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book review of

Exiled in Modernity: Delacroix, Civilization, and Barbarism by
David O'Brien

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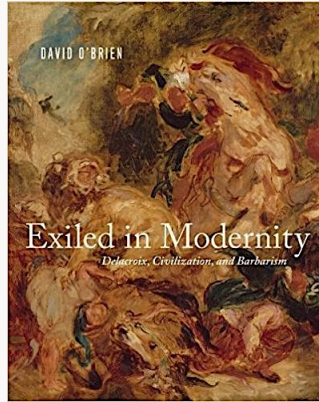
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David O'Brien,
Exiled in Modernity: Delacroix, Civilization, and Barbarism.
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226 pp.; 68 color and 29 b&w illus.; 1 plan and 1 chart; appendix; notes; bibliography; index.
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Eugène Delacroix is a paradox; at once romantic and classicist, an urbane Parisian fascinated with untamed nature, the last grand-style European painter and a major inspiration for modernist painting. David O'Brien introduces his study of this enigmatic artist and his later work with an analysis of *Ovid Among the Scythians* (1859) in which the author stresses Delacroix's ambivalence about civilization. In the painting, muscular, seminude, and tanned Scythians offer mare's milk and wild berries to a weak and effeminate Ovid, who reclines on his scrolls, an emblem of culture. In contrast to Ovid's own description of the Scythians' barbarism, Delacroix presents their primitivism as a virtue. The painting, however, is more landscape than figure painting, and reveals Delacroix sensual and textured use of paint, particularly in the mountains where opaque color bleeds through transparent strokes. This leads O'Brien to conclude, "Delacroix's meditations on civilization and barbarism were also mediations on nature and the sensual qualities of painting" (6). And in fact, the artist's musings on civilization and barbarism encouraged him progressively to favor the second concept, as he believed the primitive offered an aesthetic experience that would transcend the mundane experience of modernity, itself a state that embodied both civilization and barbarism.

The theme of civilization first appeared in painting in the eighteenth century when Enlightenment writers defined the concept as rising from an inferior condition to a broadly shared state of culture in a progressive manner. Until the end of the nineteenth century, most writers saw the European present as the apex of civilization, exemplified by technological innovation, industrial expansion, political democratization, and educational attainment, and mobilized the concept to claim European superiority over other societies. Delacroix engaged the idea in its prime and expressed early doubts about its Enlightenment definition; for instance, he saw the savage in modern men and believed that nature, untamed passion and even violent forces were crucial to human creativity. O'Brien briefly addresses Delacroix's artistic engagement with the theme of civilization in such early works as the *Massacres at Chios* (1824) and *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1828), but his principle concern is the

artist's mid to late career. In the first chapter, O'Brien analyzes Delacroix's complex and often paradoxical understanding of civilization as revealed in the artist's journal. Then, he explores the ideas of civilization and barbarism and their corollaries in Delacroix's art through three thematic chapters, focusing on mural painting, images of North Africa, and depictions of animals and the hunt, respectively. In this compelling reading, Delacroix transformed the literary rumination of his early murals to engage art historical precedents and decorative possibilities in his late mural painting, moved from an ethnographic to a fanciful approach in his images of North Africa, and dislocated his hunts from colonial practice to imaginary settings. In all of this late work, O'Brien identifies an emphasis on the sensual qualities of paint and a new expressiveness, which he relates to modernism in the conclusion.

Delacroix engaged the concepts of civilization and barbarism in painting from the beginning of his career, and wrote extensively on the topics in his journal from 1847 to his death in 1863. O'Brien begins with the journal, offering a nuanced reading of the artist's sometimes paradoxical writing on civilization and barbarism, which informs his interpretation of paintings in later chapters. For Delacroix, human beings created civilization, but civilization obeyed the laws of nature. Delacroix often compared the state of nature to civilization; for instance, in the natural condition, "savages," like animals, followed instincts and satisfied needs, whereas civilization afforded life's necessities, leisure time, and creativity. Civilization did have its disadvantages; people often became alienated from their primitive nature leading to ennui. Furthermore, civilization could decline, threatened most often from within by corruption and brutality; Delacroix wrote, in reference to the revolutions of 1848, "recent and very memorable times have shown that the barbarian and even the savage were always living in civilized men" (20). He saw civilization as a developmental process working in all societies, with European civilization at its pinnacle, but he did concede that objects from other societies could have significant power and beauty.

European society existed in the state of modernity, which Delacroix understood, paradoxically, at times as an achievement of civilization, but more often as the embodiment of barbarism. On one hand, he enthusiastically noted useful technology in his journal and profited financially from Haussmann's modernization of Paris, and on the other hand, he attacked the idea of progress, a key element of modernity and civilization. Progress, whether political, social, industrial, or technological, could destabilize society with vile consequences; for instance, he felt industrial progress had destroyed the social fabric, dehumanized people and for creative individuals led to ennui. In addition to social developments, Delacroix also understood civilization to comprise individual intellectual and artistic accomplishments that expanded the classical humanist tradition. The accomplishments of civilization, however, could stifle originality and promote imitation of great artists. In fact, Delacroix felt that he, like Peter Paul Rubens, worked in a time of relative barbarism, but that individual artists could transcend the cultural moment and create great art. Delacroix noted in his journal, "How civilization as we understand it dulls natural feelings" and imagined a return to a more innocent state before the great artistic achievements of tradition (34). Primitivism often became an antidote to the problems of civilization in Delacroix's writing, but the solution to creativity was not "primitive" art for Delacroix. In part, O'Brien compellingly suggests that Delacroix found the primitive in the sensuous nature of painting—color and the touch of the painter, and concludes, "The vague, mysterious sensations caused by the medium itself could

move viewers profoundly, providing something like a transcendent spirituality, or at least an imminent experience of beauty lacking elsewhere in modern life" (39).

Delacroix painted his most expansive statement on civilization and barbarism in the Chamber of Deputies' Library in the Palais Bourbon, where he adorned the ceiling with four pendentives in each of the five cupolas and a hemicycle at both ends of the room. This was art on a grand scale for an elite audience, like Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel or Raphael's Stanza at the Vatican. Delacroix's initial proposal presented civilization as the individual achievements of great men of the West from the ancient to the modern world. Once he received the commission, however, he utterly transformed his initial plan, working spontaneously and unsystematically. In contrast to his proposal, Delacroix's completed work emphasizes his distrust of progress, presents civilization and barbarism as dual and opposing features of humanity and offers allegorical political commentary. In fact, his completed hemicycles depict *Orpheus Civilizes the Greeks* (1845–47) and *Attila and His Barbarian Hordes Trample Italy and the Arts* (1843–47). O'Brien then extends Michele Hannoosh's interpretation of the decorations as exploring the complexities and contradictions of civilization.^[1] He identifies a series of antitheses throughout the decorative program, including nature and culture, masculine and feminine, human and animal, among others, and when these opposites meet, they produce either civilization or barbarianism in an unpredictable manner. He delineates these binaries in a useful chart and explores them in depth in an appendix set up as excellent catalog entries.

Delacroix's subsequent mural projects on the theme of civilization, O'Brien convincingly argues, "moved away from the intensely intellectual, literary mediations on civilization" of the Deputies' Library and focused "on visual appeal and engaging with the history of mural painting" (73). *Apollo Slaying a Python* (1850–51), a general allegory of light against dark, order against chaos, and civilization against barbarism, from the Apollo Gallery in the Louvre, demonstrates this transformation best. Delacroix quoted and mediated figures from Rubens and Paolo Veronese, levitated bodies and created an energetic composition that engaged the gallery's physical space. In fact, the classicist Etienne Delécluze described the design and color of a similar late mural: "painted music in which you cannot distinguish a prominent melody but which pleases the eye through a series of chords that are as learned as they are gracious" (72).

In North Africa, Delacroix found a critique of modernity, and according to O'Brien, shifted from an ethnographic to an imaginative approach as a result of his trip to Morocco in 1832 and the region's changing role in French culture by mid-century. He identifies an ethnographic attitude in drawings from the artist's trip, evident in the scrupulous detail of physiognomies, poses, architecture, clothing, landscape, and accompanying notations, and in paintings like *The Fanatics of Tangier* (1838), emphasizing social practices. In the 1830s, the painter understood North Africans as premodern, something like peoples of the ancient world. Indeed, Delacroix claimed in his journal and correspondence that "this people is all antique" and that North Africa "is something simpler and more primitive" (88–89). Ten years on, however, Delacroix felt that colonialism was destroying this isolated and premodern world. At the same time, Orientalism of the 1840s was becoming less of a departure from French culture than a part of it, as ethnographic images of North Africa proliferated in visual culture and the French settled the region. At this point Delacroix's art shifted from the

dominant ethnographic Orientalism to an imaginative approach, a manner similar to that of Alexandre Decamps and Eugène Fromentin, which permitted an escape from modern life through visual and formal effects. For example, *Arabs Skirmishing in the Mountains* (1863) presents a fanciful image of soldiers charging an enemy, below an unbelievably picturesque castle, in a zigzag pattern and exhibits a decorative use of facture and color with transparent brushstrokes blurring details and enlivening the surface of the canvas. In fact, Delacroix wrote, "I only started to do something passable, with my North African voyage, when I had forgotten the little details in order to recall in my paintings only the striking and poetic side" (106). This late style offered Delacroix and his viewers an imaginative flight from modernity once suggested by a real journey to North Africa.

Delacroix's animal paintings are some of the most brilliant examples of the genre in the history of art, and naturally summarize and expand the artist's reflections on civilization. From 1847, Delacroix concentrated on painting the predatory actions of wild animals or men hunting big cats. In these works, O'Brien persuasively identifies two meanings related to civilization; animals exemplify man's barbaric side that lay just under the surface of civilization and simultaneously represent a positive existence beyond the control of civilization. And through animals Delacroix contemplated a life free from the social constraints of civilization and its product, ennui. He painted his most ambitious animal painting, *Lion Hunt* (1855) now in Bordeaux, for his retrospective at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1855. The exposition itself celebrated modern industry and commercialism, but Delacroix's painting advanced an implicit critique of its faith in civilization, progress, and modernity. Instead, he looked back to Rubens's images of violent and energetic hunts where he saw visual and existential affinities between men and predatory beasts and formal devices of "unrivaled movement, variety, and unity" (130). Inspired by Rubens, Delacroix created a clear geometric composition in which men hunt vicious lions at close quarters with blades and pikes and enlivened the picture with hatched strokes, dramatic contours, and strong color contrasts. "The wild animals, the Orient, the impulsive violence, the transporting formal effects and Rubens," O'Brien observes, "all stood in Delacroix's mind for richly sensual, immediate, all-encompassing, uncogitated experience" (132). His animal painting, however, co-existed with the omnipresence of violent beasts in Parisian popular culture: in zoos, animal shows, images, newspapers, books, and adventure literature. After 1855, Delacroix increasingly distanced his hunts from the colonial context and the real world, emphasizing ridiculous tactics, melodramatic violence, obvious references to Rubens, and progressively idiosyncratic formal elements. For instance, his *Lion Hunt* (1863), now in Chicago, presents strange spatial tensions, at once illusionistic and flat, color to emphasize compositional movement, and anatomical distortions and loose brushwork to convey violence. The formal experimentation of these images offered an engulfing experience that conveyed something of the primitive.

In his conclusion, O'Brien argues for the significance of Delacroix's late style to the grand tradition of painting and to the emergence of modernism, illuminating perhaps the biggest paradox of Delacroix. First, Delacroix extended this tradition, relying on Rubens in particular, and simultaneously marshaled it against contemporaneous European culture. He did this in part through his expressive use of painting's formal elements, the power of which was like the elements of music, to transcend thought and become sensation. Here, Delacroix becomes a transitional figure, embracing "an aesthetic hierarchy based primarily on literary,

philosophical and moral values” and at the same time showing the way to an art “based far more on immediate sensual experience” (153).

O'Brien has produced a significant critical work on Delacroix's painting, ideas, and time. He breaks through the paradoxical Delacroix to decipher a certain consistency of thinking, charts a transformation in his art related in part to modernity, and reinserts Delacroix's importance for the development of modernism. Among other contributions, he expands the discourse on Orientalism, stressing the developing nineteenth-century notion of the genre and Delacroix's divergence from its ethnographic and illusionistic tendencies. His best chapter, which summarizes the major concerns of the book, is his discussion of wild animals and the hunt, at once intellectual biography, formalist art history, and cultural history. O'Brien is particularly skillful at visual analysis, which the book supports with truly excellent color plates laid out perfectly for reference. Also useful are his plan of the Bourbon Library paintings, the accompanying chart of antitheses in the ceiling, and the catalog entries on each of the twenty-two paintings, which could be more useful if figure numbers had been inserted in the text to refer to them. This reviewer would also like a more extended investigation of Delacroix's understanding of civilization before his trip to North Africa and its transformation in his mid to late career, a project admittedly hampered by the relative paucity of quality early sources. Despite these minor criticisms, O'Brien has provided a model for art historians after the cultural turn in the humanities, reinserting a sensitive assessment and analysis of style into the making of meaning.

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Notes

[1] Michele Hannoosh, *Painting and the “Journal” of Eugène Delacroix* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).