

# HPHP4010 REFRAMING THE WORLD



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IT BEGAN WITH a portent.

They had doubled Cape Finisterre and were sailing south before a fresh wind when a school of porpoises surrounded the frigate. Those on board crowded the poop and the breastwork, marvelling at the animals' ability to circle a vessel already gaily proceeding at nine or ten knots. As they were admiring the sports of the porpoises, a cry was raised. A cabin boy had fallen through one of the fore portholes on the larboard side. A signal gun was fired, a life-raft thrown out, and the vessel hove to. But these manoeuvres were cumbrously done, and by the time the six-oared barge was let down, it was in vain. They could not find the raft, let alone the boy. He was only fifteen years old, and those who knew him maintained that he was a strong swimmer; they conjectured that he would most probably have reached the raft. If so, he doubtless perished upon it, after having experienced the most cruel sufferings.

The expedition for Senegal consisted of four vessels: a frigate, a corvette, a flute and a brig. It had set sail from the Island of Aix on 17th June 1816 with 365 people on board. Now it continued south with its complement reduced by one. They provisioned at Tenerife, taking on precious wines, oranges, lemons, banian figs and vegetables of all kinds. Here they noted the depravity of the local inhabitants: the women of Saint Croix stood at their doors and urged the Frenchmen to enter, confident that their husbands' jealousies would be cured by the monks of the Inquisition who would speak disapprovingly of conjugal mania as the blinding gift of Satan. Reflective passengers ascribed such behaviour to the southern sun, whose power, it is known, weakens both natural and moral bonds.

From Tenerife they sailed south-south-west. Fresh winds and navigational ineptitude scattered the flotilla. Alone, the frigate passed the tropic and rounded Cape Barbas. It was running close to the shore, at times no more than half a cannon shot away. The sea was strewn with rocks; brigantines could not frequent these seas at low water. They had doubled Cape Ponce, or so they believed, when they found themselves in billows; the lead was cast every half-hour. At daybreak Mr Mudgett, ensign of the watch, made out the reckoning upon a broken coop, and judged that they were on the edge of the guano reef. His advice was discounted. But even those unaided in the sea could observe that the water had changed colour; weed was apparent at the ship's side, and a great many fish were being taken. In calm seas and clear weather, they were running aground. The lead announced eighteen fathoms, then twenty afterwards six fathoms. The frigate luffing, almost immediately gave a heel; a second and third, then stopped. The sounding line showed a depth of five metres and sixty centimetres.

By misfortune, they had struck the reef at high tide; and the growing violent, attempts to free the ship failed. The frigate was assuredly lost. Since the boats it carried were not capacious enough to contain the whole personnel, it was decided to build a raft and embark upon it those who could not be put into the boats. The raft would then be towed to the shore and all would be saved. This plan was perfectly well-laid; but as two of the men were later to affirm, it was traced upon loose sand, which was dispersed by the breath of egotism.

The raft was made, and well made, places in the boats were cleared, provisions made ready. At daybreak, with two metres and seventy centimetres of water in the hold and the pumps going, the order was given to abandon ship. Yet disorderly embraced the well-laid plan. The allotment of places was ignored, and the provisions were carelessly handled, forgotten or lost in the waters. One hundred and fifty was to be the complement of the raft: one hundred and twenty soldiers and twenty-nine officers, twenty-nine men sailors and passengers, one

woman. But scarcely had fifty men got on board this machine – whose extent was twenty metres in length and seven in breadth – than it sank to at least seventy centimetres under water. They cast off the barrels of flour which had been embarked, whereupon the level of the raft rose; the remaining people descended upon it, and it sank again. When the machine was fully laden, it was a metre beneath the surface, and those on board so crowded that they could not take a single step; at the back and front, they were in water up to the waist. Loose flour barrels were cast against them by the waves; a twenty-five pound bag of biscuit was thrown down to them, which the water converted at once into a paste.

It had been intended that one of the naval officers should take command of the raft; but this officer declined to come on board. At seven o'clock in the morning the signal for departure was given, and the little flotilla pulled away from the abandoned frigate. Seventeen persons had refused to leave the vessel, or had concealed themselves away, and thus remained on board to discover their fate.

The raft was towed by four boats in line astern, preceded by a pinnace, which made soundings. As the boats took up their positions, cries of *Vive le roi!* arose from the men on the raft, and a small white flag was raised upon the end of a musket. But it was at this instant of greatest hope and expectation for those upon the raft that the breath of egotism was added to the normal winds of the seas. One by one, whether for reason of self-interest, incompetence, misfortune or seeming necessity, the tow-ropes were cast aside.

The raft was barely two leagues from the frigate when it was abandoned. Those on board had wine, a little brandy, some water and a small portion of sodden biscuit. They had been given no compass or chart. With neither oars nor rudder, there was no means of controlling the raft, and little means either of controlling those upon it, who were constantly flung against one another as the waters rolled over them. In the first night, a storm got up and threw the machine with great violence; the cries of those on board mingled with the roaring of the billows.

he attached ropes to the timbers of the craft, and held fast to  
se; all were buffeted without mercy. By daybreak the air was  
ed with lamentable cries, vows which could never be fulfilled  
e offered up to Heaven, and all prepared themselves for immi-  
it death. It was impossible to form an idea of that first night  
ich was not below the truth.

The next day the seas were calm, and for many hope was  
indled. Nevertheless, two young lads and a baker, convinced  
t there was no escape from death, bade farewell to their  
npanions and willingly embraced the sea. It was during this  
r that those on the raft began to experience their first  
usions. Some fancied that they saw land, others espied vessels  
ne to save them, and the dashing of these deceptive hopes  
on the rocks provoked greater despondency.

The second night was more terrible than the first. The seas  
re mountainous and the raft constantly near to being over-  
own; the officers, clustered by the short mast, ordered the  
diery from one side of the machine to the other to counter-  
alance the energy of the waves. A group of men, certain that  
ey were lost, broke open a cask of wine and resolved to soothe  
eir last moments by abandoning the power of reason: in which

ey succeeded, until the sea water coming in through the  
le they had made in the cask spoiled the wine. Thus doubly  
ddened, these disordered men determined to send all to a  
mmon destruction, and to this end attacked the ropes that  
und the raft together. The mutineers being resisted, a  
tched battle took place amid the waves and the darkness of  
e night. Order was restored, and there was an hour of tran-  
illity upon that fatal machine. But at midnight the soldiery  
e again and attacked their superiors with knives and sabres;  
ose without weapons were so deranged that they attempted  
tear at the officers with their teeth, and many bites were  
dured. Men were thrown into the sea, bludgeoned, stabbed;  
o barrels of wine were thrown overboard and the last of the  
ater. By the time the villains were subdued, the raft was laden  
ith corpses.

During the first uprising, a workman by the name of

Dominique, who had joined the mutineers, was cast into the  
sea. On hearing the piteous cries of this treacherous underling,  
the engineer in charge of the workmen threw himself into the  
water, and taking the villain by the hair, succeeded in dragging  
him back on board. Dominique's head had been split open by a  
sabre. In the darkness the wound was bound up and the wretch  
restored to life. But no sooner was he so revived than, ungrateful  
as he was, he rejoined the mutineers and rose with them again.  
This time he found less fortune and less mercy; he perished  
that night.

Delirium now menaced the unhappy survivors. Some threw  
themselves into the sea; some fell into torpor; some unfortunate  
wretches rushed at their comrades with sabres drawn demand-  
ing to be given *the wing of a chicken*. The engineer whose  
bravery had saved the workman Dominique pictured himself  
travelling the fine plains of Italy, and one of the officers saying to  
him, 'I remember that we have been deserted by the boats; but  
fear nothing; I have just written to the governor, and in a few  
hours we shall be saved.' The engineer, calm in his delirium,  
responded thus: 'Have you a pigeon to carry your orders with as  
much celerity?'

Only one cask of wine remained for the sixty still on board the  
raft. They collected tags from the soldiers and fashioned them  
into fish-hooks; they took a bayonet and bent it into such shape  
as to catch a shark. Whereupon a shark arrived, and seized the  
bayonet, and with a savage twist of its jaw straightened it fully  
out again, and swam away.

An extreme resource proved necessary to prolong their miser-  
able existence. Some of those who had survived the night of the  
mutiny fell upon the corpses and hacked pieces from them,  
devouring the flesh on the instant. Most of the officers refused  
this meat; though one proposed that it should first be dried to  
make it more palatable. Some tried chewing swordbelts and  
cartouche boxes, and the leather trimmings to their hats, with  
little benefit. One sailor attempted to eat his own excrements,  
but he could not succeed.

The third day was calm and fine. They took repose, but cruel

added to the horrors already inflicted by hunger and The raft, which now carried less than one half its original ment, had risen up in the water, an unforeseen benefit of ht's mutinies. Yet those on board remained in water to es, and could only repose standing up, pressed against other in a solid mass. On the fourth morning they ed that a dozen of their fellows had died in the night; the were given to the sea, except for one that was reserved : their hunger. At four o'clock that afternoon a shoal of fish passed over the raft, and many became ensnared in the ities of the machine. That night they dressed the fish, eir hunger was so great and each portion so exiguous, that of them added human flesh to the fish, and the flesh being d was found less repugnant. Even the officers began to eat n presented in this form.

was from this day onwards that all learned to consume n flesh. The next night was to bring a fresh supply. Some ards, Italians and Negroes, who had remained neutral g the first mutinies, conspired together with the plan of ring their superiors overboard and escaping to the shore, n they believed to be at hand, with those valuables and ssions which had been placed into a bag and hung upon the . Once more, a terrible combat ensued, and blood washed the fatal raft. When this third mutiny was finally sup- ed, there remained no more than thirty on board, and the ad risen yet again in the water. Barely a man lay without ds, into which salt water constantly flowed, and piercing were heard.

n the seventh day two soldiers concealed themselves behind last barrel of wine. They struck a hole in it and began to k the wine through a straw. On being discovered, the two passers were instantly cast into the water, in accordance with necessary law that had been promulgated.

t was now that the most terrible decision came to be taken. counting their numbers, it was found that they were nty-seven. Fifteen of these were likely to live for some days; rest, suffering from large wounds and many of them

delirious, had but the smallest chance of survival. In the time that might elapse before their deaths, however, they would surely diminish further the limited supply of provisions. It was calculated that they could well drink between them as many as thirty or forty bottles of wine. To put the sick on half allowance was but to kill them by degrees. And thus, after a debate in which the most dreadful despair presided, it was agreed among the fifteen healthy persons that their sick comrades must, for the common good of those who might yet survive, be cast into the sea. Three sailors and a soldier, their hearts now hardened by the constant sight of death, performed these repugnant but necessary executions. The healthy were separated from the unhealthy like the clean from the unclean.

After this cruel sacrifice, the last fifteen survivors threw all their arms into the water, reserving only a sabre lest some rope or wood might need cutting. There was sustenance left for six days while they awaited death.

There came a small event which each interpreted according to his nature. A white butterfly, of a species common in France, appeared over their heads fluttering, and settled upon the sail. To some, crazed with hunger, it seemed that even this could make a morsel. To others, the ease with which their visitor moved appeared a very mockery when they lay exhausted and almost motionless beneath it. To yet others, this simple butterfly was a sign, a messenger from Heaven as white as Noah's dove. Even those sceptical ones who declined to recognize a divine instrument knew with cautious hope that butterflies travel little distance from the dry land.

Yet no dry land appeared. Under the burning sun a raging thirst consumed them, until they began to moisten their lips with their own urine. They drank it from little tin cups which first they placed in water to cool their inner liquid the quicker. It happened that a man's cup might be stolen and restored to him later, but without the urine it had previously held. There was one who could not bring himself to swallow it, however thirsty he might be. A surgeon amongst them remarked that the urine of some men was more agreeable to swallow than that

others. He further remarked that the one immediate effect of taking urine was an inclination to produce urine anew.

An officer of the army discovered a lemon, which he intended to reserve entirely for himself; violent entreaties persuaded him of the perils of selfishness. Thirty cloves of garlic were also found, from which arose further disputation; had all weapons but a sabre not been discarded, blood might have been shed once more. There were two phials filled with spirituous liquor for grinding the teeth; one or two drops of this liquor, dispensed with reluctance by its possessor, produced on the tongue a refreshing sensation which for a few seconds cast out thirst. The pieces of pewter on being placed in the mouth effected a sense of coolness. An empty phial which had once contained essence of roses was passed among the survivors; they inhaled, and the remnants of perfume made a soothing impression.

On the tenth day several of the men, upon receiving their allotment of wine, conceived the plan of becoming intoxicated and then destroying themselves; they were with difficulty dissuaded from this notion. Sharks surrounded the raft, and the soldiers, in their derangement, openly bathed within sight of the great fish. Eight of the men, reckoning that land would not be far distant, constructed a second raft upon which to repose. They built a narrow machine with a low mast and a tattered cloth for a sail; but as they made a trial of it, the instability of the craft proved to them the temerity of their enterprise, and they abandoned it.

On the thirteenth day of their ordeal, the sun rose entirely free from clouds. The fifteen wretches had put up their prayers to the Almighty, and divided amongst them their portion of food; when a captain of infantry, looking towards the horizon, descried a ship and announced it with an exclamation. All cried thanks to the Lord and gave way to transports of joy. They straightened barrel hoops and attached handkerchiefs to the mast; one of their number mounted to the top of the mast and hoisted these little flags. All watched the vessel on the horizon and guessed at its progress. Some estimated that it was coming nearer by the minute; others asserted that its course lay in a

contrary direction. For half an hour they lay suspended between hope and fear. Then the ship disappeared from the sea.

From joy they fell into despondency and grief; they envied the fate of those who had died before them. Then, to find some consolation from their despair in sleep, they rigged a piece of cloth as shelter from the sun, and lay down beneath it. They proposed to write an account of their adventures, which they would all sign, and nail it to the top of the mast, hoping that it might by some means reach their families and the Government.

They had passed two hours among the most cruel reflections when the master gunner, wishing to go to the front of the raft, went out of the tent and saw the *Argus* half a league distant, carrying a full press of sail, and bearing down upon them. He could scarcely breathe. His hands stretched towards the sea. 'Saved!' he said. 'See the brig close upon us!' All rejoiced; even the wounded made to crawl towards the back part of the machine, the better to see their saviours approaching. They embraced one another, and their delight redoubled when they saw that they owed their deliverance to Frenchmen. They waved handkerchiefs and thanked Providence.

The *Argus* clewed up her sails and lay on to their starboard, half a pistol shot away. The fifteen survivors, the strongest of whom could not have lived beyond the next forty-eight hours, were taken up on board; the commander and officers of the brig, by their reiterated care, rekindled in the survivors the flame of life. Two who later wrote their account of the ordeal concluded that the manner in which they were saved was truly miraculous, and that the finger of Heaven was conspicuous in the event.

The voyage of the frigate had begun with a portent, and it ended with an echo. When the fatal raft, towed by its attendant vessels, had put to sea, there were seventeen persons left behind. Thus abandoned by their own choice, they straightaway examined the ship for everything that the departing had not taken and the sea had not penetrated. They found biscuit, wine, brandy and bacon, enough to subsist for a while. At first tranquillity prevailed, for their comrades had promised to return to their rescue. But when forty-two days had passed

without relief, twelve of the seventeen determined to reach land. To this end they constructed a second raft from some of the frigate's remaining timbers, which they bound together with strong ropes, and they embarked upon it. Like their predecessors, they lacked oars and navigational equipment, and possessed no more than a rudimentary sail. They took with them a small supply of provisions and what hope there was remaining. But many days later some Moors who live beside the Saharan coast and are subjects of King Zaïde discovered the vestiges of their craft, and came to Andar with this information. It was believed that the men on this second raft were doubtless the prey of those sea-monsters which are found in great numbers off the shores of Africa.

And then finally, as if in mockery, there came the echo of an echo. Five men remained upon the frigate. Several days after the second raft had departed, a sailor who had refused to go upon it also attempted to reach the shore. Unable to construct a third raft for himself, he put to sea in a chicken coop. Perhaps it was the very cage upon which Mr Maudet had verified the frigate's fatal course on that morning when they had struck the reef. But the chicken coop sank and the sailor perished when no more than half a cable's length from the *Medusa*.

## II

HOW DO YOU turn catastrophe into art?

Nowadays the process is automatic. A nuclear plant explodes? We'll have a play on the London stage within a year. A President is assassinated? You can have the book or the film or the filmed book or the booked film. War? Send in the novelists. A series of gruesome murders? Listen for the tramp of the poets. We have to understand it, of course, this catastrophe; to understand it, we have to imagine it, so we need the imaginative arts. But we also need to justify it and forgive it, this catastrophe, however minimally. Why did it happen, this mad act of Nature, this crazed human moment? Well, at least it produced art. Perhaps, in the end, that's what catastrophe is *for*.

He shaved his head before he started the picture, we all know that. Shaved his head so he wouldn't be able to see anyone, locked himself in his studio and came out when he'd finished his masterpiece. Is that what happened?

The expedition set off on 17th June 1816.

The *Medusa* struck the reef in the afternoon of 2nd July 1816.

The survivors were rescued from the raft on 17th July 1816.

Savigny and Corréard published their account of the voyage in November 1817.

The canvas was bought on 24th February 1818.

The canvas was transferred to a larger studio and restretched on 28th June 1818.

The painting was finished in July 1819.

On 28th August 1819, three days before the opening of the Salon, Louis XVIII examined the painting and addressed to the artist what the *Moniteur Universel* called 'one of those

felicitous remarks which at the same time judge the work and encourage the artist.' The King said, 'Monsieur Géricault, your shipwreck is certainly no disaster.'

begins with truth to life. The artist read Savigny and Corréard's account; he met them, interrogated them. He combed a dossier of the case. He sought out the carpenter from the *Medusa*, who had survived, and got him to build a scale model of the original machine. On it he positioned wax models to represent the survivors. Around him in his studio he placed his paintings of severed heads and dissected limbs, to infiltrate the air with mortality. Recognizable portraits of Savigny, Corréard and the carpenter are included in the final picture. How did they feel about posing for this reprise of their sufferings?)

He was perfectly calm when painting, reported Antoine Bonaparte Montfort, the pupil of Horace Vernet; there was little perceptible motion of the body or the arms, and only a slight turning of the face to indicate his concentration. He worked directly on to the white canvas with only a rough outline to guide him. He painted for as long as there was light with a thoroughness which was also rooted in technical necessity: the dry, fast-drying oils he used meant that each section, once begun, had to be completed that day. He had, as we know, had his head shaved of its reddish-blond curls, as a *Do Not Disturb* sign. But he was not solitary: models, pupils and friends continued coming to the house, which he shared with his young assistant Louis-Alexis Jamar. Among the models he used was the young Delacroix, who posed for the dead figure lying face down with his left arm extended.

Let us start with what he did not paint. He did not paint:

- 1) The *Medusa* striking the reef;
- 2) The moment when the tow-ropes were cast off and the raft abandoned;
- 3) The mutinies in the night;
- 4) The necessary cannibalism;
- 5) The self-protective mass murder;

- 6) The arrival of the butterfly;
- 7) The survivors up to their waists, or calves, or ankles in water;
- 8) The actual moment of rescue.

In other words his first concern was not to be 1) political; 2) symbolic; 3) theatrical; 4) shocking; 5) thrilling; 6) sentimental; 7) documentary; or 8) unambiguous.

#### Notes

1) The *Medusa* was a shipwreck, a news story and a painting; it was also a cause. Bonapartists attacked Monarchists. The behaviour of the frigate's captain illuminated a) the incompetence and corruption of the Royalist Navy; b) the general callousness of the ruling class towards those beneath them. Parallels with the ship of state running aground would have been both obvious and heavy-handed.

2) Savigny and Corréard, survivors and co-authors of the first account of the shipwreck, petitioned the government, seeking compensation for the victims and punishment for the guilty officers. Rebuffed by institutional justice, they applied to the wider courts of public opinion with their book. Corréard subsequently set up as a publisher and pamphleteer with a shop called *At The Wreck of The Medusa*; it became a meeting-place for political malcontents. We can imagine a painting of the moment when the tow-ropes are loosed: an axe, glittering in the sun, is being swung; an officer, turning his back on the raft, is casually slipping a knot . . . It would make an excellent painted pamphlet.

3) The Mutiny was the scene that Géricault most nearly painted. Several preliminary drawings survive. Night, tempest, heavy seas, riven sail, raised sabres, drowning, hand-to-hand combat, naked bodies. What's wrong with all this? Mainly that it looks like one of those saloon-bar fights in B-Westerns where every single person is involved – throwing a punch, smashing a chair, breaking a bottle over an enemy's

ead, swinging heavy-booted from the chandelier. Too much is going on. You can tell more by showing less.

The sketches of the Mutiny that survive are held to resemble additional versions of the Last Judgment, with its separation of the innocent from the guilty, and with the fall of the mutinous into damnation. Such an allusion would have been misleading. On the raft, it was not virtue that triumphed, but strength; and there was little mercy to be had. The sub-text of this version could say that God was on the side of the officer-class. Perhaps he used to be in those days. Was Noah officer-class?

4) There is very little cannibalism in Western art. Prudishness? This seems unlikely: Western art is not prudish about gouged eyes, severed heads in bags, sacrificial mastectomy, circumcision, crucifixion. What's more, cannibalism was a pagan practice which could be usefully condemned in paint while surreptitiously enflaming the spectator. But some subjects just seem to get painted more than others. Take officer-class Noah, for instance. There seem to be surprisingly few pictures of his Ark around. There is the odd jocular American primitive, and a murky Giacomo Bassano in the Prado, yet not much else springs to mind. Adam and Eve, the Expulsion, the Annunciation, the Last Judgment – you can have all these by major artists. But Noah and his Ark? A key moment in human story, a storm at sea, picturesque animals, divine intervention in human affairs: surely the necessary elements are there. What could account for this iconographical deficiency? Perhaps the lack of a single Ark painting great enough to give the subject impetus and popularity. Or is it something in the story itself: maybe artists agreed that the Flood doesn't show God in the best possible light?

Géricault made one sketch of cannibalism on the raft. The notorious moment of anthropophagy shows a well-muscled survivor gnawing the elbow of a well-muscled cadaver. It is almost comic. Tone was always going to be the problem here.

5) A painting is a moment. What would we think was happening in a scene where three sailors and a soldier were throwing people off a raft into the sea? That the victims were

already dead? Or if not, that they were being murdered for their jewellery? Cartoonists having trouble explaining the background to their jokes often give us newsvendors standing by billboards on which some convenient headline is inscribed. With painting, the equivalent information would have to be given in the title: A GRIEVOUS SCENE ABOARD THE RAFT OF THE MEDUSA IN WHICH DESPERATE SURVIVORS, WRACKED BY CONSCIENCE, REALIZE THAT PROVISIONS ARE INSUFFICIENT AND TAKE THE TRAGIC BUT NECESSARY DECISION TO SACRIFICE THE WOUNDED IN ORDER THAT THEY THEMSELVES MIGHT HAVE A GREATER CHANCE OF SURVIVAL. That should just about do it.

The title of 'The Raft of the Medusa', incidentally, is not 'The Raft of the Medusa'. The painting was listed in the Salon catalogue as *Scène de naufrage* – 'Scene of Shipwreck'. A cautious political move? Perhaps. But it's equally a useful instruction to the spectator: this is a painting, not an opinion.

6) It's not hard to imagine the arrival of the butterfly as depicted by other painters. But it sounds fairly coarse in its emotional appeal, doesn't it? And even if the question of tone could be overcome, there are two major difficulties. First, it wouldn't look like a true event, even though it was; what is true is not necessarily convincing. Second, a white butterfly six or eight centimetres across, alighting on a raft twenty metres long by seven metres broad, does give serious problems of scale.

7) If the raft is under water, you can't paint the raft. The figures would all be sprouting from the sea like a line-up of Venus Anadyomenes. Further, the lack of a raft presents formal problems: with everyone standing up because if they lay down they would drown, your painting is stiff with verticals; you have to be extra-ingenious. Better to wait until more on board have died, the raft has risen out of the water, and the horizontal plane becomes fully available.

8) The boat from the *Argus* pulling alongside, the survivors holding out their arms and clambering in, the pathetic contrast between the condition of the rescued and that of the rescuers, a

sene of exhaustion and joy – all very affecting, no doubt about it. Géricault made several sketches of this moment of rescue. It could make a strong image; but it's a bit . . . straightforward. That's what he didn't paint.

What did he paint, then? Well, what does it look as if he painted? Let us reimagine our eye into ignorance. We scrutinize 'Scene of Shipwreck' with no knowledge of French naval history. We see survivors on a raft hailing a tiny ship on the horizon (the distant vessel, we can't help noticing, is no bigger than that a butterfly would have been). Our initial presumption is that this is the moment of sighting which leads to a rescue. This feeling comes partly from a tireless preference for happy endings, but also from posing ourselves, at some level of consciousness, the following question: how would we know about these people on the raft if they had *not* been rescued?

What backs up this presumption? The ship is on the horizon; the sun is also on the horizon (though unseen), lightening it with yellow. Sunrise, we deduce, and the ship arriving with the cabin, bringing a new day, hope and rescue; the black clouds overhead (very black) will soon disappear. However, what if it be mere sunset? Dawn and dusk are easily confused. What if it were the sunset, with the ship about to vanish like the sun, and the castaways facing hopeless night as black as that cloud overhead? Baffled, we might look at the raft's sail to see if the machine was being blown towards or away from its rescuer, and to judge if that baleful cloud is about to be dispelled; but we get little help from the wind is blowing not up and down the picture but from the right to left, and the frame cuts us off from further knowledge of the weather to our right. Then, still undecided, a third possibility occurs: it could be sunrise, yet even so the rescuing vessel is not coming towards the shipwrecked. This would be the plainest rebuff of all from fate: the sun is rising, *but not for us*.

The ignorant eye yields, with a certain testy reluctance, to the informed eye. Let's check 'Scene of Shipwreck' against Savigny and Corréard's narrative. It's clear at once that Géricault

hasn't painted the hailing that led to the the final rescue: that happened differently, with the brig suddenly close upon the raft and everyone rejoicing. No, this is the first sighting, when the *Argus* appeared on the horizon for a tantalising half hour. Comparing paint with print, we notice at once that Géricault has not represented the survivor up the mast holding straightened-out barrel-hoops with handkerchiefs attached to them. He has opted instead for a man being held up on top of a barrel and waving a large cloth. We pause over this change, then acknowledge its advantage: reality offered him a monkey-up-a-stick image; art suggested a solider focus and an extra vertical.

But let us not inform ourselves too quickly. Return the question to the tetchy ignorant eye. Forget the weather; what can be deduced from the personnel on the raft itself? Why not start with a head-count. There are twenty figures on board. Two are actively waving, one actively pointing, two vigorously supplicating, plus one offering muscular support to the hailing figure on the barrel: six in favour of hope and rescue. Then there are five figures (two prone, three supine) who look either dead or dying, plus an old greybeard with his back to the sighted *Argus* in a posture of mourning: six against. In between (we measure space as well as mood) there are eight more figures: one half-supplicating, half-supporting; three watching the hailer with non-committal expressions; one watching the hailer agonizingly; two in profile examining, respectively, waves past and waves to come; plus one obscure figure in the darkest, most damaged part of the canvas, with head in hands (and clawing at his scalp?). Six, six and eight: no overall majority.

(Twenty? queries the informed eye. But Savigny and Corréard said there were only fifteen survivors. So all those five figures who might only be unconscious are definitely dead? Yes. But then what about the culling which took place, when the last fifteen healthy survivors pitched their thirteen wounded comrades into the sea? Géricault has dragged some of them back from the deep to help out with his composition. And should the dead lose their vote in the referendum over hope versus despair? Technically, yes; but not in assessing the mood of the picture.)

So the structure is balanced, six for, six against, eight don't  
 eyes. Our two eyes, ignorant and informed, squintily roam.  
 increasingly, they are drawn back from the obvious focus of  
 attention, the hailer on the barrel, towards the mourning figure  
 on the left, the only person looking out at us. He is supporting on  
 his lap a younger fellow who is – we have done our sums –  
 certainly dead. The old man's back is turned against every living  
 person on the raft: his pose is one of resignation, sorrow,  
 despair; he is further marked out by his grey hair and the red  
 cloth worn as a neck-protector. He might have strayed in from a  
 different genre – some Poussin elder who had got lost, perhaps.  
 nonsense, snaps the informed eye. Poussin? Guérin and Gros,  
 you must know. And the dead 'Son'? A medley of Guérin,  
 Rodet and Prud'hon.) What is this 'Father' doing? a) lament-  
 ing the dead man (his son? his chum?) on his lap; b) realizing  
 they will never be rescued; c) reflecting that even if they are  
 rescued it doesn't matter a damn because of the death he holds in  
 his arms? (By the way, says the informed eye, there really are  
 handicaps to being ignorant. You'd never, for instance, guess  
 that the Father and Son are an attenuated cannibalistic motif,  
 would you? As a group they first appear in Géricault's only  
 surviving sketch of the Cannibalism scene; and any educated  
 contemporary spectator would be assuredly reminded of Dante's  
 description of Count Ugolino sorrowing in his Pisan tower  
 among his dying children – whom he ate. Is that clear now?)  
 Whatever we decide that the old man is thinking, his  
 presence becomes as powerful a force in the painting as that of  
 the hailer. This counterbalance suggests the following deduc-  
 tion: that the picture represents the mid-point of that first  
 sighting of the *Argus*. The vessel has been in view for a quarter of  
 an hour and has another fifteen minutes to offer. Some believe it  
 is still coming towards them; some are uncertain and waiting to  
 see what happens; some – including the wisest head on board –  
 know that it is heading away from them, and that they will not  
 be saved. This figure incites us to read 'Scene of Shipwreck' as an  
 image of hope being mocked.

Those who saw Géricault's painting on the walls of the 1819

Salon knew, almost without exception, that they were looking  
 at the survivors of the *Medusa's* raft, knew that the ship on the  
 horizon did pick them up (if not at the first attempt), and knew  
 that what had happened on the expedition to Senegal was a  
 major political scandal. But the painting which survives is the  
 one that outlives its own story. Religion decays, the icon  
 remains; a narrative is forgotten, yet its representation still  
 magnetizes (the ignorant eye triumphs – how galling for the  
 informed eye). Nowadays, as we examine 'Scene of Shipwreck',  
 it is hard to feel much indignation against Hugues Duroy de  
 Chaumareys, captain of the expedition, or against the minister  
 who appointed him captain, or the naval officer who refused to  
 skipper the raft, or the sailors who loosed the tow-ropes, or the  
 soldiery who mutinied. (Indeed, history democratizes our sym-  
 pathies. Had not the soldiers been brutalized by their wartime  
 experiences? Was not the captain a victim of his own pampered  
 upbringing? Would we bet on ourselves to behave heroically in  
 similar circumstances?) Time dissolves the story into form,  
 colour, emotion. Modern and ignorant, we reimagine the story:  
 do we vote for the optimistic yellowing sky, or for the grieving  
 greybeard? Or do we end up believing both versions? The eye  
 can flick from one mood, and one interpretation, to the other: is  
 this what was intended?

8a) He very nearly painted the following. Two oil studies of  
 1818, which in composition are closest of any preparatory  
 sketches to the final image, show this significant difference: the  
 vessel which is being hailed is much closer. We can see its  
 outline, sails and masts. It is in profile, on the extreme right of  
 the canvas, and has just begun a painful voyage across the  
 painted horizon. It has clearly not yet seen the raft. The impact  
 of these preliminary sketches is more active, kinetic: we feel as if  
 the frantic waving by those on the raft might have some effect  
 over the next few minutes, and that the picture, instead of being  
 an instant of time, propels itself into its own future, asking the  
 question, Will the ship sail off the edge of the canvas without  
 seeing the raft? In contrast, the final version of 'Shipwreck' is

ss active, offers a less articulated question. The signalling seems more futile, and the hazard on which the survivors' fate depends more terrifying. What is their chance of rescue? A drop in the ocean.

He was eight months in his studio. Around this time he drew self-portrait, from which he stares out at us with the sullen, rather suspicious gaze that painters often assume when faced by mirror; guiltily, we assume that the disapproval is aimed at us, whereas in fact it is mostly directed back at the sitter. His beard short, and a tasselled Greek cap covers his shorn hair (we only hear of it being cropped when he began the picture, but hair grows a long way in eight months: how many extra trims did he need?). He strikes us as a piratical figure, determined and ferocious enough to take on, to board his enormous Shipwreck. The width of his brushes, by the way, was surprising. From the breadth of his manner, Montfort supposed that Géricault used very thick brushes; yet they were small compared to those of other artists. Small brushes, and heavy, fast-drying oils.

We must remember him at work. It is a normal temptation to schematize, reducing eight months to a finished picture and a series of preliminary sketches; but we must resist this. He is tallish, strong and slender, with admirable legs which were compared to those of the ephebe restraining the horse in the centre of his 'Barberi Race'. Standing before the Shipwreck, he works with an intensity of concentration and a need for absolute silence: the scratch of a chair was enough to break the invisible bread between eye and brush-tip. He is painting his large figures directly on to the canvas with only an outline drawing for assistance. When the work is half done it looks like a row of sculptures hanging on a white wall.

We must remember him in the confinement of his studio, at work, in motion, making mistakes. When we know the final result of his eight months, his progress towards it seems irresistible. We start with the masterpiece and work backwards through the discarded ideas and near-misses; but for him the discarded ideas began as excitements, and he saw only at the very

end what we take for granted at the beginning. For us the conclusion was inevitable; not for him. We must try to allow for hazard, for lucky discovery, even for bluff. We can only explain it in words, yet we must also try to forget words. A painting may be represented as a series of decisions labelled 1) to 8a), but we should understand that these are just the annotations of feeling. We must remember nerves and emotions. The painter isn't carried fluently downstream towards the sunlit pool of that finished image, but is trying to hold a course in an open sea of contrary tides.

Truth to life, at the start, to be sure; yet once the process gets under way, truth to art is the greater allegiance. The incident never took place as depicted; the numbers are inaccurate; the cannibalism is reduced to a literary reference; the Father and Son group has the thinnest documentary justification, the barrel group none at all. The raft has been cleaned up as if for the state visit of some queasy-stomached monarch: the strips of human flesh have been housewifed away, and everyone's hair is as sleek as a painter's new-bought brush.

As Géricault approaches his final image, questions of form predominate. He pulls the focus, crops, adjusts. The horizon is raised and lowered (if the hailing figure is below the horizon, the whole raft is gloomily engulfed by the sea; if he breaks the horizon, it is like the raising of hope). Géricault cuts down the surrounding areas of sea and sky, hurling us on to the raft whether we like it or not. He stretches the distance from the shipwrecked to the rescuing vessel. He readjusts the positions of his figures. How often in a picture do so many of the chief participants have their backs to the spectator?

And what splendidly muscular backs they are. We feel embarrassed at this point, yet we shouldn't be. The naïve question often proves to be the central one. So go on, let's ask. *Why do the survivors look so healthy?* We admire the way Géricault sought out the *Medusa's* carpenter and had him build a scale model of the raft . . . but . . . but if he bothered to get the raft right, why couldn't he do the same with its inhabitants? We can understand why he fiddled the hailing figure into a separate

vertical, why he added some supernumerary corpses to assist the formal structure. But why does everyone – even the corpses – look so muscled, so . . . healthy? Where are the wounds, the scars, the haggardness, the disease? These are men who have drunk their own urine, gnawed the leather from their hats, consumed their own comrades. Five of the fifteen did not survive their rescue very long. So why do they look as if they have just come from a body-building class?

When television companies make drama-docs about concentration camps, the eye – ignorant or informed – is always drawn to those pyjamaed extras. Their heads may be shaven, their shoulders hunched, all nail varnish removed, yet still they throb with vigour. As we watch them queue on screen for a bowl of gruel into which the camp guard contemptuously spits, we imagine them offscreen gorging themselves at the catering van. Does 'Scene of Shipwreck' prefigure this anomaly? With some painters we might pause and wonder. But not with Géricault, the portrayer of madness, corpses and severed heads. He once stopped a friend in the street who was yellow with jaundice and told him how handsome he was looking. Such an artist would hardly shrink from flesh at the limit of its endurance.

So let's imagine something else he didn't paint – 'Scene of Shipwreck' with the casting redistributed among the emaciated. Shrivelled flesh, suppurating wounds, Belsen cheeks: such details would move us, without trouble, to pity. Salt water would gush from our eyes to match the salt water on the canvas. But this would be precipitate: the painting would be acting on us too directly. Withered castaways in tattered rags are in the same emotional register as that butterfly, the first impelling us to an easy desolation as the second impels us to an easy consolation. The trick is not hard to work.

Whereas the response Géricault seeks is one beyond mere pity and indignation, though these emotions might be picked up *en route* like hitchhikers. For all its subject-matter, 'Scene of Shipwreck' is full of muscle and dynamism. The figures on the raft are like the waves: beneath them, yet also through them surges the energy of the ocean. Were they painted in lifelike

exhaustion they would be mere dribbles of spume rather than formal conduits. For the eye is washed – not teased, not persuaded, but tide-rugged – up to the peak of the hailing figure, down to the trough of the despairing elder, across to the recumbent corpse front right who links and leaks into the real tides. It is because the figures are sturdy enough to transmit such power that the canvas unlooses in us deeper, submarinous emotions, can shift us through currents of hope and despair, elation, panic and resignation.

What has happened? The painting has slipped history's anchor. This is no longer 'Scene of Shipwreck', let alone 'The Raft of the Medusa'. We don't just imagine the ferocious miseries on that fatal machine; we don't just become the sufferers. They become us. And the picture's secret lies in the pattern of its energy. Look at it one more time: at the violent waterspout building up through those muscular backs as they reach for the speck of the rescuing vessel. All that straining – to what end? There is no formal response to the painting's main surge, just as there is no response to most human feelings. Not merely hope, but any burdensome yearning: ambition, hatred, love (especially love) – how rarely do our emotions meet the object they seem to deserve? How hopelessly we signal; how dark the sky; how big the waves. We are all lost at sea, washed between hope and despair, hailing something that may never come to rescue us. Catastrophe has become art; but this is no reducing process. It is freeing, enlarging, explaining. Catastrophe has become art: that is, after all, what it is for.

And what of that earlier catastrophe, the Flood? Well, the iconography of officer-class Noah begins as we might imagine. For the first dozen or more Christian centuries the Ark (usually represented as a mere box or sarcophagus to indicate that Noah's salvation was a premonstration of Christ's escape from his sepulchre) appears widely in illuminated manuscripts, stained-glass windows, cathedral sculpture. Noah was a very popular fellow: we can find him on the bronze doors of San Zeno in Verona, on Nîmes cathedral's west façade and Lincoln's east; he sails into fresco at the Campo Santo in Pisa and Santa Maria

Novella in Florence; he anchors in mosaic at Monreale, the baptistery in Florence, St Mark's in Venice.

But where are the great paintings, the famous images that these are leading up to? What happens – does the Flood dry up? Not exactly; but the waters are diverted by Michelangelo. In theistine Chapel the Ark (now looking more like a floating stand than a ship) for the first time loses its compositional re-eminence; here it is pushed right to the back of the scene. What fills the foreground are the anguished figures of those doomed antediluvians left to perish when the chosen Noah and his family were saved. The emphasis is on the lost, the abandoned, the discarded sinners, God's detritus. (Should we allow ourselves to postulate Michelangelo the rationalist, moved by pity to subtle condemnation of God's heartlessness? Or Michelangelo the pious, fulfilling his papal contract and showing us what might happen if we failed to mend our ways? Perhaps the decision was purely aesthetic – the artist preferring the contorted bodies of the damned to yet another dutiful presentation of yet another wooden Ark.) Whatever the reason, Michelangelo reoriented – and revitalized – the subject. Baldassare Peruzzi followed him, Raphael followed him; painters and illustrators increasingly concentrated on the forsaken rather than the saved. And as this innovation became a tradition, the Ark itself sailed further and further away, retreating towards the horizon just as the *Argus* did when Géricault was approaching his final image. The wind continues to blow, and the tides to run: the Ark eventually reaches the horizon, and disappears over it. In Poussin's 'The Deluge' the ship is nowhere to be seen; all we are left with is the tormented group of non-swimmers first brought to prominence by Michelangelo and Raphael. Old Noah has sailed out of art history.

Three reactions to 'Scene of Shipwreck':

a) Salon critics complained that while they might be familiar with the events the painting referred to, there was no internal evidence from which to ascertain the nationality of the victims, the skies under which the tragedy was taking place, or the date

at which it was all happening. This was, of course, the point.

b) Delacroix in 1855 recalled his reactions nearly forty years earlier to his first sight of the emerging Medusa: 'The impression it gave me was so strong that as I left the studio I broke into a run, and kept running like a madman all the way back to the rue de la Planche where I then lived, at the far end of the faubourg Saint-Germain.'

c) Géricault, on his death-bed, in reply to someone who mentioned the painting: 'Bah, une vignette!'

And there we have it – the moment of supreme agony on the raft, taken up, transformed, justified by art, turned into a sprung and weighted image, then varnished, framed, glazed, hung in a famous art gallery to illuminate our human condition, fixed, final, always there. Is that what we have? Well, no. People die; rafts rot; and works of art are not exempt. The emotional structure of Géricault's work, the oscillation between hope and despair, is reinforced by the pigment: the raft contains areas of bright illumination violently contrasted with patches of the deepest darkness. To make the shadow as black as possible, Géricault used quantities of bitumen to give him the shimmeringly gloomy black he sought. Bitumen, however, is chemically unstable, and from the moment Louis XVIII examined the work a slow, irreparable decay of the paint surface was inevitable. 'No sooner do we come into this world', said Flaubert, 'than bits of us start to fall off.' The masterpiece, once completed, does not stop: it continues in motion, downhill. Our leading expert on Géricault confirms that the painting is 'now in part a ruin'. And no doubt if they examine the frame they will discover woodworm living there.

it/I thought so once and now I know it'. Beesley's case offered corroboration: the hero of the *Titanic* was a blanket-forged and transvestite imposter; how just and appropriate, therefore, that I fed him false cricket scores. And on a wider scale, theorists maintained that life amounted to the survival of the fittest: did not the Beesley hypothesis prove that the 'fittest' were merely the most cunning? The heroes, the solid men of yeoman virtue, the good breeding stock, even the captain (especially the captain!) – they all went down nobly with the ship; whereas the cowards, the panickers, the deceivers found reasons for skulking in a lifeboat. Was this not deft proof of how the human gene-pool was constantly deteriorating, how bad blood drove out good?

Lawrence Beesley made no mention of female dress in his book *The Loss of the Titanic*. Installed at a Boston residential club by the American publishers Houghton Mifflin, he wrote the account in six weeks; it came out less than three months after the sinking it describes, and has been reprinted at intervals ever since. It made Beesley one of the best-known survivors of the disaster, and for fifty years – right up to the time I met him – he was regularly consulted by maritime historians, film researchers, journalists, souvenir hunters, bores, conspiracy theorists and vexatious litigants. When other ships were sunk by icebergs he would be telephoned by newsmen eager for him to imagine the fate of the victims.

Forty or so years after his escape he was engaged as a consultant on the film *A Night to Remember*, made at Pinewood. Much of the movie was shot after dark, with a half-size replica of the vessel poised to sink into a sea of ruckled black velvet. Beesley watched the action with his daughter on several successive evenings, and what follows is based upon the account she gave to me. Beesley was – not surprisingly – intrigued by the reborn and once-again-teetering *Titanic*. In particular, he was keen to be among the extras who despairingly crowded the rail as the ship went down – keen, you could say, to undergo in fiction an alternative version of history. The film's director was equally determined that this consultant who lacked the neces-

sary card from the actors' union should not appear on celluloid. Beesley, adept in any emergency, counterfeited the pass required to let him board the facsimile *Titanic*, dressed himself in period costume (can echoes prove the truth of the thing being echoed?) and installed himself among the extras. The film lights were turned on and the crowd briefed about their imminent deaths in the ruckled black velvet. Right at the last minute, as the cameras were due to roll, the director spotted that Beesley had managed to insinuate himself to the ship's rail; picking up his megaphone, he instructed the amateur imposter kindly to disembark. And so, for the second time in his life, Lawrence Beesley found himself leaving the *Titanic* just before it was due to go down.

Being a violently-educated eighteen-year-old, I was familiar with Marx's elaboration of Hegel: history repeats itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. But I had yet to come across an illustration of this process. Years later I have still to discover a better one.

## II

WHAT WAS JONAH doing inside the whale in the first place? It's a fishy story, as you might expect.

It all began when God instructed Jonah to go and preach against Nineveh, a place which, despite God's substantial record of annihilating wicked cities, was still – obstinately, unaccountably – a wicked city. Jonah, disliking the task for unexplained reasons which might have had something to do with a fear of being stoned to death by the partying Ninevites, ran away. At Joppa he embarked on a boat to the farthest end of the known world: Tarshish, in Spain. He failed to understand, of course, that the Lord knew exactly where he was, and what's more had operative control over the winds and waters of the



The effect of  
information  
& reading  
on how we  
see the  
picture