which was at stake for masculinity in the wake of the demilitarization of the age-old pairing of horse and rider, a historical transition which, as Stephen Deuchar has demonstrated, had been fully accomplished by the late-eighteenth century.<sup>539</sup> The elaborate body armour and weaponry synonymous with the *genre équestre* are here replaced by a multi-coloured silk riding costume and peaked jockey's cap. Denuded of this masculine carapace together with its connotations of military heroism, this hunched figure possesses no more character than a two-dimensional paper cut-out. The jockey's acquiescent horse is equally devoid of personality: Bonaparte's spirited charger is nothing but a distant memory.

### Aftermath

As we have seen Degas was well versed in the history of equestrian art, and had been instructing himself in the anatomy and physiognomy of the horse from his earliest copying practice. But dispersed amongst these earnest copies are series of drawings featuring men

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<sup>538</sup> Michel, *Géricault*, p. 220.

<sup>539</sup> See Stephen Deuchar, *Sporting Art in Eighteenth-Century England: A Social and Political History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), esp. pp. 39-59.

on horseback in various narrative scenarios. Here we find a sketch of a chevalier pulling up at the doorway of a mansion where a lady stands to greet him (figure 264), a horse-backed knight in full body armour riding through a forest (figure 265), a ceremonial cortège set in an unspecified antiquity (figure 266) and a vaguely medieval battle scene (figure 267). These drawings are all unidentifiable. They do not appear to be direct copies of older art and if they were initial ideas for a larger project they were never developed or elaborated upon beyond these initial sketches. While these obscure but evocative doodles, harking back to the lost worlds of medieval chivalry, antique pageantry and military ritual, are entirely uncharacteristic of Degas' output they represent a set of historical equestrian themes which captured the artist's imagination but that he was unable to elaborate upon further. If we are to read these romantic vignettes as a wistful harking back to the grandeur of the now obsolete genre of equestrian art it soon becomes clear that Degas did not entertain such historical fancies for long. With regard to its equine subject matter, the content of the *carnets* soon undergoes a marked shift as the artist turned his attention to a detailed exploration of the ways in which this genre had been recently reconfigured in the work of Géricault and his contemporaries.

Degas was a great admirer of Géricault and the extant copies of his work bear out an in-depth familiarity with his practice. During 1859, he made several detailed sketches of Géricault's equestrian paintings on display at the Luxembourg Museum including *Cinq Cheval Vus par la Croupe* (figure 268) together with fragments of *Cheval Turc* and *Cheval Espagnol*.<sup>540</sup> Turning further along the pages of the same notebook one also comes across numerous drawings of horses carefully copied from the lithographic illustrations of the renowned equestrian artist Alfred de Dreux's, *Scènes équestres* (1843) (figure 269). This *carnet* is notable for the contemporary nature of its subject matter as Degas sought to distance himself from the heroic and idealized horses of historical legend. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in the faithful copies of Géricault's *Cheval écorché* (figure 270). The painstakingly delineated musculature of this figure represents a concerted attempt on the part of the artist to educate himself in the specificities of the physiognomy of the horse.

Degas' own work on the theme of horseracing is datable to around 1860 when he made his first visit to the racetrack at Argentan in Normandy during a stay at his friend Paul Valpinçon's family estate in nearby Ménil-Hubert. The main canvases datable to around this time are: *Course de gentlemen. Avant le départ* (1862) (figure 272) *Jockeys à Epsom* (1861-2) (figure 273) and *Sur le champ de courses* (1861-2) (figure 274). Presenting the mounted jockeys in their bright costumes preparing for the start of the race whilst the bourgeois spectators in their Sunday-best look on from the sidelines, these pictures – exhibiting clear formal repetitions and borrowings from one another – are more or less variations of the same scene; their

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<sup>540</sup> For further copies see Nb 13, p. 63, 65 and 67.

unfinished and roughly scumbled surfaces pre-figuring the artist's more assured depictions of Longchamp in the 1870s and 80s. Indeed, while it was these latter images of the racetrack which would help to consolidate Degas' reputation as a painter of modern life and leading proponent of *la nouvelle peinture*, it is an often neglected fact that this was a subject which he had first taken up over a decade earlier. The three latter canvases are amongst some of the earliest pictures the artist ever produced and were a series of works upon which he was at work in parallel with the history paintings discussed in earlier chapters. With this in mind we see here how equestrian subjects functioned as a crucial transitional genre for the artist through which he made his first tentative forays into the arena of modern life.<sup>541</sup>

Although originating in England, horseracing had existed in France since the late 1780s where it enjoyed a certain amount of popularity amongst the aristocracy.<sup>542</sup> It was not until the July Monarchy, however, that the sport really began to flourish under the patronage of the French Jockey Club in 1833, which administered the construction of the new racing ground at Longchamp, which officially opened to the public in 1857. Its modest entrance fees and betting attractions led to the popularization of the sport and in the Second Empire horseracing was one of the best-attended spectator sports in Paris. The popularity of this leisure activity is registered in numerous popular illustrations of Parisian life. Exemplary of this genre is an illustration by Pierre Gavarni (figure 275) which depicts well-dressed members of society enjoying a day at the races. Representations of this sport quickly infiltrated 'high art' too. This we see in the numerous equestrian racing subject exhibited at the Salon throughout the 1860s by Salon stalwarts such as Henri Delamare and Olivier Pichat. Images such as these, produced with the explicit intention of celebrating the luxury and culture of the Second Empire, could not be further from Degas' contemporaneous representations of this milieu. While the racetracks of Salon painting and popular culture are characterized by an atmosphere of festivity, Degas' imagery on this theme is haunted by the memory of Géricault. This affiliation is most obvious in the numerous pictorial motifs appropriated from him which, although integrated within the composition as whole, are still clearly in evidence. This we see for example in the rear view of the horse on the right of *Jockeys at Epsom*, which has been lifted directly from his

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<sup>541</sup> For the existing literature upon the theme of the racetrack in Degas work and nineteenth century French art in general see Eunice Lipton, chapter 1 'The Racing Paintings' in *Looking into Degas: uneasy images of women and modern life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 17-72; T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his followers*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999); Robert L Herbert, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure and Parisian Society*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988). For a discussion of the gendering of nineteenth century urban public space see Griselda Pollock, 'Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity', *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 50-90.

<sup>542</sup> For a the history of horseracing in France see Kimberly Jones, 'A Day at the Races: A Brief History of Horseracing in France,' in Boggs, *Degas at the Races*, ex. cat. (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1998) pp. 208-203.

Géricault's *Cinq Cheval* (figure 276). Degas' debt to the melancholic equine rhetorics of his predecessor is seen most clearly in small sketch of a mounted jockey dated around 1859-60 at the Bibliothèque Nationale (figure 277). The configuration is reversed and the position of the figures modified somewhat but the affiliation with Géricault's *Jockey Montant* is clear to see. This thumbnail sketch would eventually form the basis for the mounted riders in both *Jockeys at Epsom* and *At the Start*. Although this formal resemblance is most striking in the figure at the far left of each picture, the rest of the hunched and faceless jockeys are permutations of the same Géricauldian motif. Degas, however, provides his jockeys with a greater semblance of narrative than his predecessor had done. While Géricault's riders charge ahead along non-specific lunar landscapes, Degas' jockeys prepare for the start of the race on damp muddy fields; the industrial backdrop of smoking chimney stacks lining the horizon serving to locate this social space of leisure in the newly emergent urban environs.<sup>543</sup> But Degas imagery is no less pessimistic for this descriptive context, and I would argue that his jockey's are characterized by the same aura of isolation and solitude as Géricault's mounted riders.<sup>544</sup>

But the unremitting melancholia of Degas' early racetrack pictures is given added weight by the sediment of an equestrian representational history which pre-dates Géricault's alienated horses and riders. The bathetic charge of these pictures is enforced by a set of pictorial references which are so submerged within the composition as to hover at the very threshold of cognition. The subtle but disquieting effects of this pictorial strategy are exemplified by a preparatory drawing for *Sur le champ de courses* (figure 278). These graceful finely drawn horses and upright riders bear comparison with the sketches of Gozzoli's *Adoration of the Magi* (figure 279) which the artist had made in Florence. While Degas' line-up of jockeys preparing for the start of the race is far beyond the level of a direct copy, the gracefully raised front legs of the horses and erect postures of the jockeys together with this preparatory drawing's compositional frieze format, serve to infuse the image with something of this Medici palace fresco's sense of occasion (figure 280). But any residual ceremonial aura borrowed from Gozzoli's fifteenth-century cavalry procession still in evidence here was soon to be lost at this configuration of horses and riders was transferred to the canvas surface and made to play their part within a representation of modern life. Emptied out of Gozzoli's celebratory subject – and with it any remaining sense of grandeur – the aimless and distracted shufflings of Degas' jockeys at the starting line replace the pomp and ceremony of Renaissance pageantry. Recast in the mundane here and now of the

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<sup>543</sup> For the emergence of the 'environs' in the nineteenth century and their connection to nineteenth century constructions of work and leisure see T J Clark, 'The environs of Paris', in *The Painting of Modern Life*, pp. 147-204.

<sup>544</sup> Eunice Lipton has also made a case for the pessimism of Degas' imagery upon the theme of the racetrack.



mid-nineteenth century, all that remains of the Magi procession is this fresco's compositional frieze format.

### **Fallen Jockeys**

Degas' most ambitious work relating to the theme of the racetrack during this formative period is the *Scène de Steeplechase: Le Jockey Tombé* (1866) (figure 281). Although this was the second picture which the artist had successfully managed to exhibit at the Salon, it scarcely managed to make a greater critical impact than *Scène de Guerre* had done the previous year. Edmond About paused only to note this picture's 'brisk and lively' composition (*'cette composition lesté et vivante'*<sup>545</sup>). An anonymous critic noted its debt to the conventions of English sporting art before going on to note the anatomical naivety of the main horse. *'Comme cette jockey, le peintre ne connaît pas encore parfaitement son cheval'* was his wry conclusion.<sup>546</sup> The absurd rendering of this horse, together with the picture's compositional incongruities, were seized upon by the satirical illustrator 'Cham' who made the picture the subject of a mocking caricature (figure 282). Here we see a crudely rendered horse leaping over a stunned jockey, while the head of an impassive rider pops-up from above the clouds in the distance. Beneath the caricature the mocking epithet reads: *Fallait pas qu'il y aille... aux chevaux de bois!*<sup>547</sup>

Even though the picture was reworked after 1866, it is not difficult to see why this work failed to register with the critics at the Salon. Its muddy palette consisting of dark earth tones, swampy greens and muted umbers does not immediately attract the spectator. The picture's visual lack of appeal is compounded further by its awkward formal arrangement: the different elements of the composition, poised uneasily, and somewhat arbitrarily, alongside one other do not marry together successfully and the effect is an extremely jarring pictorial structure. This is particularly true of the jockey's position in relation to his horse. Although the two figures are situated in a seemingly narrative relation to one another, this connection is not supported by the temporal disjunction between the motionless jockey and careering horse which necessitates a greater physical distance than the one given here. The distribution of figures across the picture surface is also rather strange. A large portion of the lower half of the canvas is given over to a plane of crudely rendered grass, while the two mounted jockeys are squashed into its upper left hand corner.

Degas himself would acknowledge the technical flaws of this picture over thirty years later. In an interview with the journalist François Thiébault-Sisson regarding the simultaneously outstretched hind and front legs of the horse he stated: *'je ignorais du tout au*

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<sup>545</sup> Edmond About, 'Salon de 1866', (Paris, 1867), p. 229.

<sup>546</sup> Anonymous critic, 'Salon de 1866', (Paris, 1866), quoted in Henri Loyrette, *Degas* (Paris: Fayard, 1991), p. 206.

<sup>547</sup> 'Le Salon de 1866', photographié par Cham', 1866.

*tout le mécanisme de ses mouvements...*<sup>548</sup> Despite the anatomical shortcomings of the picture this was a work which the artist appears to have held in high affection. Totally ignoring the clutch of racetrack paintings from the early 1860s he went onto comment of *Scène de Steeplechase*: ‘la première et pendant longtemps la seule que m’aient inspirée les champs des courses. Or, si je connaissais alors assez bien...’<sup>549</sup>. While this remark betrays a personal investment on the part of Degas to *Scène de Steeplechase*, it is a picture which stands apart from the rest of his imagery on the theme of equitation for another reason: its subject. Indeed, it is the only work to depict (as explicitly indicated in the title of the work) a scene from the steeplechase. Although this sport falls under the general rubric of *les champs des courses*, there are certain crucial differentiations between the horserace and the steeplechase. Thus, a brief discussion of this sport will serve to help us understand what motivated Degas to execute such an ambitious work upon this subject. While *course plate* racing takes place on the flat, the jockey and horse participating in the steeplechase are required to traverse a series of obstacles (usually somewhere between fifteen and thirty) including stone walls, open ditches, water jumps, banks and hedges over a distance of between 3-6 km.<sup>550</sup> Modelled on the English and Irish events of the same name the steeplechase first caught on in France in the 1830s among the aristocracy, although it was not until the establishment of the *Société des Steeplechases* in 1863 that the sport began to gain widespread popularity. Flat-racing tested primarily the speed of the horse. But in the steeplechase it was the *sang-froid* of the rider and his skill in manoeuvring the acquiescent animal successfully to the finish which was most important. As a contemporary horse racing handbook explained: ‘*Les courses avec obstacles ne sont plus seulement des épreuves de vitesse et de fond, mais le moyen par excellence de constater chez le cheval, la force la vigueur, la solidité, la durée, la docilité, et, chez la cavalier, la hardiesse, l’habilité, le courage*’.<sup>551</sup> The steeple-chase was obviously more dangerous than flat-racing and for this reason was heavily criticized by some as a pointless and reckless sport. Falls were extremely common and it was not unusual for the jockey to be toppled from his horse several times during a race. The jockey was vulnerable to debilitating injuries, and contemporary histories of the sport list injuries such as ruptured spinal cords, fractured skulls, broken ribs and shattered vertebrae as par for the course. As horseracing developed and became more competitive, the role of the jockey became professionalized. Here then the sporting injuries incurred from the horserace might be seen to constitute the professional jockey’s ‘occupational hazards’. However, as the steeplechase remained traditionally an ‘amateur’ sport – the preserve of the privileged upper-classes – there was something rather different at stake for the ‘gentleman rider’. As Louis Enault explained: ‘*Quant aux steeple-chase, ils ont gardé le glorieux*

<sup>548</sup> François Thiébaud-Sisson, ‘Degas: sculpteur raconté par lui-même’, *Le Temps* (23 May, 1921).

<sup>549</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>550</sup> Henry Lee, *Historique des courses de chevaux de l’antiquité à ce jour* (Paris: 1914) p. 329.

<sup>551</sup> E Gayot, *Guide du Sportsman ou l’entraînement des courses de chevaux* (Paris: 1865) p. 326.

*privilege d'être disputés par des coureurs aristocratiques, vraie fleur des pois des gentil-hommes, jaloux de prouver qu'eux aussi, comme leurs aïeux, savent bien faire à l'heure de l'épreuve et du peril.*<sup>552</sup> This excerpt has much to inform us about the social conditions of upper-class masculinity in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>553</sup> In the absence of meaningful military life and the masculine ideals with which this domain was associated, it is a comment which betrays a very clear sense of bourgeois nostalgia for obsolete noble, martial and chivalric ideals. The social and technological advances of modernity meant that the nineteenth-century male was not exposed to the same series of risks and dangers to which his ancestors had been. In the absence of opportunities for martial combat the contrived situation of the steeplechase provided a way through which he was able to prove his heroism and mettle, and thus justifiably claim affiliation with his courageous forbears.

While the steeple-chase was founded on such earnest intentions, mishaps incurred by riders during the participation of this event were mercilessly mocked by contemporary illustrators. A caricature by Cham (figure 283) shows one particularly undignified fall where the jockey is unceremoniously flung head-over-heels into a ditch. Also telling is Albert Cler's 'Sunday Riders' (figure 284) (its title a reference to the amateurism of the steeplechase participants) which depicts three hapless jockeys trussed up in tail-coats and top hats in various states of disarray. In keeping with the light-hearted and humorous tone of these caricatures, the possibly fatal consequences of the fall are not pursued. And on the rare occasions on which they are, the jockey never seems to incur anything more serious than a few bumps and bruises.

Due to the trivialisation of the steeplechase in popular illustrations – where falls and injuries were presented as comical mishaps, rather than acts of heroism or courage – it was a sport which would thus seem to present itself as a risky subject for a work of such aggrandizing dimensions (at 1.8 x 1.52m *Scène de Steeplechase* was by far Degas' largest work to date). Certainly, the subject was not a popular Salon theme at this moment, exhibitors favouring the far less problematic subject of flat-racing. If Degas' aspiration with the *Steeplechase* was to elevate a contemporary subject to the stature of history painting, then it is a feat which the picture does not quite manage to pull off. The fine line between the heroic (or sublime) and the ridiculous which Degas is seen to tread here is brought to the fore in Cham's aforementioned caricature of the *Steeplechase*. The pathetic object of ridicule to

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<sup>552</sup> Louis Enault, *Les courses de chevaux en France et en Angleterre*, (Paris, 1865), p. 25

<sup>553</sup> See Robert Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honour in Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Although concerned with a slightly later historical moment (i.e. the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian wars) see also chapter 1 Gustave Caillebotte's 'Male Figures: Masculinity, Muscularity and Modernity', and chapter 2 'Modelling the Male Body: Physical Culture, Photography and the Classical Ideal' in Tamar Garb, *Bodies of Modernity: Figure and Flesh in Fin-de-Siècle France* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), pp. 24-79.

which his fallen jockey has been reduced in this illustration was surely *not* the effect at which he was aiming with this work.

Degas was not alone in departing from the traditional heroizing battle accoutrements supplied by History painting and the *genre militaire* in order to negotiate the risks of contemporary subject matter upon the site of the male body. Here, the *Steeplechase* bears comparison with Manet's *Episode d'une course de taureaux* exhibited two years previously at the Salon of 1864.<sup>554</sup> Greeted here with widespread derision, Edmond About's comment that the painting depicted: '*un torero de bois tué par un rat cornu*' exemplifies the unfavourable critical response this work received from its first audience.<sup>555</sup> About's withering description of *Combat de taureaux* was visually enforced by Cham's lampooning of the picture in a caricature published in *Le Charivari* in which the flattened bullfighter lies next to a rather malevolent looking bull (figure 285). Cham's 'gingerbread man-like' toreador, situated within such a formally incongruous pictorial space and highly implausible narrative scenario, is reminiscent of his 1866 caricature of Degas' *Steeplechase*.<sup>556</sup> This pair of caricatures are highly significant in terms of the ways in which they are seen to dramatize the latent bathos and deflation at stake in these two-dimensionally rendered male figures.

Shortly after the Salon of 1864 Manet took a knife to the canvas and cut out the male figure, a picture which exists today as the *Le torero mort* (figure 286). To what extent this act was motivated by the hostile critical response the work had received we cannot know. Nevertheless, this dramatic pictorial gesture is seen here to represent a solution of sorts to a very real artistic dilemma at a moment when it was no longer viable to couch the male figure in heroizing historical or militaristic narratives, but modern subject matter did not provide a sufficiently ennobling alternative. It was only by severing the male body from narrative context altogether that Manet was able to salvage a measure of the integrity that this figure was previously seen to possess. In doing so the *torero mort* is directly affiliated with an eminent historical lineage of wounded male figures. Of all these heroic precedents, the one most directly invoked by Manet is the anonymous seventeenth-century *Dead Soldier* formerly attributed to Velasquez (figure 287).<sup>557</sup> While denuding the toreador of a narrative context served as the means through which Manet was able to recover the tragic pathos of the grievously injured male body, Degas' *Scène de Steeplechase* is seen to enact the very same pictorial strategy – only in reverse.

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<sup>554</sup> For an extended commentary on this picture see the entry in Françoise Cachin and Charles S. Moffett, *Manet: 1832-1883* ex. cat. (Paris, pp. 195-8).

<sup>555</sup> Edmond About, 'Le Salon de 1864', (Paris, 1864), p. 157. .

<sup>556</sup> It is Boggs who first makes this connection. See Boggs, *Degas at the Races*, ex. cat. (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1998), p. 56.

<sup>557</sup> See discussion in Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 97-8

Like Manet, Degas was not satisfied with his early Salon submission. After its brief outing at the Salon *Scène de Steeplechase* returned to the studio and was substantially reworked on at least two separate occasions.<sup>558</sup> The compositional adjustments undertaken here relate mainly to the horses and riders in the background while the picture's main motif of the fallen horse and rider remained essentially the same. In the midst of this freely brushed surface littered with *pentimenti* it is the figure of the fallen jockey (see detail figure 288) which stands out as the most arresting part of the composition by far. The lower half of the jockey's body has not been worked on beyond the rudimentary *ébauche* stage of paint; the black riding boots with their brown trim, and closely fitted britches are marked out at only the most cursory level of notation. But as the eye gradually moves up the body, one sees that this is a figure which has been embellished in a far greater amount of painterly detail. The pink jockey's waistcoat has been articulated through a richly painted passage of unctuous paint. But it is the head of this motionless figure which ultimately arrests our gaze (see detail figure 289). Nose grazing the upper-hind left leg of the horse and silk jockey's cap adorned with jaunty bow lying poignantly behind his head, the potential abjection of this supine figure is rescued by the curious serenity of his expression. The eye lingers over his partially open mouth, moving upwards to the faintest trace of facial hair outlining the jawbone and shadowing the upper lip. It is this mesmerizing figure who, in exceeding the absurd narrative scenario he inhabits, holds the key to Degas' investment in this curious picture.

Early sketches relating to *Scène de Steeplechase* bear out that it was the motif of the runaway horse and fallen rider which initially attracted Degas to such a theme. In a  *carnet*  that the artist was using at the time he made his first visit to Ménil-Hubert there exists a detailed compositional sketch of a horse galloping away from an awkwardly posed prostrate male figure (who has presumably been toppled from the animal) (figure 289). No direct pictorial sources have been identified for this sketch, although it bears a marked resemblance to Henry Alken's numerous depictions of this sport (figure 290) (with whose work Degas is known to have been familiar). Shortly after making this drawing the artist executed what can retrospectively be seen as a preparatory *croquis* for *Scène de Steeplechase* (figure 291). But after this rough sketch laying out the main elements of the composition it would seem that the figure of the fallen jockey took precedence over any other element within it. The central importance of this figure within the composition is indicated by the subtitle of this canvas as it was listed in the 1866 Salon livret: *le jockey tombé*.

The jockey's recumbent pose resonates with an art historical iconography of mortally wounded male bodies, and in so doing assumes its place within a representational

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<sup>558</sup> Technical research undertaken on this picture has dated some of these formal alterations to as late as 1890. See dossier 1979.79.6, Washington, National Gallery of Art.

tradition dating back to antiquity with the *Dying Gaul* (figure 293). But this was a genre which also held a much more immediate historical pertinence, as evidenced by the innumerable injured heroes and swooning warriors of Neoclassicism.<sup>559</sup> Most remarkable of this genre is Jean-Germain Drouais' *L'Athlète Mourant* (1786) (figure 294), a work which has been read by Thomas Crow as this young artist's precocious transformation of the *académie peinte*. Based on a male figure study drawn from life, the *académie peinte* was a fundamental studio exercise at this moment. While in most cases the figure study was subject to only the most minimal transformations (a classical prop, or the provision of the name of an antique hero for a title) Drouais' *L'Athlète Mourant* initiates a far more radical and ambitious set of interventions into this genre. Through Drouais' 'elevation' of a prescribed studio exercise the *académie* is effectively transformed into a heroic image of masculine suffering. As Crow explains: 'The elegance of a late classical Hermes, when maintained in the face of suffering, is the source of the painting's drama and pathos – the anguish alone would not suffice... The message of the painting is that nobility and grace are proven – perhaps only proven – under conditions of extreme suffering; pain coupled with an unconquerable poise, each written onto the other, is the pre-eminent sign of virtue.'<sup>560</sup>

Although representations of pain and suffering in neoclassicism were ultimately redemptive, or else seen to serve some higher justification, (Girodet's *Endymion* and David's *Bara* being the most obvious points of reference) it is questionable whether Degas' imagery of the fallen jockey confers or, perhaps more to the point, strives to achieve, the same sense of heroic purpose on *its* wounded male protagonist. In contrast to the martyred *Bara*, this supine figure is not redeemed in the name of virtue or liberty. Nor, is he seen to experience anything of the ecstatic reverie enjoyed by the swooning *Endymion*. Moreover, unlike Drouais' valiant athlete, Degas wounded male figure is supplied with no ennobling epithet through which a sense of heroic or military importance may be conferred upon him (when the *L'Athlète Mourant* came to be engraved it was renamed the *Soldat Blessé*). From the subtitle of Degas' canvas (*le jockey blessé*) this figure cannot be elevated beyond his status as a mere sports rider – and an amateur one at that.

Another crucial difference between this figure and the heroic predecessors with whom he is ostensibly affiliated is that Degas' fallen rider is fully dressed. The idealized muscular nudity of his heroic progenitors (which has no place in a representation of contemporary nineteenth-century life) has been substituted accordingly for a fashionable

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<sup>559</sup> Thomas Crow has published a great deal on the male nude in France in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Aside from *Emulation* see 'Observations on Style and History in French painting of the male nude', in *Visual Culture*, Bryson, Holly, Moxey (eds.), pp. 141-167; 'Revolutionary Activism and the Cult of Male Beauty in the Studio of David', in *Fictions of the French Revolution*, Bernadette Fort (ed.), (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991) and 'Géricault and the Heroic Single Figure in *Géricault: conférence et colloque*, vol. 1, Régis Michel (ed.), pp. 41-55.

<sup>560</sup> Crow, *Emulation*, p. 56.

riding suit. As the fallen jockey is denied the various means through which the injured male body had previously been dignified, Degas offers us an image of masculinity that is at once demilitarized, apolitical and secularized. Even Géricault's floundering soldiers were still in possession of a clearly legible political identity. While the *tombé* of this figure's title has a literal meaning, insofar as refers to the fate of the jockey who has fallen from his horse, it can also be taken as emblematic of a broader historical demise; that of the heroic male figure whose ignominious fall from grace is mirrored in this unceremonious toppling. While this interpretation of Degas' *Jockey tombé* is dependant upon the narrative context of the Salon canvas, it is in the preparatory studies for *Scène de Steeplechase* where this quietus is dramatized most compellingly.

Although there are a number of prefatory drawings relating to this picture the overwhelming number of these works relate to the figure of the fallen jockey (figures 295, 296, 297 and 298). With only minimal variations at stake within the series, these drawings are repetitions of the same pose. But while they ostensibly function to refine the jockey's pose as it would eventually appear on the canvas they exceed the conventional remit of the *académie*. Forming a compelling series which demands to be considered on their own terms, these drawings are comparable to the *Scène de Guerre* preparatory drawing sequence. Indeed, these figure studies are seen to dramatize the obsolescence of the heroic male figure in the same way that those relating to *Scène de Guerre* play out the expiration of the Nude. This is a comparison which merits further interrogation – not least because the studies for the *jockey blessé* share remarkable formal similarities with the writhing female figures which the artist had executed in preparation for his first Salon canvas only a year or so earlier. The jockey's comportment is remarkably similar to the prostrate rhetorics of the nude illustrated in these studies. See for example the awkwardly contorted left arm, reiterating the dislocated limbs of the *mise à nu* and corpse like female figures discussed in the previous chapter (figures 299 and 300). The legs-akimbo pose of the jockey is also resonant with the spread-eagled lower body of this latter figure, as is his unconscious facial expression.

But I evoke his comparison primarily to contrast the galling *anonymity* of the preparatory drawings for *Scène de Guerre* (upon which the debasement of the female figure depends) with the profound *intimacy* at stake in the *académies*. Degas' biographers have maintained that it was his younger brother Achille who posed for the figure of the fallen jockey and, as we shall soon see, it is not incidental that the artist recruited his brother to undertake a role that a hired model would normally have been enlisted to perform.<sup>561</sup> This is a disparity which emerges most forcefully in a comparison between the radically differing ways in which the faces of these male and female figures have been rendered. Whereas the featureless visages of the *académies* for *Scène de Guerre* are predicated upon the utter

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<sup>561</sup> Lemoisne was the first to make this assertion. See *Degas et son Oeuvre*, vol. 1, p. 30.

effacement of any physiognomic particularities through which these figures might be individualized, the careful tracing of Achilles facial contours – first transcribed in the recumbent figure studies and subsequently elaborated upon in the detailed study of his head bear witness to an utterly mesmerized encounter. This is not to argue, however, for an entirely sympathetic identification with the male figure in the latter works as opposed to a misogynistic procedure at work the drawings for *Scène de Guerre*. As argued in the previous chapter Degas' engagement with the female nude is altogether more ambivalent, fraught and complex than this. But while the artist's negotiation of the historical norms and conventions governing the representation of the male figure in the figure studies for the *jockey blessé* are equally problematic, they disclose a subjective investment of an altogether different nature.

In helping us to begin to account for the libidinal dynamics and complex identificatory processes mobilized in the highly charged inter-subjective encounter dramatized in these drawings, a brief discussion of the studio fraternity of Jacques-Louis David and his artistic milieu can provide us with a useful paradigm. The fraternal social relations characterizing the studio politics of David's *atelier* have come under extensive analysis by contemporary scholars.<sup>562</sup> Locating them within the increasingly masculinized social and political culture of the Jacobin dictatorship and subsequent post-revolutionary period, this literature has also discussed how this close-knit studio circle was the locus within which close professional and personal relationships between the associates were forged (as well as functioning as the site of intense rivalry and conflict). Needless to say, such a highly masculinized social, artistic and political culture, necessitated a radical marginalization, if not complete obliteration, of the feminine and when discussing the homosocial world of David's studio fraternity we are referring to a world in which women simply do not figure.<sup>563</sup> Moreover, while the studio is seen here to function as the social arena in which dramatic aesthetic emulations and rebellions were waged, it is important to stress that these were played out primarily upon the site of the male body. Within the context of a studio practice devoted to the study of the male nude, it is not surprising that this body came to function as the locus of intense identifications for these young male artists (in this respect Girodet's *Endymion* – read as both a reaction against his master David and the attempt to differentiate himself from his closet rival Drouais – is exemplary).<sup>564</sup> The

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<sup>562</sup> See Thomas Crow *Emulation*; Abigail Solomon-Godeau *Male Trouble*, pp. 42-98 and Alex Potts *Flesh and the Ideal*, pp. 223-227. For broader discussions of David see Satish Padiyar, *Chains: David, Canova, and the Fall of the Public Hero in Post-revolutionary France* (Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007) and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, *Necklines: The Art of Jacques-Louis David after the Terror* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>563</sup> I borrow the term 'homosocial' from Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick's, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

<sup>564</sup> See Crow, 'Observations on Style and History in French painting of the male nude'.



milieu of David's atelier, together with the work produced from this site of production, can be brought directly to bear upon the figure studies for the fallen jockey in two ways: while the male body is seen to function as a similarly cathected site for Degas, the negotiations taking place here were enacted within a comparable homosocial paradigm.

*A nagging and interminable question: how does one sacrifice a son? A son who is always unique, always an only son [un fils unique]? Isaac knew a thing or two about this. His father had 'looked up' twice at the decisive moment when he had to sacrifice him and then spare him by substituting a ram. How does one choose between two sons? This is, twice multiplied, the same question, the unique question of the unique. How does one choose between two brothers? Between two twins, in sum, since Jacob was Esau's twin, even though he was born after him and his brother had sold him his birthright (he despised his birthright). Is it not more difficult than choosing between the pupils of one's own two eyes, between the two apples of one's eyes, which can at least supplement the other? To sacrifice one's son is at least as cruel as giving up one's own sight.*

Derrida, *Memoirs d'aveugle*<sup>565</sup>

Unlike his artistic predecessors or, indeed, many of his contemporaries Degas was never part of a vibrant studio culture.<sup>566</sup> (Apart from anything else he never needed the financial security brought by a formal studio apprenticeship). As discussed in the introduction, the artist was formally attached to the studio of Louis Lamothe for a brief period, but this seems to have played no significant role in his artistic formation. Indeed, Edgar's first teacher had quickly met with the disapproval of his father who, as we have seen, made his disdain for Lamothe's second rate academicism known to his son on more than one occasion. After Degas returned from Italy he sought to actively disassociate himself from Lamothe and rented a private studio close on the Rue de Laval. Close to the family home, this space seems to have been the site of production for most of the work discussed in this thesis. It is not entirely clear if the artist lived at his studio during the 1860s, or continued to reside at the family's large apartment on the Rue de Mondovi along with the rest of his kin: father Auguste, sisters Thérèse and Marguerite, youngest brother René and (during his periods of leave from the military) his brother Achille. Whatever the case, it is clear that Edgar remained in close and constant contact with his immediate family during this period. His father and siblings took a keen interest in his work, voicing their opinions with regard to his artistic progress and offering practical assistance as a ready source of models. This we

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<sup>565</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 23.

<sup>566</sup> See Amaury-Duval, *L'Atelier d'Ingres* (Paris, 1878) for a contemporary account of Ingres' studio.

see in the numerous family portraits of the Degas siblings datable to around this time.<sup>567</sup> Representative of this genre is the three-quarter length Washington portrait of Achille (figure 301). After an unspectacular pupilage at the Lycée *Louis-le-Grand* Achille had entered the *Ecole Navale* and the portrait depicts him in the regalia of a mid-shipman. Also notable is a tender schoolboy portrait of Edgar's youngest brother René (figure 302). Many years later, perhaps remembering the tedious hours spent standing before his brother on the occasion of this portrait sitting, the artist's youngest sibling René would recall nostalgically to André Lemoisne how – no sooner had he come home from school and offloaded his books and satchel – than Edgar would grab him and put him to work as a model.<sup>568</sup> Indeed one detects a certain forbearance to this compliant model in his uniform smock (an inkwell and pile of books placed strategically behind him), his placid demeanour obedient to the dictates of his elder sibling as his twenty-one-year-old brother emulated his artistic heroes. The portrait's debt to Bronzino's portraits of aristocratic Florentine youths (figure 303) which Edgar was copying in the Louvre around this time is clear to see.

Like René and Achille, Degas' sisters also facilitated their brother's first forays into formal portraiture. Exemplary of this group are a delicate watercolour depicting Marguerite at her confirmation (figure 304) and a double portrait of Thérèse marking the occasion of her marriage to Edmondo Morbilli (figure 305). These insipid portraits of Marguerite and Thérèse are far less remarkable than those of the artist's brothers. Marking the upper-class young woman's cultural rites of passage, they fall entirely within the remit of mid-nineteenth century portraiture precepts dictating the representation of bourgeois femininity.<sup>569</sup>

In these ways we see how the familial cell functioned as the most significant formative artistic crucible for Degas. And whilst it goes without saying that the bourgeois family structure is a radically different developmental context than the homosocial studio fraternity offered by an artist's atelier, there are a number of interesting parallels to be made between the two domains. The close personal relations forged within the intimate

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<sup>567</sup> Although Degas' portraiture is not dealt with explicitly in this thesis it is a genre which constitutes a significant proportion of his early work. The existing literature on Degas portraits has dealt only with his self-portraits and those of his extended family, while the numerous portraits Degas made of his siblings have been largely neglected. For a brief overview of Degas early family portraits see Toby Bezzola 'Degas' Family Portraits' in *Degas Portraits*, Felix Baumann and Marianne Karabelnik (London: Merrel Holberton, 1994), pp. 174-205. The Degas family portrait which has been the subject of most discussion is *La Famille Beelli* (1858-67). See for example, Linda Nochlin, 'A House is not a Home: Degas and the Subversion of the Family' and Susan Sidlauskas, 'Degas and the Sexuality of the Interior' in *Body, Place and Self in Nineteenth Century Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 20-60. For a discussion of Degas self-portraits see Carol Armstrong, *Degas: Odd Man Out* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 226-244.

<sup>568</sup> Marcel Guérin, *Dix-neuf portraits de Degas par lui-même* (Paris, 1931), np.

<sup>569</sup> For a detailed discussion of female portraiture at this historical moment see Tamar Garb, *The Painted Face*.

environment of the studio circle are seen to offer a substitute family of sorts (this is certainly the way in which David's atelier functioned for the fatherless sons Drouais and Girodet). But, although the politics of the studio may be characterized by similar structures of desire and rivalry to those which exist within the nuclear family unit, a crucial difference exists between the two social structures. In the latter the woman, i.e. the Mother, has a crucial role to play (even if, at least within Oedipal or patriarchal symbolic paradigms, this is one which is largely conceived of negatively), while the former is organized entirely around the absence of women. Again, this is not so far from Degas' familial circumstances. Edgar's mother Célestine died when the artist (the eldest of the Degas siblings) was thirteen and René, the youngest, only two. Aside from the usual succession of female paid labourers (wet-nurses, governesses and the like) who surely came and went within the affluent Degas household, it was a family in which a maternal figure was notably absent. Auguste Degas never remarried and with most of his extended family and in-laws overseas functioned as his children's sole parental figure.

The leverage of the paternal within the Degas family unit is reflected in the primacy accorded to the encounter between father and son in *Alexandre et le Bucéphale*. The ways in which this picture is seen to stage an Oedipal drama of sorts between these two main protagonists has already been discussed at length. However, I draw upon *Alexandre et le Bucéphale* again because it is a work which opens a dimension of familial relations which has not, so far, been considered in this chapter: the lateral. It is Juliet Mitchell's recent work on siblings – particularly in its offering of a 'set of desires other than the vertical' (i.e. Oedipal) – which will prove to be of great significance in theorizing the identificatory investments at stake upon the figure of the fallen jockey.<sup>570</sup> I drew upon these theories briefly in chapter two, but to recap: Mitchell's call is for the acknowledgement of the importance of lateral relations (i.e. those forged with siblings and peers) in the constitution of subjectivity – a hitherto unaccounted-for dimension in classical psychoanalysis which has been unable to think its way out of the vertical relationships enshrined in the Oedipal paradigm.

Admittedly, it might seem strange to bring this lateral axis to bear upon *Alexandre et le Bucéphale* – a picture which foregrounds the rivalry between father and son at the expense of marginalizing even Alexander's closest intimate Bucephalus. But it is precisely in Degas' *refutation* of the lateral familial axis – within which Alexander is also necessarily implicated – that this dimension assumes its true significance. Indeed, this is a picture where, via an identification with the figure of Alexander, Degas can be seen to momentarily envision himself – just like the *sui generis* young prince – to be *un fils unique*. (Historically, this is not strictly true; Plutarch mentions numerous half-siblings which were begotten by Philip with various women. But while this illegitimate spawn never pose any real challenge to the

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<sup>570</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Siblings: Sex and Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).

ascendancy of Alexander, Degas, by contrast, had four other siblings to contend with.) The Freudian subtext here is impossible to resist: *'an interesting variant of the family romance may appear, in which the hero and author returns to legitimacy himself while his brothers and sisters are eliminated by being bastardized'*.<sup>571</sup> And indeed, *Alexandre et le Bucéphale* constitutes a wishful daydream on the part of Degas that even the most imaginative of Freud's 'young phantasy-builders' would be proud to have invented.<sup>572</sup>

*At one end of laterality is a minimal differentiation, at the other a much greater separation when brothers and sisters love, cherish and protect, kill, rape or simply lose touch.*<sup>573</sup>

Sibling relationships constitute the most critical inter-subjective encounters which the subject will ever have to negotiate. It is the sibling who poses the first, and thus most fundamental, challenge to the subject's sense of its individual identity. With reference to the profound sense of displacement felt on the part of the elder child at the appearance of his/her newborn sibling Juliet Mitchell remarks: *'the sibling is par excellence someone who threatens the subject's uniqueness'*.<sup>574</sup> Mitchell then goes on to demonstrate how the senior sibling's attitude towards its baby brother or sister is one that is highly ambivalent and conflicted; murderous desires and destructive fantasies will co-exist with feelings of profound love and adoration: *'The ecstasy of loving one who is like oneself is experienced at the same time as the trauma of being annihilated by one who stands in one's place'*.<sup>575</sup> This is the crux of the ambivalence at the heart of the formative sibling relationship. The recognition of 'sameness' is where the primary love felt for the sibling originates; it is precisely because the sibling is *like* the self that it presents such a profound threat to the subject and its sense of uniqueness. But this primary love is, at base, narcissistic and there comes a point when the subject will progress from what is an ultimately selfish form of love to a more generous form of 'object love' founded upon a recognition of autonomy and difference. Although this entails a difficult and protracted process of transition, it is only here that the subject begins to come to terms with the fact that he is not unique and learns to take his place as part of a series (within the family unit and, eventually, within the world too), accepting that he is just one of many others like him.<sup>576</sup>

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<sup>571</sup> Freud, 'Family Romances', p. 240.

<sup>572</sup> Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>573</sup> Mitchell, *Siblings*, p. 129.

<sup>574</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>575</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>576</sup> The concept of seriality (as distinct from repetition) is crucial in terms of how siblings begin to negotiate their difference from one another. Whereas repetition pre-supposes identity, seriality allows for a certain amount of difference between the various units forming part of a series. But the ambiguous distinction between repetition and seriality is one that is intensely

It is the negotiation of precisely these lateral relations which we see being played out in the numerous portraits Degas made of his siblings during his early career. A neglected batch of family portraits and self-portraits (figures 306, 307, 308, 309, 310 and 311 ) from the early-1850s here takes on an important significance. Juvenilia in the truest sense of the word, these crude portraits – in aesthetic terms at least – can be valued as nothing but the most elementary of artistic exercises. However, it is precisely the problematics of this process of differentiation and negotiation of subjective positionality within the family unit which these works are seen to play out. This is manifested most clearly at the level of physical resemblance (one of the crucial markers of sameness/difference between siblings). Aside from the information provided by the names of these portraits it is impossible to tell the Degas sibling-subjects apart. It is as through the young Edgar is testing the limits of familial affinity as he interrogates the least level of differentiation necessary between siblings.

This group of works stand in marked contrast to the slightly later group of family portraits I drew attention to earlier. Degas' contemporaneous self-portrait discussed in the introduction (figure 14) also merits consideration as part of this group. Here the siblings are much more clearly differentiated from one another. Although a marked physical resemblance between them remains (the horsy face, faintly bulbous eyes and petulant mouth which are the Degas family traits), each is accorded own specific and autonomous identity: René the schoolboy, Achille the *aspirant*, Thérèse the newly-married wife, Edgar the self-aware young artist, etc. Perhaps the disparity between the two groups of portraits can be explained by taking into account the varying conditions under which each was produced. The former, correspond roughly to the period of the artist's adolescence. A moment when familial relations are redefined, this is a period when issues of identification and differentiation, particularly with one's siblings are intensified as the subject begins to make the difficult transition away from the protectorship of the nuclear family unit. It was through these portraits that the artist perhaps sought – albeit momentarily – to deny or refute these impending differences. But, as we have seen in the second group of portraits, this was an inevitability that he could not stave off for long. Largely datable to the 1860s, these works were made shortly after Degas had returned from his two year sojourn in Italy, a moment when his younger brothers and sisters had begun to assume their different social roles and establish their own identities. The artist's shock at the dramatic changes his younger siblings had undergone in his absence is registered in a letter to Moreau despatched shortly after his arrival back in to Paris. *'je me sens encore comme tout étourdi, la famille est*

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problematic for the subject – how to come to terms with the fact that we are the same but nevertheless *different* from our siblings? For an elaboration of this point see Tamar Garb and Mignon Nixon, 'A Conversation with Juliet Mitchell', *October*, 115 (Summer 2005) p. 20.

*méconnaissable*<sup>577</sup> he wrote bewilderedly. While René had grown into a tall young man (*René est un jeune homme, il est très grand pour son âge*), he was even more in awe of his two sisters who had matured into young women: *‘Mes deux soeurs m’en imposent et je me trouve terriblement diminué’*. The only family member who had remained unchanged was the artist’s father. Of the indomitable Degas patriarch Edgar commented: *‘Papa est toujours le même.’*

While these early portraits foreground sibling relationships as a crucial issue in the negotiation of the artists own formative identity, I would now like to consider how Degas went on to pursue further the consequences of the various processes of identification and differentiation played out here in relation to the sibling closest in age to him: his four-years-younger brother Achille.

*There is a fundamental desire to murder your sibling.*<sup>578</sup>

Degas’ siblings appear frequently in his early work, but it is almost exclusively through the conventional format of portraiture. The only exception to this is the curious series of drawings the artist executed in preparation for the *Jockey Tombé*. Achille was clearly no stranger to modelling for his artist-brother. But whereas on the occasion of the military portrait he had stood fully clothed and upright – meeting his brother’s gaze directly – here he was required to assume an altogether different posture. By casting his younger brother as a dying Gaul, the body of this young bourgeois male was enlisted to serve a very specific set of artistic ends. Although the drawings relating to *Le jockey tombé* are not portraits in the conventional sense, there are a number of significant factors regarding Achille’s personal circumstances at this moment which rendered him ideally pre-disposed to serving as a model for this figure. We have no information regarding the historical circumstances under which this encounter took place. Perhaps Achille came to his brother’s studio one day to pose or a makeshift studio was improvised for the purpose at the family home. The only thing we can surmise are the possible dates of these works, which were executed sometime between 1865 and 1866. As noted earlier Achille had joined the *Ecole Navale* after leaving school. However, his time in the military was troubled. Severely reprimanded for unruly and insubordinate behaviour he came close to dismissal on numerous occasions and, despite remaining in the navy for almost a decade, he never managed to progress beyond the lowliest ranks of subordinate officers.<sup>579</sup> And while Achille’s martial service coincided with a range of overseas operations in territories such as Mexico and southern Vietnam (*Cochinchine*), he was not given (or perhaps refused) the opportunity to participate in the action. Instead Achille appears to have been despatched on a succession of monotonous

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<sup>577</sup> Unpublished letter from Degas to Gustave Moreau (26 April, 1859), reprinted in Theodore Reff, ‘More unpublished letters of Degas,’ *Art Bulletin*, 51, (September 1969), p. 284.

<sup>578</sup> Mitchell, *Siblings*, p. 48.

<sup>579</sup> For the biographical details of Achille Degas see Loyrette, *Degas*.

postings off the coast of west Africa which, although providing a military presence designed to serving French colonial interests in the region, did not offer much opportunity for martial combat or acts of heroism. Eventually it seems that Achille grew weary of the institutional existence of military life and resigned from service in 1864. In the autumn of 1866 Achille would set sail for New Orleans with his younger brother René to (unsuccessfully) establish an import-export business. But before that an extended hiatus followed, a period coinciding precisely with the dates of the wounded jockey drawing and during which, it would seem, Achille was nothing more than an unoccupied 'gentleman of leisure' with nothing better to do than pose for his elder brother. In the light of this we see how Achille – a man who had recently been divested of his military status (and after a singularly ignominious period of service at that) – presented himself to Edgar as the ideal subject through which to pursue an interrogation of the demise of the heroic male figure.

There are five drawings in all relating to this series. The first two (figures 65 and 66) are cursory pencil sketches of a recumbent male figure. The subtle modifications between these two drawings would suggest it was here that Degas refined the jockey's pose. The awkwardly contorted posture of this figure as it is laid out in this latter drawing closely corresponds to that of the fallen jockey in *Scène de Steeplechase*. But the following two drawings, although of the same figure and outlining roughly the same pose, are much more finely detailed. If the grid drawn over the figure of the jockey (figure 66) (the means through which this figure would be transferred onto the canvas) conventionally indicates the termination of the preparatory drawing stage, then these studies are tangential to the procedure of picture making. Indeed, I would argue there is a clear 'slippage' at stake between the first two drawings, where the artist's brother is merely posing *as* a wounded jockey, and the latter pair, which are seen to become more a portrait of Achille himself. It appears that the initial process of life-drawing had opened up for Degas something compelling about his brother's (and by extension his own) subjectivity that necessitated a more detailed investigation. That these two drawings represented a digression from the norms of academic preparation is indicated in the artist's choice of materials. While the former two were summarily executed on sheets of rough sketching paper, for the latter pair Degas selected a brown paper of much finer quality. The medium is also different. A workaday graphite pencil was substituted for finely sharpened charcoal. What is most striking about these two drawings – and which marks them out as far exceeding the remit of preparatory *académies* – however, is their palpable corporeality. This articulates something of the highly charged nature of the conditions under which this encounter took place. One imagines Edgar carefully tracing the intimate contours of his brother's body as he lay at his

feet.<sup>580</sup> The image of Achille is rendered so immediate in these drawings that one can almost hear the barely audible sound of rasping breath exhaled from his slightly open mouth.

In these terms it is the study of Achille's head which is most remarkable – in particular the sensuous lingering upon the most intimate of facial orifices; the slightly parted mouth, eyelids, nostrils and the opening of the auditory canal which have been carefully highlighted with the tip of a white pastel crayon. These areas correspond precisely to Lacan's 'delimitation of the erogenous zone' and designated by him thus: 'the result of a cut (*coupure*) expressed in the anatomical mark (*trait*) of a margin or border – lips, (the enclosure of the teeth), the rim of the anus, the tip of the penis, the vagina, the slit formed by the eyelids, even the horn shaped aperture of the ear.<sup>581</sup> Although never explicitly stated by Lacan, these areas of heightened corporeal sensitivity illustrate perfectly his notion of *extimité* ('extimacy'); a term coined to highlight the problematic demarcation between interiority and exteriority.<sup>582</sup> While *extimité* is not necessarily tied to the body, it is surely these transgressive marks 'of the cut' punctuating its surface that must be seen as one of its most compelling instances.<sup>583</sup> Once notions of inside and outside are rendered unstable upon the body, so too are the boundaries between self and 'other'. But if these boundaries which constitute the subject's sense of integrity may be potentially transgressed at the site of the *extimité*, then it is here where the subject is rendered most vulnerable to the Other. It is precisely the 'extimate' areas of Achille's body which have been attended to so carefully in this drawing. It is as if – through a process of symbolic permeation via his brother's most intimate orifices – Degas sought to penetrate his brother's very being. Just as the *extimité* possesses the capacity to erode the conventional distinction between inside/outside, subject/object, so are these pages the medium through which Degas' subjectivity becomes so enmeshed with that of his brother Achille that it is impossible to distinguish between the two.

In order to understand precisely what is at stake in this imbrication of sibling-subjectivities, it will be productive to analyse what forms of desire are seen to underpin the encounter they transcribe. As we have seen, Mitchell identifies the narcissistic element to the first form of love which the elder child feels for his sibling. Although this is ostensibly

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<sup>580</sup> An interesting point of comparison between this highly charged encounter is with that between Géricault and Delacroix, when the latter posed for the one of the prostrate male figures in *Radeau*. See Grigsby, *Extremities*, pp. 237-40 for a powerful account of this occasion.

<sup>581</sup> Lacan, 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire' (1960), reprinted in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Routledge: London and New York, 1991), p. 348.

<sup>582</sup> For a commentary upon Lacan's notion of the *extimité* see Jacques-Alain Miller 'Extimité' in Mark Bracher et. al. *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), pp. 74-87. See also Mladen Dolar, 'I Shall Be With You On Your Wedding Night: Lacan and the Uncanny', *October*, 58 (Autumn 1991), pp. 6-23.

<sup>583</sup> Lacan, 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire', p. 349.



presented here as a stage to be overcome I would argue that this narcissistic love is something that is retained – even if only residually – and that the mourning of the loss of the unique self is never fully completed. This is acknowledged by Mitchell herself who states that: ‘*the narcissistic love can be retained so that the sibling/peer is only ever loved as the self and violence will erupt the moment it is achieved as marginally other.*’<sup>584</sup>

This idea can be mapped productively onto the structuration of desire within the Lacanian imaginary – the very basis of which is predicated upon a narcissistic economy. Primary narcissism (the first, and possibly last, form of love) originates here at the mirror stage, a moment where ‘the subject originally locates and recognizes desire through the intermediary of his own image.’<sup>585</sup> But if the mirror stage is, as Kaja Silverman has noted, ‘one instance where the subject merges effortlessly with a beloved image as to believe itself ideal’,<sup>586</sup> then it stands as a moment of illusory plenitude which the subject will subsequently try to recuperate through the substitution of this lost mirror-*imago* with various object-choices. As Lacan affirms: ‘it is the mirror reflection which provides the framework for all possible erotism... the object-relation must always submit to the narcissistic framework and be inscribed within it.’<sup>587</sup> This economy is expressed in *Seminar I* through the following algebraic formulation:  $\$ < > a$ . Here ‘ $\$$ ’ designates the subject (the line scored through the character acknowledging the sacrificial cost of his entry into language, i.e. castration), ‘ $< >$ ’ = desire for, and ‘ $a$ ’ (the *objet petit a*) standing for the loss entailed by this accession into the symbolic which the object of desire is enlisted to fulfil.<sup>588</sup> The symbiosis of fantasy formula makes clear the substitutory function of the *objet petit a*. As Lacan states: ‘it is one’s own ego that one loves in love, one’s ego made real on an imaginary level’. If the *objet petit a* may thus be understood as a narcissistic supplement in terms of how it functions as a substitute for the subject’s *own* loss then it is only logical that the sibling (there is, of course, no one closer to the self, apart from the self) could represent this ‘missing piece’ of being. As the sibling promises the *jouissance* of this lost plenitude, might we not then see how Achille functions as Edgar’s *objet petit a* within the politics of desire at stake in the encounter under discussion?

Of the libidinal economy laid out in the Lacanian fantasy formula Mladen Dolar has commented that ‘love after all is the attempt to make the Other the same, to reconcile it with narcissism’.<sup>589</sup> But it is only within the realm of the phantasmatic, where the ego or the

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<sup>584</sup> Mitchell, *Siblings*, p. 206.

<sup>585</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud’s Papers on Technique, 1953-1954*, trans. John Forrester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) p. 147. (Quoted in Silverman, p. 5)

<sup>586</sup> Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 223.

<sup>587</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I*, p. 174.

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>589</sup> Mladen Dolar, ‘I Shall Be With You On Your Wedding Night: Lacan and the Uncanny’, *October*, 58 (Autumn 1991), p. 12.

*moi* is truly able to manifest itself, that this becomes possible. If, as Laplanche and Pontalis have argued, this is a space characterized by the ‘absence of subjectivization’<sup>590</sup> then it is here where the sibling identification is so profound that ‘all distinction between subject and object is lost’<sup>591</sup> and thus an instance where the subject can be seen truly to love the Other as himself.

*‘Doubling, in the simplest way, entails the loss of that uniqueness that one could enjoy in one’s self-being provided one was neither ego nor subject.’*<sup>592</sup>

But the story of the sibling-subjects Achille and Edgar does not end here. Indeed, there is much more to say about the loss incurred upon entry into the symbolic – particularly when it is the *sibling* who is enlisted to stand in place of the *objet petit a*. While Mitchell, like Lacan, speaks of the loss of the unique self as a founding formative moment, for her it is the sibling who precipitates this loss felt on the part of the subject and for which he is forever held culpable. But this loss may be disavowed through a narcissistic attachment to the sibling. As Mitchell’s warns: ‘violence will erupt the moment it is achieved as marginally other.’<sup>593</sup> Or to put it in Lacanian terms, if the *objet petit a* (Achille) is enlisted to stand in a mirroring relation to the subject’s (Edgar’s) ego, then this is a position that cannot be sustained, and there will eventually come a moment where the ‘narcissistic complement turns lethal’.<sup>594</sup>

In order to elaborate upon the haunting spectre of violence at the heart of the narcissistic sibling relationship I would like to draw an analogy with the ‘double’ – one instance of the Freudian uncanny as discussed by Mladen Dolar in the same essay cited earlier. Although the double is a literary trope drawn from Gothic fiction, we might also consider here the identical twin (the fantasy of the evil-twin is a *par excellence* manifestation of the double) and the mirror image – from which the ego-ideal – originates in our discussion. Achille then is ‘doubly’ double – both sibling (twin) *and* the substitute for the formative mirror imago. But if the double – a symptom of disavowal – is initially produced to ward off the spectre of death then it also simultaneously invokes the trauma of castration (or, for Mitchell, the loss of the unique self). As it reflects the unattainable loss back to the subject the double thus turns into an ominous harbinger of death. In Freudian psychoanalytic terms, fantasies of fratricide are understood to be manifestations of the death drive which run counter to the pleasure principle. And while civilized culture dictates that the subject must overcome the desire to murder his/her sibling (the ultimate taboo), I would argue it is precisely this repressed primal fantasy to which these drawings surrender.

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<sup>590</sup> Jean Laplanche and JB Pontalis, ‘Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality’, *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 49, no. 1 (1968), p. 13.

<sup>591</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>592</sup> Dolar, ‘I Shall be with you on Your Wedding Night’, p. 13

<sup>593</sup> Mitchell, *Siblings*, p. 206.

<sup>594</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

In the light of this discussion there is one particular detail upon the full length figure study of the supine Achille which takes on an even greater poignancy: the vertical band of bright red pastel running down the right hand side of his torso (see detail figure 312). Formally this is a striking part of the image in that it is the only patch of colour breaking up its monochromacy. But its placement is also highly significant: in symbolic terms it can be indicative of nothing other than a mortal chest wound. This wound, however, is incongruous when framed against the larger narrative context to which it supposedly relates. It bares no relation to the fatalities that could possibly be incurred from a horse – however violent the fall. (Notably this contusion is nowhere in evidence on the figure of the jockey in *Scène de Steeplechase*). Rather this is a injury symptomatic of man-made rituals of violence. While it is of the kind which could have only been sustained by a fellow compatriot, in this case the fatal body blow is one that has been delivered by none other than the victim's own brother. But this strike upon Achille's vital organ was not inflicted during the frenzy of martial combat. Rather, it takes the form of a highly premeditated assault. The lengths to which Degas went in preparing to sacrifice his brother are inscribed upon the drawings themselves where Achille is here subjected to a slow but inexorable process of submission. By enlisting him as a model, Achille was installed firmly under his gaze and held (momentarily at least) to his mercy. Here Edgar wasted no time in directing his younger sibling to lay at his feet, before instructing him to close his eyes and feign death. But once cast down to the ground Achille was to be rendered even more vulnerable. The bourgeois gentleman's riding attire he wears was never going to provide much protection from the armory of swords or bullets with which his assailant was planning to deliver his attack. And whilst Achille was perhaps lulled into in a false sense of security as Edgar carefully traced the folds and creases of his shirt where it fell against his skin, and attentively delineated each and every one of the buttons on his waistcoat, he should not have been fooled. For it was here that the unwitting Achille was held culpable for the irrevocable formative psychic injury he inflicted upon his elder's brother's ego by his very coming into being: the angry passage of harshly scribbled scarlet pigment upon his upper right torso symptomatic of the irruption of a first born child's long-harboured death wish against the young upstart who expropriated his supremacy.

If we are to understand this drawing as an arena in which Degas symbolically murders his brother, this is an act which is not without cost (as the *dénouement* of every Gothic novel involving the double testifies). As the protagonist here kills the double in order to ward off the threat of death he represents, he is 'unaware that his only substance and his very being were concentrated in the double' and thus in killing him he kills himself too.<sup>596</sup> The same procedure is seen to be at play in the encounter between the two Degas brothers. Whilst for Edgar to picture Achille mortally wounded or dead was to enact the symbolic annihilation of his younger brother, the profound psychic investment in the sibling would necessarily entail the obliteration of the self too.

But there is also, strangely, something to gain from this surrender, and which may be explained by recourse once again to the trope of the double. Whilst for Freud the double is primarily the figure of a lack (castration) for Lacan it is the figure of *excess*. He represents, as Dolar puts it, the anxiety of 'gaining too-much' – this too-much of course being the *objet petit a*, the missing piece with which entry into the symbolic was paid, and that part of being radically inaccessible to us. In these terms perhaps we might understand these drawings as the expression of a desire to join the lost *jouissance* offered by the double/brother. Indeed, in Degas' utter *rapture* with this motionless figure (we remember from the previous chapter the etymological origins of this term which are suggestive of taking someone away or 'outside' of oneself, whether implications are erotic and/or spiritual) one might read the profundity of the artist-subject's psychic investment in him as a form of expropriating identification as outlined by the phenomenologist philosopher Max Scheler.<sup>597</sup>

This idea is elaborated upon in the *Nature of Sympathy* (1922) where it is posited as the opposite of an interiorizing or *idiopathic* variety of identification. As Kaja Silverman outlines (the following discussion is indebted to her writing upon this subject in her book *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*) this form of identification is similar to that outlined by Freud in 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego' (1921) who correlates it with the oral phase of development when: 'the object that we long for and prize is assimilated by eating and in that way is annihilated.'<sup>598</sup> Through this analogy it becomes clear that what this particular form of identification turns upon is the internalization of the image of the other as 'self' and the denial of the 'otherness' of the other. As Scheler explains, it is dependant

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<sup>595</sup> Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>596</sup> Dolar, 'I Shall be With You On Your Wedding Night', p. 11.

<sup>597</sup> See Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, trans. Peter Heath (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon, 1970).

<sup>598</sup> Freud, 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego', *Standard Edition*, vol. 18, pp. 65-144, quoted in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, p. 263.

upon 'the total eclipse and absorption of another self by one's own, it being thus, as it were, deprived of all rights in its conscious existence and character.'<sup>599</sup> But whilst the idiopathic identification is driven by the *repudiation* of difference in its entailment of the overwriting of the Other's identity for the subject's own narcissistic self-profit there is something altogether different at stake in the *heteropathic* (externalizing) form of identification. This is described by Scheler as a process whereby 'the 'I'' is so overwhelmed and hypnotically bound and fettered by the other 'I' that its formal status as a subject is usurped by the other's personality.'<sup>600</sup> At this moment he adds: 'I live not in 'myself', but entirely within the other person.'<sup>601</sup>

There is a certain violence implied in both of these identificatory processes. But whereas one (the idiopathic) turns upon a violence done to the other (sadistic), the other (heteropathic) turns upon a violence done to the self (masochistic). Thus, whilst the former can be aligned with 'normative' masculinity, it is the heteropathic variant of identification which would seem to offer the most transgressive possibilities for the subject. The heteropathic identification entails a sacrifice of the self in its surrendering to the other as it necessitates the loss or destruction of the ego – but as it does, it is *loss* of self at stake in this identification which is co-incident with a form of ecstasy.

In order to link this 'heteropathic ecstasy' back the drawings under discussion it is necessary to return for one last time to the double/brother. If as Dolar argues he is 'the mirror image in which the *objet petit a* is included', then it is an image which not only shows us what we are missing, but as it does also reflects our *own* loss back to us.<sup>602</sup> As Dolar counsels: '*when I recognize myself in the mirror it is already too late. There is a split: I cannot recognize myself and at the same time be with myself. With the recognition I have already lost what one could call my 'self-being', the immediate coincidence with myself in my being and jouissance.*'<sup>603</sup> But if the subject is overcome by a loss of which he is only made aware through the figure of the double/brother, then it would make sense that it is through this image that he will seek to recover the lost *jouissance* which the representative of this missing piece of being promises to him. This is precisely the ecstasy to which Narcissus surrendered as he dived headlong into the pool of water in which he saw his reflection. Indeed, if this myth teaches us that one can know the self only at the cost of losing the self, then perhaps we might understand the inscription of Edgar's own subjectivity in these drawings as an entirely *wilful* submission to the death drive – in which the subject wholeheartedly abandons himself to the masochistic *jouissance* entailed in the dissolution of self and other with utter disregard for its fatal consequences. Thus, whilst it is ostensibly the annihilation of his sibling that would seem to

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<sup>599</sup> Scheler *The Nature of Sympathy*, p. 18-19, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 264.

<sup>600</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>601</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>602</sup> Dolar, *I Shall be With You On Your Wedding Night*, p. 13.

<sup>603</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

be enacted in these works, it is actually Degas' *own* fantasized divestiture of the self – refracted across the body of his sibling Achille – that is fantasized in these works; his brother/double the mirror which he holds out to himself.

*The experience of this shameful infirmity comes right out of a family romance, from which I will retain on a trait, a weapon and a symptom, no doubt, as well as a cause: wounded jealously before an older brother whom I admired, as did everyone around him, for his talent as a draughtsman – and for his eye, in short, which has never ceased to bring out and accuse in me, deep down in me, apart from me, a fratricidal desire'.*

Derrida, *Memoirs d'aveugle*.<sup>604</sup>

Sometime around 1895, Degas, now an infirm and partially blind man in his seventies, reprised the motif of the fallen jockey which he had first explored over thirty years earlier. *Le Jockey Tombé* (figure 313) was executed on an identically sized canvas to his earlier *Scène de Steeplechase*. But in his reworking of this later picture Degas dispensed with all extraneous detail, retaining only its essential figurative elements: the runaway horse and the fallen jockey. Once again the connection between the two figures as they are positioned in relation to each other is entirely incongruous. The background of *Scène de Steeplechase* had, at least, provided the figures with a semblance of descriptive context. But the freely brushed verdant terrain and cerulean blue sky stippled with billowing clouds, against which horse and fallen rider are situated in *Le Jockey Tombé* locates these figures in an abstracted fantasy landscape that is far removed from the industrial environs of nineteenth-century Paris in which Degas' earlier equestrian imagery had been situated.

Although Achille had served as the model for the principal figure in the 1867 *Scène de Steeplechase* he was not able to oblige his brother in the same way on the occasion of its 1895 reprisal, due to the fact that he was already dead. This was not the first time that Degas was to make a portrait of a deceased family member. In the very same year he resurrected the image of his father – who had been dead for over twenty years – in a reprise of the 1869 portrait that we saw at the start of this chapter: *Pagans et le père de Degas*. Downcast, but nonetheless distinguished, the Degas patriarch is here already an elderly man. But in the posthumous portrait made some twenty five years later (figure 314) he is even further diminished. Rooted to the spot in his black garb, Auguste possesses an unmistakably funereal air. Unlike the authoritative images of parental dominance we encountered at the start of this chapter, it is hard to sustain one's faith in the omnipotence of this derelict father figure.

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<sup>604</sup> Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, p. 37.

The death of Auguste Degas in 1874 was an event which was to play a determining role in the subsequent relationships of the Degas siblings. When Auguste died he left the family firm in significant financial debt. These arrears were down, in part, to a large loan which he had extended to his two youngest sons a few years earlier to finance their business in New Orleans, but which had never been repaid. Their company finally folded in 1875 and the following year, with unpaid debts still outstanding, the Degas family were sued by their major creditor. With René and Achille refusing to honour their debts, Edgar was obliged to do so for them. A period of unprecedented financial hardship followed, from which the artist was not to recover for many years. Edgar would never cease to be resentful of having to earn his '*chiennne de vie*' by selling pictures.<sup>605</sup> Unlike his younger brothers, Degas took his family responsibilities very seriously ('*vous ne vous doutez pas des ennuis de toute sorte dont je suis accablé*')<sup>606</sup> he wrote to Jean-Baptiste Faure in 1874) and after the death of his father assumed the role of parental figure to René and Achille – who often behaved like wayward sons. The artist's lack of faith in the capacity for hard work and business acumen of his younger brothers is reflected in the way in which they have been depicted in *Portraits dans un Bureau* (1873) (figure 315). In the midst of this bustling scene, Achille leans idly against the wall, whilst René slouches on a chair reading the paper and smoking a cigarette (it is surely not just a mere coincidence that his legs-akimbo pose is exactly the same as that laid out in the studies for the fallen jockey (see details figures 316 and 317)).<sup>607</sup> It is even less of a coincidence that when the financial situation of the Degas family was at its worst, this was one of the works which the artist sought actively to sell. As time went on Edgar became increasingly disillusioned with the irresponsible behaviour of Achille and René. In 1874, six months after the death of Auguste, Achille caused a public scandal when he was involved in a fracas with the husband of his lover on the steps of the Paris Bourse. But the final straw for Degas came four years later when René, still living in new Orleans, deserted his nearly-blind invalid wife Estelle and their children by running off with her reader. Degas had remained close to his sister in law (and cousin) ever since her brief exile in France during the American Civil War and would never forgive René for his actions.<sup>608</sup> As a result he broke off all contact with his brother and the two would not see each other again for many years to come.

Indeed, if the batch of portraits Degas made of his siblings in the 1850s during the period of his late adolescence discussed earlier play out the 'minimal differentiation' of

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<sup>605</sup> Degas, letter to Faure, dated 1876. Reprinted in *Lettres de Degas*, Marcel Guérin (ed.) (Paris, Editions Bernard Grasset, 1931), p. 22.

<sup>606</sup> Degas, letter to Faure, dated 1877. Reprinted in *ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>607</sup> John Rewald, 'Degas and his family in New Orleans', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, XXX, (August, 1946), pp. 105-126.

<sup>608</sup> Degas had also painted several portraits of Estelle Musson during his stay in New Orleans. Marni Reva Kessler, 'Ocular Anxiety and the Pink Teacup: Edgar Degas' *Woman with a Bandage*', *Nineteenth Century Art Worldwide*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Autumn, 2006), n.p.

lateral relations, it appears their familial alliance, as time went on, gradually shifted to the other extreme of this axis where brothers and sisters 'simply lose touch'.<sup>609</sup> But while the artist's relationships with his siblings in adulthood were largely characterized by strained relations (at least with his brothers) and minimal contact (particularly with his sisters, both of whom had emigrated, Thérèse to Naples and Marguerite to Buenos Aires), 1895 marks a moment when they came to be redefined once again. Achille had died in 1893 at the age of fifty-five from the last of a series of strokes which had left him progressively more paralysed. Two years later, Degas' sister Marguerite, whom he had not seen since she had relocated overseas, died.

The two posthumous portraits of 1895: *Le Jockey Tombé* and *Pagans et le père de Degas* are seen here to function in a certain capacity as 'works of mourning'.<sup>610</sup> The recent deaths of Achille and Marguerite had surely reawakened the process of mourning for his father, whose shoes he had been effectively required to step into after his death. And while the artist would never hear a word against his *cher Papa*, it surely cannot have escaped his attention that he had attained a degree of financial security that Auguste had not been able to secure for himself or his family at that age. Moreover, the considerable professional success which Degas had achieved by the time he was sixty, had long put paid to the doubts his father harboured with regard to his artistic merit during the years of his early career. While his son's renown was something Auguste would not live to see, it was Edgar (like King Alexander), who would nonetheless ultimately have the last laugh in the face of his dubious elders. If Degas' profound attachment to the image of his father in the 1869 *Pagans* portrait is indicated by the fact that it hung in pride of place over his bed, the moribund figure of the posthumous 1895 work can perhaps be seen to reflect a loss of faith in the efficacy of a patriarch whose legacy to his eldest son was not a prosperous and far-reaching empire (like the one Philip bequeathed to Alexander), but the burden of a large financial debt.<sup>611</sup> As for Achille, Edgar had outlived his younger brother. There was no need to symbolically enact the process of his brother's annihilation. His long harboured death-wish had, at last, come true and Achille no longer posed any threat to him.

1895 was also a significant year for the artist in that it marked a reconciliation of sorts between himself and his youngest brother René. Ending a period of estrangement which had lasted for almost twenty years, this was surely prompted by the recent deaths of their other siblings. Degas marked the occasion accordingly with a series of photographic

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<sup>609</sup> Mitchell, *Siblings*, p. 10.

<sup>610</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917 [1915]), vol. 14, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, (London: Hogarth, 1959), pp. 237-58.

<sup>611</sup> This was noted by Paul Poujard. See Marcel Guérin, 'Le portrait du chanteur Pagans et de M. de gas père par Degas', *Bulletin des Musées de France* (3 March, 1993)pp. 34-5.



portraits (figure 318).<sup>612</sup> While Achille and Auguste were not available to pose as subjects for the artist, René was one member of the family who was still able to function in this capacity. However, as the images themselves attest, this was not an altogether happy encounter. The truculent gaze of the middle-aged René, seated somewhat uncomfortably on a chair in his brother's studio, is a far cry from the doe-eyed acquiescent youth as he was portrayed in the 1854 school-boy portrait. René is no longer the compliant model or adoring younger brother, but these images can, nevertheless, be seen as an attempt to seek out any remaining sense of affiliation between the two estranged siblings. If this is the case the portraits are not entirely successful attempts at identification. The sitter's mistrustful expression indicates little complicity between artist and subject. It seems theirs was a rift that time had certainly not healed.

*I suffered seeing my brothers drawings on permanent display, religiously framed on the walls of every room.*<sup>613</sup>

Thérèse Morbilli died in Naples in 1912, with the artist himself following suit five years later. With René the only surviving member of the Degas family left, it was to his youngest brother that Edgar had bequeathed most of his estate whom he had appointed principal executor of the will. The artist had also appointed his principal dealer Durand-Ruel to administer the sale of the contents of his studio. But before the gallery had moved into his studio in order make a full inventory of its contents, René had already sifted through his brother's work and selected a few choice pieces for himself. Understandably he kept most of the family portraits discussed in this chapter, together with one or two of his brother's early  *carnets*  and a series of photographic plates. But in the immediate aftermath of Edgar's death René appointed himself as executor of his brother's legacy in another, and far more ominous, sense of the word. As Eugenia Parry Janis has revealed it is thought that René was the one who destroyed many of his brother's brothel monotypes.<sup>614</sup> The common justification put forward for this act is that René did not want to sully his brother's artistic reputation and that he disposed of only the most graphic and explicit imagery. But even if it is true that René did not wish to bring the family name (which, in any case, he had never previously done much to honour) into disrepute, it is hard not to read this defacement of his brother's legacy as a last-ditch (albeit infantile) attempt to get his own back on his dominating patriarchal elder artist-sibling.

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<sup>612</sup> For a discussion of these photographs see Eugenia Parry Janis, 'Edgar Degas' Photographic Theatre' in *Degas: Form and Space*, ex. cat. (Paris: Centre culturel du Marais, 1984), pp. 451-86.

<sup>613</sup> Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, p. 37.

<sup>614</sup> Eugenia Parry Janis, *Degas Monotypes*, ex. cat. (Cambridge, Mass.: Fogg Art Museum, 1968). pp. xix-xx.



## Conclusion

*'Comment oublier l'antique, l'art le plus fort et le plus charmant?'* Degas wrote ruefully on the page of notebook sometime during his Italian sojourn.<sup>615</sup> This was a question which had presented itself as an urgent issue for the artist at the beginning of his career and is one with which his early practice sought ardently to come to terms. But while the memory of the classical tradition and its deceased grandeur may have haunted Degas' formative oeuvre, it was the figure of Ingres who loomed largest over the young artist. Unlike the remote forefathers of classical antiquity, however, Ingres lived just around the corner from Degas and was a legend with whom he was personally acquainted. The pair had met in 1855 when Degas accompanied Paul Valpinçon to the elderly artist's studio in order to discuss arrangements regarding the loan of the *Grande Baigneuse* for his upcoming retrospective at the *Exposition Universelle*.<sup>616</sup> Relating this youthful encounter to Paul Valéry many decades later Degas recalled how Ingres had had a dizzy spell just as they were about to leave: *'Ingres à leur sortie, s'incline très révérencieusement. En s'inclinant il est pris d'un vertige et tombe sur la face. On le relève en sang.'*<sup>617</sup> Degas rushed to help him to his feet, and after washing the blood from his face hurried off to find Mme Ingres.

The historic meeting between the seventy-five-year-old artistic colossus and his young acolyte takes the form of a curiously deflated encounter. In view of the high esteem in which Degas held Ingres throughout his life, this candid anecdote is somewhat surprising. The disparity between the resplendent young man of the 1804 portrait (to whom Degas would soon dedicate his woeful homage) and the decrepit Ingres of the Valéry anecdote can be taken as emblematic of what the classical tradition had come to stand for in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

It was Ingres' death in 1867, however, which represented the final nail in the coffin of this artistic legacy.<sup>618</sup> The symbolism of this event is indicated by a black bordered announcement on the first page of the January edition of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*. *'Ingres est mort!'* was the bereft cry emblazoning the top of this page (figure 319).

The magazine also contained an obituary written by Léon Lagrange. *'Un grand deuil vient de frapper l'École française'* he lamented, before going on to describe the impoverished state of art in the immediate wake of Ingres' demise which he likened to the disintegration

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<sup>615</sup> Nb. 6, p. 8.

<sup>616</sup> Etienne Moreau-Néaulton, 'Deux-heures avec Degas', *L'Amour de l'art*, 12<sup>ème</sup> année (July 1931) p. 269.

<sup>617</sup> Paul Valéry, *Degas, Danse, Dessin* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 67.

<sup>618</sup> For a discussion of its significance see Patricia Mainardi, 'The Death of Ingres', *Art and Politics of the Second Empire*, pp. 151-3.

of the last column holding up a crumbling temple.<sup>619</sup> While Lagrange's eulogy to the *maître de Montauban* makes clear how Ingres' passing was seen to herald the end of an era for French art I would like to conclude by speculating on the significance of the death of this eminent (fore)Father for the thirty-three-year-old Degas.

Norman Bryson has considered the troubled terrain of artistic inheritance in his 1984 book *Tradition and Desire*. Focusing on three pivotal figures in French art: David, Ingres and Delacroix, Bryson discusses the ways in which these artists 'perceive, and cope with their perception of and their place in artistic tradition'.<sup>620</sup> It was precisely this concern which beset Degas, particularly at the beginning of his career; a moment when his place *within* the tradition of which he so ardently desired to be part was not yet secured.

*'Every disciple takes something from his master'.*

Oscar Wilde, *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*<sup>621</sup>

As discussed in the introduction it was Ingres who cast the longest shadow over Degas at the beginning of his career. Closely identified with the Academy and the classical tradition, Ingres was the veritable embodiment of Degas' artistic inheritance. Although Degas first became acquainted with his work through the diligent copies he executed as a novice at the 1855 *Exposition Universelle* Ingres retrospective, it is to his later artistic practice which we must turn in order to see precisely what it was that Ingres bequeathed to Degas or, to put it another way, what Degas salvaged from his bequest.

In order to pursue the implications of this latter point I would like to draw on an alternative reading of Ingres' artistic legacy in order to add another dimension to the prolonged debate with his master in which Degas was engaged throughout the 1860s. While Ingres is generally held up as the protector of tradition and academic orthodoxy, Adrian Rifkin (pursuing an idea first put forward by the art historian and curator Jean Cassou) has recently claimed him as a progenitor (or better to say *proto*-progenitor) of modernism. It is what Rifkin has termed Ingres' 'supreme indifference' manifest in 'his fanatical persistence of naming things *as if only surface*' (recorded, for example, in his classicizing or archaeologizing detail) where the incipient modernism of the *chef d'école* is to be detected.<sup>622</sup> Extending the terms of this argument, I would like to propose that the unconscious modernity of Ingres is something that we can detect as being written across Degas' oeuvre,

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<sup>619</sup> Léon Lagrange, 'Bulletin mensuel. La Mort de M. Ingres', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (1 February, 1867), p. 206.

<sup>620</sup> Norman Bryson, *Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1984), p. xvii.

<sup>621</sup> quoted in Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 6.

<sup>622</sup> Adrian Rifkin, *Ingres, Then and Now*, (Routledge: London and New York, 2000), p. 123.

and that it was *he* (Degas) – albeit unwittingly – who was the first to tap into the latent Modernism of his master.<sup>623</sup>

Although he certainly did not inherit Ingres' fetish for 'finish' there are interesting dialogues with his predecessor visible in Degas' practice which would certainly bear this out. One instance of this is seen in the two artists' shared penchant for repetition. The serial nature of Degas' artistic procedures has already been noted, but Ingres was *also* infamous for turning out replica after replica of the same motif (*Paolo and Francesca* for example constitutes over twenty paintings, drawings and prints executed over a thirty-five year period). And while this was a proclivity for which he was widely derided by his contemporaries, the reference to mechanical reproduction implicit in this procedure constitutes another crucial aspect of Ingres' modernity.<sup>624</sup>

As discussed in chapter 2, a further point of correspondence between Ingres and Degas is the medieval topos of *Scène de Guerre* and the subject matter favoured by Ingres' during his short-lived *troubadour* phase. But subtle strategies of subversion are also at play in Degas' appropriation of his master's motifs. This we see for example in *Interieur (Le Viol)* (1868-9) (figure 320) picture that, although commonly understood to depict the corrupt lovers of Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, is a work which I believe can also be understood as a mutilated reference to *Paolo et Francesca* (figure 321), a work with which Degas was certainly familiar. While the motif of an inter-sex pairing is a rare theme in Ingres' oeuvre, it is even more uncommon *chez* Degas (family portraits aside, *Le Viol* represents the only 'couple' that the artist ever depicted). This picture, however, renounces the romantic tenor of Ingres' *Paolo et Francesca*. This amorous couple who, as Susan Siegfried has put it 'are so fused together that formally they constitute a separate motif' constitute a unity that is antithetical to the dismal encounter enacted by Degas' unhappy protagonists where Dante's doomed love affair is recast as a contemporary vignette of sexual alienation.<sup>625</sup> Not only does Degas effectively annihilate the 'excessive unity' of these star-crossed lovers but, as if to add insult to injury, he transposes the red-cheeked ardour of the young Paolo onto his wretched female protagonist as a crimson blush of shame.

But it is the nude that constitutes the key site over which Degas' dialogue with Ingres was waged. If, as I argued in chapter 3, Degas' imagery of the female body might justifiably be read as the desecration of the ideal nude, this is a corpus that also casts light

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<sup>623</sup> Ingres complex subjectivity has also been explored by Wendy Leeks. See *'The Family Romance' and repeated themes in the work of J. A. D. Ingres*, PhD Diss. (University of Leeds, 1990). See also *Fingering Ingres* (Art History Special Issue), Adrian Rifkin and Susan Siegfried (eds.) (Oxford: Blackwells, 2001).

<sup>624</sup> Ingres' investment in the reproduction of his work has been discussed by Stephen Bann. See 'Ingres in Reproduction', in *ibid*, pp. 56-75.

<sup>625</sup> Susan Siegfried, 'Ingres and the Undoing of Narrative', *Art History*, vol. 23, no. 5 (December 2000), p. 662.

on the latent sadism at stake in Ingres' *own* formal procedures. The disorganized bodily syntax and contorted posturings of Degas' nudes reveal the violent undercurrent of the physical distortions and impossible anatomies of Ingres' *odalisques*.<sup>626</sup>

Griselda Pollock's *Avant-Garde Gambits* (1992) can help to shed light on the complex terms of Degas' engagement with the legacy of Ingres. Pollock's identification of a *fin-de-siècle* avant-garde strategy or 'gambit', – defined by three calculated maneuvers: 'reference, deference and difference' – through which an artist is able to gain critical recognition for his interventions into the established representational codes of the day, undermines notions of creativity and artistic genius, whilst offering a model of artistic engagement that is more nuanced than traditional paradigms of artistic 'influence'.<sup>627</sup> Degas' 'reference'; the way in which his practice relates to 'valorized contexts of meanings', is a distinct feature of his early practice, evidenced in his desire to exhibit at the Salon and engagement with traditional pictorial genres such as history painting and the nude.<sup>628</sup> And while Degas' referencing of the work of his predecessors is, at this early stage of his career, largely *deferential* (see my discussion of the different ways in which Degas and Manet quote Marcantonio Raimondi's engravings after Raphael) subtle strategies of *difference*, as revealed in the above discussion, are also clearly in play.

It is to one final 'master' that we must turn for the most astute and penetrating commentary on the problems of artistic inheritance: Picasso. If one can imagine Ingres as Degas' fore(Father), it is surely not too far-fetched to imagine Picasso as the son of Degas. Whilst this lineage of artistic Fathers and Sons may at first seem to capitulate to outmoded Oedipal paradigms of historical analysis, it is the way in which Picasso's interventions render this model *dysfunctional* that I would like to stress.<sup>629</sup> Unlike Degas, Picasso had no respect for the Father. While Degas obediently played the role of dutiful son (even his radical interventions into the genre of the nude can be understood as an endeavour to

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<sup>626</sup> See Carol Ockman, *Ingres' Eroticized Bodies: Retracing the Serpentine Line* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>627</sup> For a critique of the use to which models of artistic influence have been put to use in art history see Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 59. An alternative theory of artistic influence is provided by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973). Rather than understanding influence as being a process of unproblematic transmission from 'X' to 'Y', Bloom's six 'ratiors' stress the profoundly *anxious* terms of an artist's engagement with the legacy of his predecessors. For a feminist critique of the Oedipal paradigm to which Bloom adheres see Joan Copjec, 'Transference: Letters and the Unknown Woman', *October* 28 (Spring 1984), pp. 60-90 and Mignon Nixon 'Discipleship: Deference and Difference', *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 13-52.

<sup>628</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits, 1888-1893: Gender and the Color of History* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992) p. 15.

<sup>629</sup> Although Picasso's function in art history is that of a phallogocentric figure *par excellence*, the disruptive logic of Picasso's practice in relation to dominant Modernist narratives has been explored by Rosalind Krauss. See Chapter 5, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 196-240.

invent the means through which his master's legacy could continue on into the future), Picasso quickly disinherited himself from his artistic antecedents before turning to devote his career to defacing their legacy.<sup>630</sup> This is dramatized most compellingly in a series of riotous etchings from the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>631</sup> Executed as he entered his tenth decade, Picasso's attack on the history of western art profanes almost every canonical image held sacred by this tradition. Witness a series of blasphemous etchings on the theme of Ingres' *Paolo et Francesca* (see, for example figure 322) where Picasso hones in on the repressed sexual desire with which this motif is saturated (indicated by Ingres only in Paolo's engorged throat) and unleashes the repressed libidinal force of this prim courtly couple.

It is interesting to note that in the infantile fantasy world of Picasso's late etchings, peopled by monsters, giants, body parts and parental figures of authority, the Father is invariably held up as an object of ridicule. This we see in the *Paolo et Francesca* imagery where the cuckolded Giancotto (ready to move in for the kill in Ingres' version of events) is transfigured into an emasculated peeping Tom witnessing a 'primal scene' enacted by his wife and younger brother. A similar (in)version of the primal scene is enacted in Picasso's take on Ingres' *Raphael and La Fornarina* (figure 323) where the copulating couple are regarded by a Holy Father dressed in full ceremonial regalia sitting on a potty.<sup>632</sup>

Neither was Degas spared an irreverent trouncing by his errant progeny. This is played out in Picasso's reworking of the Brothel monotypes (figures 324 and 325) in which the identification of Degas with the be-suited male clients occupying the margins of these images is made explicit.<sup>633</sup> The artist, renowned for his bourgeois habits and drab existence, is here situated at the centre of a rambunctious bordello, petrified, but no less transfixed, by the corpulent whores who with bosoms pressed against him proffer their nipples.

There is a curious elision of the artistic and familial father at stake in these etchings. More than one critic has noted the uncanny physical resemblance between Don José Ruiz

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<sup>630</sup> Picasso's dialogues with the art of the past was the subject of a major exhibition recently held at the Grand Palais. For the catalogue see Anne Baldassari et al. *Picasso et les maîtres*, ex. cat. (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2008).

<sup>631</sup> The commentary on these etchings is patchy, although they are treated in some detail by the various contributors to the exhibition catalogue *Late Picasso: Painting, Sculpture, Drawing*, ex. cat. (London: Tate Gallery 1988).

<sup>632</sup> Tamar Garb has also discussed Picasso's reworking of Ingres' *Raphael and La Fornarina*. See 'Fictions of Femininity in the Case of Ingres' Portrait of Madame de Senonnes' in *The Painted Face: Portraits of Women in France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 49-50.

<sup>633</sup> Picasso acquired some of the Brothel monotypes in the late 1950s. Charles Bernheimer has also provided a commentary on Degas' brothel imagery and Picasso's etchings. See 'Degas's Brothels: Voyeurism and Ideology' in *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), esp. pp. 177-181.

and Degas (familiar to them from the framed photographs Picasso kept in the studio).<sup>634</sup> Picasso's art teacher father figures prominently in the artist's biography, although he is a figure treated with little more respect than the rest of his antecedents. As Picasso would later boast to Jaime Sabartés, José Ruiz was so astounded by the artistic skill his son possessed at the tender age of thirteen that he promptly passed his paints and brushes over to him and never painted again.<sup>635</sup> Soon after Pablo dropped his father's name, signing his work only with his mother's name – the altogether more unique Picasso.

How different is Picasso's self-propagated myth of his precocious artistic beginnings from that of Degas. José Ruiz's resignation from painting in the face of his son's prodigious talent is a far cry from the doubts and anxieties expressed by Degas' father Auguste who (not without justification it must be said) held great reservations with regard to *his* son's artistic efficacy. Although, as we saw in chapter 4, Degas had no qualms about symbolically murdering his brother, it was an altogether different matter where his elders were concerned. Unlike Picasso, he was unable to kill off the Father with his own hands, and was required instead to wait for nature to take its course.

While the death of Ingres in 1867 (and with it the classical tradition he represented) entailed a necessary process of mourning it also brought with it a certain liberating potential. Indeed, 1867 marks something of a watershed in the protracted period of Degas' maturation covered in this thesis: it was at this precise moment that the artist turned his back on history painting for good. As we see from the inauspicious portraits produced during this period, (figure 326) however, Degas still had some way to go before, artistically speaking, he found his feet and it is 1874 which represents the next decisive moment in his artistic formation. This was a year marked by the death of his father Auguste, an event closely followed by the first Impressionist exhibition – the forum where Degas would finally make his longed-for artistic mark. It was within the context of the Impressionist exhibitions where Degas' established a set of social and professional bonds outside the familial cell within which, as we saw in chapter 4, his practice had previously been circumscribed. Here Degas entered into a series of artistic dialogues with figures such as Edouard Manet, Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt, Edmond Duranty and Gustave Caillebotte who shared with him a growing consciousness of modernity and a commitment to forging a set of pictorial languages appropriate to these new conditions of existence. In this way the close-knit Impressionist circle can be seen here to represent a set of important 'peer-group' relations. And while the artistic dialogues played out here (characterized by similar strategies of 'reference', 'deference' and 'difference') were no less fraught than those in which Degas was engaged with his forebears, the Impressionist milieu provided an important crucible in

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<sup>634</sup> See John Richardson, 'L'époque Jacqueline' in *Late Picasso* p. 39.

<sup>635</sup> Jaime Sabartés *Pensées sur Picasso*, quoted in Pierre Daix, *Picasso: Life and Art*, trans. Olivia Emmet (New York: Harper Collins, 1993).



which the stifling nexus of artistic and familial constraints under which he had previously been operating was finally loosened.

It is within the Impressionist peer group (where women artists such as Morisot and Cassatt played an active role and with whom Degas had longstanding professional associations) where the ‘Oedipal’ dialogues in which Degas’ early practice was enmeshed are ultimately disrupted and complicated.<sup>636</sup>

As already noted throughout this thesis there are numerous stoic elders to be found scattered across Degas’ early oeuvre. These elders take the form of historical individual (the Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus and the elderly King Philip) and senior family members (Degas’ aunt the Duchesa Cicerale, and the artist’s father and grandfather). And while these figures of authority are never represented as anything less than objects of respect and veneration, it was only with the deaths of these hallowed patriarchs (namely the artist’s father and Ingres) – and the set of lateral collegial relations which were immediately forged in their wake – that the floundering youths they overshadowed (the young Kings David and Alexander and – by way of a profound fantasmatic identification – Degas) were able to come to the fore and realize their true potential.

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<sup>636</sup> Cf. Juliet Mitchell, *Siblings* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2003) which provides a critique of classical psychoanalysis and its insistent privileging of the vertical Oedipal paradigm. Mitchell’s theories are discussed at length in chapter 4 of this thesis.

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## Illustrations

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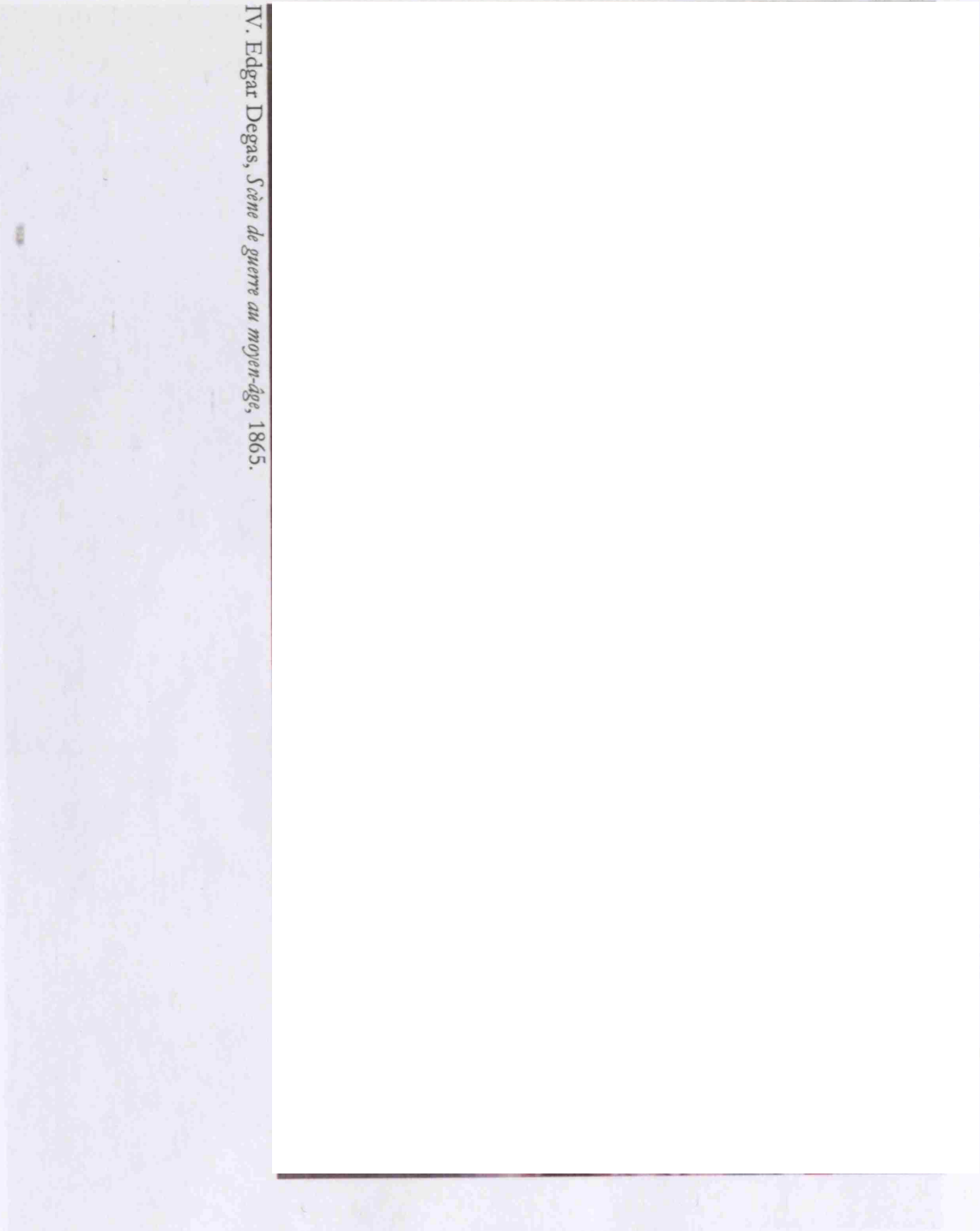
I. Edgar Degas, *Sémiramis construisant babylone*, c. 1860.

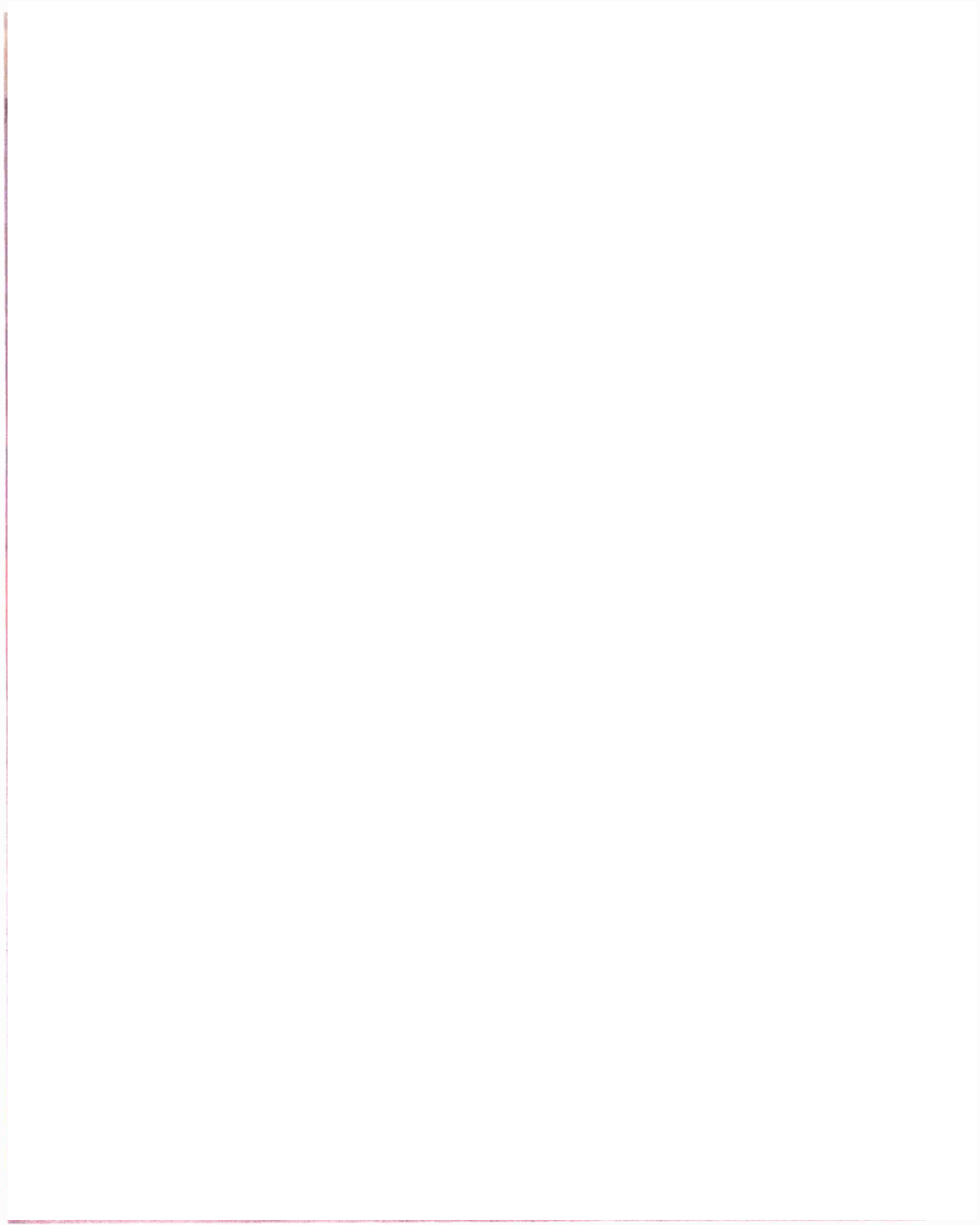
II. Edgar Degas, *Petites filles spartiates provoquant des garçons*, begun 1860; reworked c. 1880.



III. Edgar Degas, *David et Goliath*, c. 1858.

IV. Edgar Degas, *Scène de guerre au moyen-âge*, 1865.






V. Edgar Degas, *Alexandre et le Bucéphale*, 1859-1861.

VI. Edgar Degas, *Scène de steeplechase: le jockey tombé*, 1866; reworked 1880-1881 and c. 1897.












13. Photograph of the Ingres installation at the 1855  
Exposition Universelle.



14. Edgar Degas, *Auto-portrait*, 1855.



15. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Autoportrait a l'âge de 24 ans* 1804.



16. Raphael, *Self Portrait*, c. 1506.



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