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Joyce Carol Polistena, *The Religious Paintings of Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863): The Initiator of the Style of Modern Religious Art*. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellon Press, 2008. xiii+ 318 pp. 12 color plates and 29 black and white figures, preface, acknowledgements, endnotes, chronological list of 220 religious subjects considered to be done by Eugène Delacroix, selected bibliography, index. \$119.95 U.S. (hb); £74.95 U.K. (hb). ISBN-13:978-0-7734-4973-2 and ISBN-10:0-7734-4973-6.

Review by Shaw Smith, Davidson College.

The religious paintings of Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) first came into general discussion at the bicentennial retrospective of his works, *Eugène Delacroix: The Late Work*, in 1998. In the catalogue essay on the subject of the artist's religious works (thirty-three paintings and drawings of religious scenes were shown), Vincent Pomarède laid out Delacroix's growth from a rationalist, yet strongly Catholic family.<sup>[1]</sup> Retreating to his family's ancient abbey at Valmont as a child, inspired from scenes painted by his teacher, Pierre-Narcisse Guérin (1774-1833), and encouraged with church commissions by his friends Théodore Géricault (1791-1824) and Pierre-Paul Prud'hon (1758-1823), the young Delacroix was soon impassioned by Spanish Baroque painting and its display of suffering. In the 1830s, after his ill-received *Death of Sardanapalus* (Salon of 1827), he sought to prove himself against the masters of the Italian Renaissance. Through his official commissions at the Palais Bourbon, for example, he was able to create grand allegorical murals which equated religion with science. In the last half of his life he made many other religious images, including over fifty paintings and the decorative murals at Saint-Denis du Sacrament and Saint-Sulpice, both in Paris.

In Delacroix's *Journal, Correspondence, and Essays*, one finds contradictory expressions about his religion and faith. It is clear that he doubted the existence of an afterlife and questioned the existence of deity. On the other hand, he confessed that "God is within us" (*Journal*, October 12, 1862) and associated God with the Beautiful and Truthful in art and religion. At times he seemed to have a "feel" for religious expression, not simply as a subject within itself, but as a dimension of human agony discovered in the sufferings of Christ. However, the theme of doubt which emerges amidst such juxtapositions of belief and disbelief reveals his suspicions about his family, given the questions surrounding his paternal lineage, and his well-known Voltairean skepticism.

Scholars have been at work on Delacroix's religious paintings for decades. The traditional view has been to see Delacroix's relationship with religion through the rational eyes of the Enlightenment, the aestheticism of narrowly defined modernism, or simply through pessimism and atheism.<sup>[2]</sup> Upon this high altar of secularized scholarship, Joyce Carol Polistena offers her case for his intention, which has been ignored and has "led to the current lacunae in the Delacroix scholarship" (p. 11), to create a modern form of religious art. She announces that she will show the "clear connection between radical nineteenth-century theologies and innovative religious iconography," and how Delacroix's "dynamic religious subjects came to hold transcendent meaning for him," a teleological position without apology (p. vii). She does this through an "analysis of Delacroix's religious paintings, with works by contemporary artists, comparative critical reviews, literature on the theology of the body, and Delacroix's thoughts on the transcendent creative spirit" (p. viii). This is a tall order given the artist's historical persona as a melancholy atheist whose band of intellectual brothers included the anticlerical

Voltaire and the rationalist Diderot, as well as a preponderance of art-historical scholarship which has portrayed him as a modern secularist. But she has succeeded in creating, at the very least, doubt about any one-dimensional reading of Delacroix which is never appropriate for this complex artist and seeker. Indeed, one might say, Delacroix “is well worth a Mass.”[3]

This approach to intention and teleology pairs the examination of intention within a theological context with a teleological interpretation of salvation theology. The latter challenges the atomistic secularism which Polistena sees as having reduced our understanding of modernism. This attention to intention and zeitgeist parallels other recent scholarly efforts at redefining modernism as polyphony, rather than as reductive purity. To support this reading she enlists Charles Baudelaire’s assessment of Delacroix’s “modern style for religious subjects,” (p.vii) and Ernest Chesneau’s celebration of Delacroix’s religious oeuvre which included some 120 pictures and 220 drawings. She points to his relationships with liberal Catholics such as his cousin, the famed jurist, Pierre-Antoine Berryer (1790-1868), and his love of “meditating in churches” (*Journal*, August 29, 1857 cited on pp. 10, 112, 236) while listening to music. There is also the evidence of the artist’s enthusiasm for stories of religious devotion like those by Sister Anna Emmerich (1774-1824) (p. 77). Polistena seeks to correct the “false reading of history that denies a role for religion in cultural history altogether” (p. 13). She rejects that Delacroix thought only of the “randomness of existence,” and sets out to prove a “salvation history” within his system of belief, premised on the acceptance of a teleological model of history.

In chapter one, Polistena masterfully deciphers complicated nineteenth-century religious currents and their political implications for religious paintings. She clarifies the shifting perspectives of the Gallican church, Jansenism, the Ultramontanes and Jesuits which reflected a struggle for power between the followers of the French nationalists at Port Royal and the Roman church. As she warns, these forces cannot always be locked into ideological positions since the Ultramontanes, for example, were not always ultra-royalists. In short, she does fine service in deconstructing scholarly prejudice against religion, almost as if it were a subaltern being in the modern culture of scholarship, by analyzing the fluid nature of ecclesiastical positions throughout Delacroix’s life.

In tracing this history, Polistena indicates how deism and Thomist rationalism appeared out-of-date by the 1830s. These changes were partly due to a rising interest in Spanish Baroque art and in Christian idealism. Such progressive interpretations, along with the mysticism of René de Châteaubriand, and the humanism of German idealist philosophy, recreated Christ as a mystic protector—a view quite different from the one of Christian egalitarianism held by George Sand and contemporary Utopianists. As Polistena demonstrates in chapter two, these ideas transformed the image of Christ into one of the suffering liberator, an image that appealed to Delacroix’s romantic sensibilities. Despite the forces of secularism, religious impulses remained vibrant under the materialism of the Bourgeois Monarchy.[4] Polistena argues that a new wave of religious feeling, often not recognized sufficiently, emphasized the humanistic qualities of divinity as well as the power of the community of believers. The doctrine of the incarnation changed the nature of suffering and became an icon for liberal Catholicism even as believers remained loyal to Rome.[5]

In chapter three, she analyzes specific works by Delacroix which relate to the ordeals of Christ. These works include a group of paintings on the subject of *Christ on the Sea of Galilee*. Unlike Lorenz Eitner’s ground-breaking work on the sea theme of the “open boat” as metaphor of the secular romantic hero, Polistena studies these representations of Christ with a fresh approach to artistic intention.[6] She seeks to prove that Delacroix was creating new Christocentric forms based on the idealism of *Le Vrai*, or the true, the good, and the beautiful, as found in the art of Renaissance artist Raphael and in the writings of the philosopher Victor Cousin (1792-1867). The importance of this analysis is to show how Delacroix was intentionally seeking a new modern religious vocabulary which was not simply consumed in the secular aspects of artistic creation out of atheism, as posited by Stéphane Guégan (p. 86, note 89), or careerism, as thoughtfully outlined by Brigitte Méra.[7] That is, by identifying with the suffering

body, the artist could move the viewer more emotionally, in works such as Delacroix's *Pietà* (1844) with "its excruciating maternal grief" (p. 103).

Polistena links the expression of profound emotion to Delacroix's loss of his mother as well as many of his friends. This, as she says, was not simply melancholy or fatalism, but rather an encounter with the humanized passions of the "solitary suffering hero..." As Baudelaire wrote in his *Salon* of 1846, "The imagination of Delacroix never retreated from the heights of religion" (p. 109). Her fascinating analysis of the animal-like Christ, crawling in the *Agony in the Garden* (1849), witnesses an intensified identification with the suffering hero. At the same time, we are reminded that Delacroix's sketches of wild animals at the zoo of the Jardin des Plantes during this period capture much of the same raw instinctual behavior found in this powerful depiction of Christ.[8]

But there was another important moment in the life of the artist which Polistena marshals for her argument. She targets the year 1847, when the painter underwent a significant change. Having turned fifty and having resumed his daily, introspective *Journal* after an interruption of fifteen years, he traveled to Antwerp where he became enamored of Peter Paul Rubens' religious works. Delacroix's famous trip to North Africa in 1832 in search of "a living antiquity" perhaps served as a model for Polistena when she claims that the Antwerp trip of 1847 was an imaginative spiritual quest, what we might call a "living religious life."

For Polistena, Delacroix's vaunted Voltairean skepticism must be seen as "fluid punctuated by a spurt of sympathy for Catholic ritual" and alongside time spent "in long meditations in churches" (p. 112). This contrast of attitudes is deftly compared in the more traditional murals by Hippolyte Flandrin (1809-1864), "an artist on his knees" (p. 111), at Saint Germain-des-Prés and Delacroix's program of new religious art at the near-by, super-nationalist church of Saint-Sulpice. In this analysis, she combines a new view of the human community which Delacroix had found in writing about the *Last Judgment* by Michelangelo (1837), with the idealism of Raphael's work, some of which had recently been on view at the Panthéon.[9]

The author masterfully ushers us through the litany of critical responses to these Augustinian forms of beauty by outlining the forces of religious thought.[10] Through this changing web, we can see that Delacroix did not simply embrace neo-Thomist views as Jacques Maritain has suggested, but that what Delacroix created were indeed "novel modes of thinking" in search of "essential universal values" for a new modern man (p. 123).[11]

In chapter four Polistena details how this awareness of the passions, found in Spanish Baroque paintings, was also displayed in the works of Prud'hon whom Delacroix had supported publicly. In passionate depictions of the Crucifixion of Christ, which owe much to Prud'hon, Delacroix emphasized how the modern doctrine of incarnation literally personifies human suffering. His longing for human connection, even to the point of suffering, is reflected in Delacroix's own doubts about his family, his concerns about the erosion of paternalist rights, and his belief in family stability as the bedrock of French society. His sense of isolation grew as he saw family and friends die and materialist interests replace family values. As he said, "today, family is a vain word" (*Journal*, June 29, 1854). Here Polistena makes a distinction in her argument from that of others, stating that this ability to move the spectator, which Spector saw as a psychological drama, and Strauber saw as an aesthetic practice like music, is a personal statement of transcendent faith in art (p. 128, note 36).

Shifting from dogma to spiritual imagination, Delacroix transformed the crucified body through the mystic heat of the Spanish Counter-Reformation into the hypostasis of the body in two natures, god and man. In examples of skillful, formal analysis (p. 162 and p. 167), Polistena explains this rendering of the bodies of suffering saints, such as Sebastian, in a way that refreshes our identification with the subject. The painter's artistic and personal union with human suffering is infused within the rippling physical

forms which had been relegated to criticisms of Delacroix's non-academic, gestural drawing style. In these forms he sought new modes of feeling through his struggle with faith. Polistena suggests that, through the religious art produced within these shifting ecclesiastical concerns, truth which is known "solely through reason, could be reasoned through faith" (p. 16).

In chapter five, we see other forms of imagery which begin to emerge from this changing matrix of theology and ecclesiastical reform. The shifting political regimes of nineteenth-century France began the suppression of romantic religious art, in part, through restrictions from the Vatican. These emerging dynamics included the Falloux Law of 1850, which established Catholic schools in France, enforced the Index of Banned Books, and the encouraged the publication of popular religious prints. In addition to the traditional works of dogmatic presentation at Saint Germain-des-Près and genre scenes of folk religion found in the provinces, such "pious prints" represented a system of representation that differed from Delacroix's vision, reflecting commercialism and sentimentalism, a very different kind of religious image (pp. 193-197).

In chapter six, Polistena recasts Delacroix's program in the murals in the Chapel of the Holy Angels at Saint-Sulpice. The three main scenes are *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* and *Heliodoros Driven from the Temple* on the walls and *Saint Michael Vanquishing the Demon* on the ceiling (1849-1861). With a breathtaking vision of the transcendent interconnections between Biblical histories, the works of Raphael, and Delacroix's religious struggle, Polistena gives us thrilling, newly unified readings of the murals. She returns to Baudelaire, who seems to have understood the connections of the Old and New Testament in these "great walls" and a "new angelology" which was based on the French Order of Saint Michael. She interprets the program as a combination of Delacroix's wrestling with Raphael as well as the victory over modern positivism and materialist tendencies, a triumph for both the Gallican and Thomist positions. [12] A contemporary of the artist, Abbé Hurel, vicar of the church of La Madeleine, praised the work precisely because it had, in Polistena's words, "shaken the torpor from religious art" (p. 235).

By seeing the scene of Heliodoros as a chastisement by angels, Jacob as the struggle with angels, and Michael as the combative angel, Delacroix's solitary combat, a profoundly physical act of wrestling with divinity, becomes an act of purification and salvation through the struggle to paint. Delacroix was keenly drawn to this wrestling motif since it is also found in his newly commissioned plaster reliefs of the metopes which derived from the Temple of Theseum in Athens, for his new studio in the Place Furstenberg. Polistena's study of the Saint-Sulpice painting series is deeply rewarding. In particular, she focuses her investigation on the motif of "the heel" as linking the Genesis of the Old Testament with the New Testament book of Revelation, a classical "symbol of vulnerability and perseverance rewarded" (p. 237). The vulnerable heel of the man of the Fall, Adam, is connected to the struggle for redemption in Jacob, Michael, and even the hoof of the horse of Heliodoros. These figures combat to escape the grip of doubt and sin in what Polistena interprets as the claw-like forms of the trees in the landscape.

At this point, combining the evidence of Delacroix's daily religious drawings of early 1862 and *Tobias with Angel* (1863), his last painting, Polistena makes a case for the teleological approach to salvation. This position opposes that of Michelle Hannoosch, and others, who argue that "inconsistency" is in fact Delacroix's goal (p. 243, note 11). Polistena concludes her discussion with Delacroix's poignant 1862 confession that "God is within us." It was reported, that Delacroix on his death bed a year later, affirmed his belief in this spiritual form of *Le Vrai*. [13] One is still left with much evidence that complicates this reading. Would it be possible to see the modern religious painting as a fluid mosaic structure of multiple possibilities, rather than as a teleological absolute?

While she makes an excellent case for Delacroix's religious intentions, there is a very important passage from a letter, written by Delacroix to an ailing George Sand on November 25, 1860 from Champrosay, which needs to be considered. Delacroix, who had just recovered from being ill himself, wrote this dark letter:

“Let us keep well, my dear friend: there are very horrible things in this world, but after all what shall we find beyond it? Night, dreadful night. There won’t even be, according to my sad presentiment, that gloomy limbo into which Achilles, now nothing but a ghost, wandered not merely regretting that he was no longer a hero, but wishing that he was the meanest peasant’s slave, able to feel cold and heat under that sun which, thank heavens, we still enjoy (when it is not raining)...”[14]

Once again Delacroix confronts us with his complexity. While it is perhaps facile to cite any single caveat such as this letter, doubt seems to be a constant of his faith.[15] Given the poignancy and timing of Delacroix’s letter, it would have been helpful for the author to have addressed this particular confession of doubt more specifically.

Secondly, it would have been interesting to hear more about the roles of Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) and Paul Marc Chenavard (1807-1895), the latter of which she mentions as having an “incidental but noteworthy influence” (p. 234) on Delacroix. The proposal for a modern teleology (p. 221) could be strengthened with more attention to a developed comparison with Chenavard’s ideas of *palingenesis*, or a cyclical nature of history. It might also have been helpful to compare Delacroix’s evolving conception of spirituality as he encountered other forms of belief, ranging from table-tipping games to Islam, Judaism, and Protestantism, which he labeled “an absurdity” (*Journal*, October 27, 1854).

Delacroix painted scenes from North Africa which included religious rituals from weddings to funerals which could be usefully compared to Christian representations found in the *Seven Sacraments* by Poussin.[16] Delacroix worked for several years on an article on Poussin (who is not cited in Polistena’s index) that focused on the *Seven Sacraments* and which he finally published in 1853 (also not cited in Polistena’s ample bibliography). That being said, all the above comments, with the exception of the letter to George Sand, are not intended as criticism of her fine work, but as responses generated by it, as with any good book, for further discussion. There are, however, also some very small editing problems of spelling (pp. 31, 112, 211) and the color prints are dark. Moreover, the *Agony in the Garden* (plate 1) was duplicated in the copy for this reviewer.

Polistena’s reading of the Saint-Sulpice murals is a dazzling reformation of our understanding of the Heliodoros. The identification of the Gallicans with the persecuted Maccabees instead of the Romans, as previously suggested by Spector, is intriguing (p. 202, note 29). But the questions surrounding the issue of the Société angélique à Saint-Sulpice need to be addressed, especially since this secret society is one of the most important and useful of French associations with the murals. Finally, her suspicion of “ambiguity as one of the pitfalls of modern life” (p. 255), part of her argument about a teleological salvation history to redeem modern man, could benefit from an exegesis of Delacroix’s *le vague*, “theory of the vague” (*Journal*, January 13, 1857), defined in his never-to-be-completed *Dictionary of Fine Arts*. This idea of incompleteness had many theoretical underpinnings for Delacroix and was an essential part of his aesthetic approach to narrative structures as well as his use of gesture, color, and atmosphere.[17] To compare these two seemingly, but not necessarily oppositional positions, would, I believe, add further credibility to her effort.

The challenge taken on in this book is monumental within the contexts of Delacroix studies and early modernism, and Polistena has done what all serious scholars do. She has forced us to rethink the material and our own approaches to that material. This fine work is richly documented with deep-pocketed and erudite endnotes of religious history. Written in a lively style, Polistena’s analysis of the visual material and primary sources will undoubtedly serve as a guiding light for more debate on this topic. At its best, her book preserves one of the fundamental dynamics of Delacroix, his sense of doubt. Polistena quotes Georges Sand who, in her preface to the 1839 edition to her novel *Lélia* writes “Doubt and despair are the great maladies to which the human race must submit in order to accomplish its religious progress” (p. 21). God may indeed “live within us,” as Delacroix confessed, perhaps as a

Pascalian wager, but does that assuage his undying doubt as he faces the expectation of a “dreadful night”?

## NOTES

[1] Vincent Pomarède, Arlette Sérullaz, Joseph J. Rishel, Louis-Antoine Prat and David Loit, *Eugène Delacroix: The Late Work* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), pp. 265-269.

[2] Most of these authors focused on the works at Saint-Sulpice. They include R. Régamey on the supernatural, *Eugène Delacroix: L'époque de la chapelle des Saints-Anges 1847-1863* (Paris, Renaissance du livre, 1931); Jack Spector, *The Murals of Eugène Delacroix at Saint-Sulpice* (New York: The College Art Association of America, 1967); Jack Spector, “The Vierge du Sacré-Coeur: Religious Politics and Personal Expression in an Early Work of Delacroix,” *Burlington Magazine*, 73 (April 1981):198-296; Susan E. Strauber, “The Religious Paintings of Eugène Delacroix.” (Ph. D. dissertation, Brown University, 1983); Maurice Sérullez, *Delacroix: peintures et dessins d'inspiration religieuse*. (Paris: Editions de la réunion des musées nationaux, 1986); Bruno Foucart, *Le Renouveau de la peinture religieuse en France, 1800-1860* (Paris: Arthena, 1987).

[3] The author has studied this subject extensively: Joyce Carol Polistena, *The Role of Religion in Eugene Delacroix's Religious Paintings: Intention and Distortion* (Ph.D. dissertation, CUNY, 1997); “Reviving Eugène Delacroix's Religious Oeuvre: Romantic Painting and Its Reintegration with Theology,” in *Religion and the Arts* 4-4 (Leiden, NV: Koninklijke Brill, 2000): 517-546; “The ‘Agony in the Garden,’ by Eugène Delacroix,” *The Van Gogh Museum Journal* (Amsterdam: The Van Gogh Museum, 2001):125-135.

[4] As André Chastel and others have noted, even Napoleon could not dechristianize the entire nation, especially since France was “the Eldest Daughter of the Church.” See Chastel's magistral history of the art of France, *French Art* (Flammarion, Paris and New York, 5 vols., 1994-1998).

[5] In this context, the distribution of copies of paintings to the provinces, while the originals remained in Paris, had a temporary, unifying effect on the new Christology (p. 55).

[6] Lorenz Eitner, “The Open Window and the Storm-tossed Boat: An Essay in the Iconography of Romanticism,” *Art Bulletin* 37 (December 1955): 281-290.

[7] Brigitte Méra, “Eugène Delacroix, peintre d'éloquence européenne,” *Revue des Deux Mondes*, June 2005, pp 55-66.

[8] Arlette Sérullaz and Edwart Vignot, *Le Bestiaire d'Eugène Delacroix* (Paris: Citadelles et Mazenod, 2008).

[9] Polistena observed that Delacroix never went to Italy for reasons perhaps related to his competitive attitude toward other religious works.

[10] She does this for the religious voices much as Joseph C. Sloane had first done years ago for the complicated voices of art criticism in mid-nineteenth-century France in his *French Painting Between the Past and the Present: Artists, Critics, and Traditions from 1848 to 1870* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

[11] Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1949) p.132, note 63; cited by Polistena, p. 132, note 89.

[12] Delacroix “grapples” with Raphael as described by Emile Galichon, *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, 1861: 224.

[13] Frédéric LeBlond, “Les Derniers Moments d’Eugène Delacroix, “ *L’artiste* (March 15, 1864), an extract of a letter to Delacroix’s cousin Riesener on August 19, 1865, cited by Polistena, p. 261 and p. 268, note 21.

[14] Jean Stewart, ed., *Eugène Delacroix: Selected Letters, 1813-1863* (Boston?: MFA Publications, 2001) pp. 363-364.

[15] This doubt is shared by his great hero, Michelangelo, in the Italian’s famous admission at the end of his life of an approaching double death: one as a man, and the other, even more dreaded, as an artist, in his poem, “On the Brink of Death.”

[16] For example, these rituals might include *The Offering of Milk*, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nantes, 1837, *The Jewish Wedding*, Musée du Louvre, Paris, 1832-39, *The Fanatics of Tangiers*, Minneapolis Museum of Art, 1838, and *Arab beside a Tomb*, Museum of Art, Hiroshima, 1838.

[17] Delacroix discussed “The Vague” in his *Journal* entry of January 13, 1857 (André Joubin, *Journal d’Eugène Delacroix*, Paris: Plon, 1932, vol. III: pp. 13-14): “There is something from Obermann on *the vague* in my little blue books...How painting is more vague than poetry, despite its form arrested before our eyes. One of its greatest charms.” (Reviewer’s translation)

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