Class 7: Romance & Reality

A. Terms & Faces

1. Class title 1 (Hugo and Courbet)

The two French drawings I had on the website, **Victor Hugo** on the left and **Gustave Courbet** on the right, were meant to illustrate a clear dichotomy in French 19th-century culture, between the **Romantic** fantasy of the first decades of the century and the **Realism** that arose in literature and art around the middle of it. But as I have been working on it, I no longer think that this distinction is so clear at all. So I want to launch a dicussion by showing you a bunch of portraits of, or by, some of the people I shall be discussing in the next hour or so. This first section is called **Faces**.

2. Section title A

I reckon you know some of these, but not all. **Chateaubriand** and **Lamartine** are French writers from the beginning of the century; both had a considerable reputation in America at the time. **Lord Byron** is the one Briton in the group. **Delacroix** is the preeminent French Romantic painter, **Berlioz** the leading composer, and **Hugo** equally famous as a novelist and dramatist. But if I hadn't told you or you didn't know, what can you say about these portraits as a group? What qualities do they emphasize? What do these people do for a living? They are all artists of one kind or another, and all from the early Romantic period. Many of them have a kind of devil-may-care quality; you see it most in Chateaubriand and Berlioz, least in Lamartine and Hugo. If you define Romanticism focusing on the artist as an individual, in possession of an active imagination and inner emotional life, which of these portraits gives you the greatest sense of inner passion. We haven't attempted to define Realism-with-a-capital-R yet, but all these portraits are somewhat lowercase-r realistic; they wouldn't work as portraits otherwise. I will come back to all six of these (and others) as the class moves forward.

3. Four Géricault heads

Here is a rather more tricky comparison. All four of these are paintings by **Théodore Géricault** (1791–1824), whom we met in the class on Revolutions. Questions: Are they all portraits? Which is the most realistic? Which is the most Romantic? The self-portrait at left and young man at top right are obviously portraits; the severed head obviously isn't; the one is the middle… well, let's come back to him. All are somewhat realistic, but the severed head is realism and then some, a meticulous depiction of a subject you seldom see painted at all. Which shows the most inner life? That is a hard one. I would answer the man in the middle, because you know something must be going on there, but have no idea what it is. It is in fact one of a dozen paintings he did of inmates at a mental hospital run by a friend; the challenge is to use the techniques of objective realism as a diagnostic tool to better understand what might be going

on inside that disturbed mind. I feel very much the same about the severed head; I find myself wondering what the man might have been thinking just before death; paradoxically, the sense of inner life is strongest when there is no literal life there at all.

4. Théodore Géricault: *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819, Louvre)
5. Géricault: Studies for *The Raft of the Medusa*

Géricault probably painted the severed heads (the original painting has two of them) in preparation for his masterpiece, *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819). Its subject is a contemporary scandal. In late 1816, a French ship, the *Medusa*, carrying a garrison force intended for Senegal, and commanded by an inept political appointee, ran aground in the Mediterranean. The crew put almost 150 people onto a makeshift raft with inadequate food and water; they said they would tow them to port when they got free themselves, but instead cast the raft adrift. The survivors floated at the mercy of the elements for 13 days before being rescued, and in this time all but 15 of the original 150 had died. So here's the question: <u>is this Realistic, Romantic, or something else</u>? It's a hard one to answer, for the picture is obviously highly composed and is a reminiscent of Michelangelo as a charnel-house. The setting, with the towering waves and scudding clouds, is clearly Romantic. Yet the details are realist. Is Géricault making a political statement about a contemporary scandal, or saying something universal about the human spirit? Part of his success is that he is doing both, and keeping both in balance.

6. Five portraits by Courbet

The point I am hoping to make is that Romanticism and Realism are not the polar opposites one might think; the Romantic artist often uses realistic techniques; the real differences are in subject-matter. So let's echo our Géricault gallery from about 1820 with one from around 1850 by the artist most often cited as the arch-Realist, **Gustave Courbet** (1819–77). Five depictions of people. Similar questions to the time before: <u>What can we tell about the people</u>? <u>Which is the most realistic</u>? <u>Which has the most sense of inner life</u>? The three on the top are all self-portraits. In two of them, he seems to be acting a role, or challenging the viewer to take him seriously; the one on the left is the most normal, but even there he makes a point that he wears a very ordinary leather belt, much as though he were a workman. The two below are the writers **Prud'hon** on the left and **Baudelaire** on the right. Note the striking informality of both, in contrast to the first group I showed, where everybody seemed dressed for the occasion.

7. — the two pictures below
8. Leighton: *Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna,* detail (c.1853, London NG)
9. Courbet: *A Burial at Ornans,* detail (c.1850, Paris Orsay)
10. — the two pictures above (repeat)

For the main distinguishing feature of uppercase-R Realism is not accuracy of depiction so much as choice of subject. Here is a painting by Courbet, *A Burial at Ornans* (c.1850, Paris Orsay), contrasted with a British picture of similar scale and layout, *Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna* (c.1853, London NG) by **Frederic, Lord Leighton** (1830–96). I am not sure what is happening in the Leighton; I think the various women are competing to match the perfect proportions of the Cimabue *Madonna*, which is the first picture you see when you walk into the Uffizi. But it doesn't matter; it is an absurd and fanciful costume

drama however you look at it; the bright color and meticulous detail only emphasize its artificiality. Whereas Courbet shows the kind of occasion you would see every day in a village somewhere in France. It has faded and darkened, I'm sure, but it would never have had much color or detail, for these are ordinary people who spend most of their lives in plain black.

11. Import/Export maps

Insofar as Romanticism and Realism are a matter of style, we can look at them in terms of the **Import and Export** categories I have been using all along. For the most part, France imported Romantic ideas from other countries, but it curated and nurtured them, becoming the epicenter of its own Romantic earthquake. It all begins with **travel**, French artists went to other countries, quite frequently to neighbors like Britain, Germany, and Italy, more significantly to America (as **Chateaubriand** did), or to the Islamic world (as **Chateaubriand**, **Lamartine**, and **Delacroix** did, among others). Stylistically it imported Romantic influences from other countries, something of the reflection of Nature we see in, say, **Wordsworth** and **Schubert**, but more expecially the more dramatic Romanticism of **Lord Byron** and **Sir Walter Scott**. And French poets and artists became known abroad, but this is nothing to the later reputation of French **realists** such as **Flaubert** and **Zola**. While I originally intended to devote the same amount of time to Romanticism and Realism, I fear the latter is going to be too hard to handle in a single class, especially as French realism is found mainly in long forms such as the novel.

12. Chateaubriand, Lamartine, Byron, Delacroix, Berlioz, Hugo (repeat)

But it seems to be more than mere style: something existential, some deep psychic need, or even disorder. What was going on with all these guys? Remember the roller-coaster ride of the era in which they came of age: the promise of the Revolution, the collapse of the Revolution, the promise of Napoleon, the departure of Napoleon. Hope had turned to nightmare; these people had whiplash.

13. Le mal du siècle

Chateaubriand coined a phrase, ***Le mal du siècle,*** or roughly "the sickness of the century." It is something that affected young artists of the period who felt too much or thought too much. It gave them a sense of separation from the world, and they desperately sought a means of dealing with it. Chateaubriand, Lamartine, and Byron found quite distinct means of addressing the syndrome. They are the subject of my next section, **Species of Separation**.

B. Species of Separation

14. Section title B (Species of Separation)

Let me explain what you have just seen. Each of these three writers had a different strategy to overcome this sense of separation, or as they called it *ennui.* **Chateaubriand** traveled abroad, first to the Ohio and Mississippi valleys of America and then to the Middle East, and sought among the

supposedly primitive peoples for some ethical principles that would cast new light on the Christian faith. **Lamartine**, like many of the English Romantics, listened to the voice of Nature, which he heard as the echo of his own emotions. **Byron**, on the other hand, looked for something more stirring, more intense, colorful, and theatrical. This is the form of imported Romanticism that found particularly fertile ground in France; I will save it for the second hour, along with Byron's American equivalent—also a huge success story in France—**Edgar Allan Poe**.

15. Chateaubriand and the Chateau de Combourg

François-René de Chateaubriand (1768–1848) grew up in a forbidding old castle in Brittany, his life ruled by a domineering father. One of his earliest works is the semi-autbiographical novella *René* (1802). Feeling disenchanted, he travels to Greece and Rome, then to Scotland, all without avail. He then moves to Paris, but feels more isolated than ever. "Alas, I was alone, alone on the earth. A secret languor was taking hold of my body. The disgust for life I had felt since childhood came back with renewed force. Soon my heart no longer provided food for my mind, and the only thing I felt in my existence was a deep *ennui*." Finally, he goes to the Indian wilderness to live with a native tribe, the Natchez.

16. Chateaubriand and Delacroix: *The Natchez*

This was written at least partly from experience. The real Chateubriand did go to America, between 1891 and 1892. On a trip to the Niagara Falls, he was taken ill and nursed back to health by an Indian tribe. He then journeyed down the Mississippi valley to Louisiana, and across to Florida, before returning to France. He clearly found much simple goodness among the Native American people; for him, it was a refreshing escape from convention. He was too committed a Christian to suggest that their ethos was superior to Christian doctrine, but he tried to reconcile the two in another novella written around the same time: *Atala, or the Loves of Two Savages in the Wilderness.* Atala has been converted to Christianity, and taken a vow of chastity. But when she falls in love with an Indian man called Chatas, the conflict between he vow and her desires becomes unbearable, and she poisons herself. The French artist **Anne-Louis Girodet de Trioson** (1767–1824) painted a celebrated depiction of Atala's funeral. Here it is, with a section of the novella from a Librivox recording.

17. Chateaubriand: *The Funeral of Atala*
18. Lamartine portrait
19. Lamartine: *Isolement,* single stanza with landscape

Alphonse de Lamartine (1790–1869), like Chateaubriand, was born into an aristocratic family. He published his first poetry collection in 1820, and experienced immediate success. Many of the poems are highly personal, reflecting his grief over the death of his lover, a married woman called **Julie Charles**. From tuberculosis the year before. Most of them place the poet before some natural landscape that stirs his sad thoughts but offers no consolation—as in this stanza from a poem appropriatly called *Isolement* (Isolation, or Solitude). Here is the complete poem, read in French by **Lambert Wilson**, with a translation by **Peter Shor** above. The framing music is by **Chopin**, who at this point was virtually French.

20. Lamartine: *Isolement*
21. Chateaubriand and Lamartine
22. Lamartine rejecting the red flag (painting)

Both Chateaubriand and Lamartine were very popular in America in the first half of the 19th Century. Back home, both became politicians: Chateaubriand serving in a number of Ambassadorships, Lamartine becoming briefly Premier of the Second Republic that followed the 1848 Revolution, then its Foreign Minister. You might think that such a melancholy man could be a fiery activist, but here is his famous speech before the *Chambre des Députés,* in which he rejected any attempt to change the French flag to plain socialist red, which would have stood only for the revolution. The art is by **Henri Philippoteaux** (1815–84). The video is way over the top, but I reckon we need a break from sobriety!

23. Lamartine's defense of the tricolor flag

C. Gautier, 1841

24. Three Species of Separation title (repeat)

When I prepared this slide, I thought I would have time for all three Species of Separation in the first hour, but it seems not. So I am going to leave the theatrical qualities of Byron and Poe until after the break, and stay with the gentler kind of Romanticism for the next ten minutes, with two musical works from 1841, both based on texts by **Théophile Gautier** (1811–72).

25. Section title C (Gautier, 1841)

Gautier was a well-educated young man of good, though not aristocratic, family, coming a generation after Lamartine, two after Chateaubriand. He published his first book of poetry in 1830, at the age of 19; precociousness seems to have been a requirement for young Romantics. He was next-door neighbors with composer **Hector Berlioz** (1803–69), whom will feature extensively in our second hour. In 1841, Berlioz asked Gautier for permission to set six of the poems from his fourth collection, *La comédie de la mort* (The Comedy of Death, 1838). Berlioz published these in 1841, under the title *Nuits d'été* (Summer Nights). I am not sure why he chose that title, because almost all the poems are melancholic, sighing after a lost love, very much in the vein of Lamartine.

26. Gautier: *At the Cemetery,* with Friedrich: *Entrance to a Cenetery*

Here is an extract from one of them, called "At the Cemetery." The illustration by **Caspar David Friedrich** (1774–1840), though of the right period, is German not French. And here is the Berlioz setting of the fourth poem, *Absence,* because I find it so beautiful. The singer is **Véronique Gens**.

27. Berlioz: *Nes nuits d'été,* "Absence"
28. Still from *Giselle*

In the same year that Berlioz was setting his poems, Gautier, who was a fanatical balletomane, participated in the creation of what is surely the seminal ballet in the French Romantic Repertoire, *Giselle,* with music by **Adolphe Adam** (1803–56). Its second act is marvelously spooky, and takes us into the more Gothic wing of Romanticism; I may have more to say about it next week. But the opening act is basically a *pastoral*. Giselle is a simple village girl. When Prince Albrecht, bored with court life and his doing-the-expected-thing engagement to a nearby Princess, lets his hair down by disguising himself as a hunstman and visiting Giselle's village, she falls in love with him. I'll play part of their getting-to-know you dance, before the story gets complicated. The dancers are **Alina Cojucaru** and **Johan Kobborg**.

29. Adam: *Giselle,* Giselle and Albrecht
30. Class title 2 (still from *Giselle*)

The ballerina who created the role of Giselle was **Carlotta Grisi**. Gautier fell head over heels in love with her, but she rejected him. So he began an affair with her sister **Ernesta**—extramarital, but it produced two daughters!

D. Romantic Excess

31. Section title D (Sardanapalus)
32. Byron, Delacroix, Berlioz

Two Frenchmen and one Englishman; I'll be juggling them for the next quarter-hour so so. The painting was *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827, Louvre) by **Eugène Delacroix** (1798–1863). The music was **Berlioz** again, one of the few remaining fragments from his cantata on the same subject (1830), with which he finally won the prestigious *Prix de Rome* on his fourth attempt. The subject is by the Englishman, *Sardanapalus* (1821), written for reading, not performance, by **George Gordon, Lord Byron** (1788–1824). These three are my subject for the next quarter-hour. All are examples of a different kind of Romanticism, characterized by blatant theatrical excess rather than gentle melancholy. It was this that especially took root in post-Revolutioary France.

33. Delacroix: *The Death of Sardanapalus*, with Byron quotation
34. — the same, without quotation

Byron's play is about the supposed last King of the Assyrian Empire. Rather than surrender to his approaching enemies, he has a fire built under his throne, then invites his faithful consort to join him on the funeral pyre. Byron's play has the classical grandeur you might expect from, say, **Racine**. It is immense in implied scale, but relatively restrained in detail. Sardanapalus wants his death to be a lesson to "voluptuous princes," but it is hard to imagine anything more voluptuous than the picture Delacroix paints of Sardanapalus himself!

35. Berlioz conducting

Berlioz was a master orchestrator; he wrote the first textbook still pretty much in use. He invented new instruments, and added others to the orchestra, swelling it in size to half as large again as a Beethoven symphony. This cartoon of him conducting probably refers to his *Grande symphonie funèbre et triomphale* from 1840. Here is an excerpt of it, conducted by **Sir Simon Rattle** in Berlin.

36. Berlioz: *Grande symphonie funèbre et triomphale*, excerpt
37. Byron: stanzas from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

Byron lived most of his adult life out of England. His two major multi-volume poems, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1818) and *Don Juan* (1824, unfinished), both involve travels across Europe and around the Mediterranean. His tone generally is cynical and witty—the quality of Romantic Separation I mentioned earlier. Every now and again, though, he hints at what he will seldom say outright, as in this stanzas from Canto I of *Childe Harold.*

38. Quotations by and about Byron

"Mad, bad, and dangerous to know" was how his lover—one of many, of both sexes—**Lady Caroline Lamb** famously summed Byron up. I have chosen the other quotes, all from Byron himself, to show his wit, his revolutionary spirit, and (at the bottom) one of the few other moments where he hints that the human soul is a *terra incognita.*

39. Delacroix: *Self Portrait as Hamlet* (or Ravenswood?, 1821)

The Byronic Hero, a dandyish cynic on the outside, morose and introspective within, is a frequent figure in Romantic art. Here is Delacroix trying on the costume himself in his 1821 *Self-Portrait as Hamlet*—or possibly Ravenwood from Scott's *Bride of Lammermoor*, for **Sir Walter Scott** (1771–1832) was almost as pervasive an influence on European culture as Byron was, as we'll see next week. The main difference between Berlioz and the others, though, is that there was no outside/inside with him. He himself is the subject of many of his own works, and he parades his ambitions, frustrations, and opium dreams right out there for all to see. His *Symphonie fantastique* of 1830, for example, has the subtitle "Episode in the Life of an Artist… in Five Sections." The fourth, my favorite, is call "March to the Scaffold." Here is the second half of it. Just before the end, you will hear the theme that has been associated with the artist all along, a last desperate cry before the blade descends.

40. Berlioz: *Symphonie fantastique,* 4th movement (second half)
41. Thomas Phillips: *Byron in Albanian Dress* (1813, London NPG)

Like his *alter-ego* characters, Byron liked to dress up; here he is in Albanian costume in a portrait by Thomas Phillips (. But this for once is more than posing. Byron visited Greece several times; it features in both *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan*. Greece was then a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire, a country with a proud history now supine and enslaved, as Byron laments in his famous poem "The Isles of Greece."

42. Byron: “The Isles of Greece” (from *Don Juan*, Canto III, read by RB)
43. Delacroix: *The Massacre at Chios* (1824, Louvre)
44. — the same, with detail

But the Greeks did not remain supine much longer. Partly spurred by Byron, the Greek Revolution (aka. Greek War of Independence) broke out in 1822. It would last until 1830, and ultimately succeed, but not before suffering terrible atrocities such as the **Massacre at Chios** in 1822, when Ottoman forces killed tens of thousands of people on this one Greek island. And hearing about it, Delacroix painted the first of his large paintings that show his mature style: *The Massacre at Chios*. Alas, its colors have faded, but it is still an impressive work. The figure of the woman below the horse has become an icon for suffering—but I must say I find that Delacroix's excitement at painting the Turk and the horse above her somewhat compromises his message.

45. Eugène Delacroix: *Greece Expiring on the Ruins of Missalonghi* (1826, Bordeaux)

In 1827, the same year Delacroix painted *Sardanapalus,* he submitted one painting to the Salon. This was a tribute to Byron of quite a different sort, but I need to explain it first. Three times in four years, the Turks had besieged the port city of **Missalonghi** in Western Greece. In between the second and third of these, in 1824, Byron not only funded much needed reinforcements and supplies, but went to join them; he is still revered in Greece today, as a national hero. Above are the final paragraphs of one of his last letters. I don't understand the bit about the milk diet, but it is clear that this is a matter of honor. The Turks resumed their siege; Byron, suffering with the rest, died of fever; and the Greeks, rather than submit to their conquerors, brought the city down on top of themselves in a mass suicide. Hearing of the event, and mourning his artistic hero, Delacroix painted *Greece Expiring on the Ruins of Missalonghi*. Its success was influential in getting the Western Powers to take notice of the situation, and ultimately to come in on the side of the Greeks, winning them independence in 1830. So art *can* make a difference!

46. *Greece Expiring* compared with the *Massacre of Chios*

<u>It is almost unnecessary to compare the two Greek pictures, but let's do so anyway</u>. The later one extracts a very few elements from the first: an indication of death and destruction, the alien overlord, and a prominent figure of a female sufferer—there an old crone, here to a young woman—the allegorical figure of Greece herself. Everything else has been removed. In place of the background vista, we get a sky that might have been painted by El Greco. Truly, it is a masterpiece.

47. Eugène Delacroix: *Liberty Leading the People* (1830, Louvre)

Delacroix was to use an allegorical figure once more, in his now over-familiar painting *Liberty Leading the People*. Specifically, this commemorates the **Revolution of 1830**, which removed the unpopular Charles X and replaced him with the “citizen king” Louis-Philippe, but I think it is also a memorial of the original Revolution. [The central figure, incidentally, was the inspiration for our **Statue of Liberty**, a gift from France.] What most interests me about the picture, however, is what you see if you exclude the allegorical centerpiece. Let's give it a try.

E. A Violent Reality

48. Section title E (ordinary people in Delacroix's *Liberty*)

Do you see what I am getting at? Concentrating the allegory into that one central figues enables Delacroix to be entirely naturalistic everywhere else, commemorating the Revolution as a *popular* event, involving participants of all ages, the ordinary people of Paris. If I were to have shown you this close-up at the beginning, you would surely have labeled it Realist rather than Romantic.

49. Hugo: *Les Miserables,* cover

Although I think Delacroix was also commemorating the original Revolution of 1789, his immediate trigger was the Revolution of 1830. But the July Monarchy which that installed became unpopular in turn, and when General Larmarque, a prominent advocate of Republicanism, died in 1832, young people in Paris launched another uprising, known as the **June Rebellion**. **Victor Hugo** (1802–85) used this as background to the climactic scenes of his great novel *Les Miserables* (1862). Here is the beginning of the sequence in the 1998 movie.

50. Hugo: *Les Miserables* (1998 movie), June uprising
51. Hugo's note to the reader

Near the beginning of this class, we talked of Realism, and distinguished realism of treatment from realism of subject-matter. With Hugo, we get a third: realism of moral concern. He addresses the reader directly several times in the course of the book, as you see—but even if he didn't, it would be clear from the plot that he is constructing a new social morality, based on the lives of ordinary people.

52. Courbet: *The Stone Breakers* (1849, destroyed)

So let's go back to the first great painter of French Realism, **Gustave Courbet** (1819–77). This picture, *The Stone Breakers,* shocked the Paris *Salon* when he exhibited it in 1949; unfortunately, it was destroyed in the fire-bombing of Dresden. But let me ask you: in what ways is it realistic? In treatment, certainly. In subject-matter, certainly again. But in terms of social morality, I am less sure. Did he want affluent gallery-goers to seriously address the plight of the working man, or was he merely trying to get himself noticed?

53. Courbet: *The Painter's Studio* (1855, Paris Orsay)
54. — detail of the above

Courbet mentions moral concerns in the full title of this one, *The Painter's Studio; a real allegory summing up seven years of my artistic and moral life*. It is realistic, certainly. And the left-hand side certainly offers a realistic portrayal of the kinds of people he so often used as his subjects. I am insterested that he said "moral life," though I frankly have difficulty in seeing it. But however self-grandifying this may be, there is no doubt about its originality: an artist's *credo* in paint, one might even say a view into his mind. And *that* concept is Romantic, regardless of its means.

55. Courbet: *Charles Baudelaire* (1848, Montpellier)

The people on the right of *The Artist's Studio* are Courbet's patrons, colleagues, and friends. At the extreme right is a version of his portrait of the poet **Charles Baudelaire** (1821–67) we saw before. This leads me to one further type of Realism and one more French Connection. In 1867, Baudelaire created a sensation with the publication of a collection of 100 poems called *Les fleurs du mal* (The Flowers of Evil). Though far from the vernacular in poetic technique, Baudelaire snatched his subjects from aspects of everyday life that were not normally mentioned in polite society. As Wikipedia puts it: "*The principal themes of sex and death were considered scandalous for the period. He also touched on lesbianism, sacred and profane love, metamorphosis, melancholy, the corruption of the city, lost innocence, the oppressiveness of living, and wine*."

56. Baudelaire: *Les fleurs du mal,* "To the Reader," excerpt
57. Baudelaire on Poe

Now here's the connection. From the middle of the Nineteenth Century to well into the Twentieth, **Edgar Allan Poe** (1809–49) was far more appreciated in France than at home in America. And the person to thank for this was Charles Baudelaire. The two never met—indeed, Poe never visited France, though he set several of his stories there, including *Murders in the Rue Morgue,* often cited as the first psychological detective story. Baudelaire discovered Poe in 1847, feeling him to be an artistic twin; he translated many of his poems, and published several essays on his work. And many other French poets and artists followed Baudelaire's lead. Alas, I don't have time to explore this in detail, so I'll end with two brief clips: a montage of illustrations to "The Raven" by **Édouard Manet** (1832–83) and **Gustave Doré** (1832–83) to the beginning read by **Christopher Lee**, and the trailer for a 2012 movie of *Rue Morgue*. In the Raven illustrations, you will see that Manet treats the subject impressionistically but literally, whereas Doré includes the lost Lenore and numerous angels.

58. Poe: *The Raven*, opening stanzas (montage)
59. Poe: *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, 2012 trailer
60. Class title 3 (Poe in Paris)