



DARK ROMANTICISM

From Goya to Max Ernst

Edited by Felix Krämer

Texts by Roland Borgards, Ingo Borges, Claudia Dillmann, Dorothee Gerken,
Johannes Grave, Mareike Hennig, Hubertus Kohle, Felix Krämer, Franziska
Lentzsch, Alexander Meier-Dörzenbach, Manuela B. Mena Marqués, Nerina
Santorius, and Claudia Wagner

**HATJE
CANTZ**

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UNCANNY IMAGES

THE “NIGHT SIDES” OF THE VISUAL ARTS AROUND 1800

Johannes Grave

Under the Spell of Medusa

Despite the Enlightenment, must the early days of modernity be considered a dark era? For all the sense of a new dawn and optimism about the future, which was repeatedly expressed around 1800, it is hardly possible to overlook the fundamental ambiguities and vexations that were emerging in all spheres of life. Although the programmatic metaphor of light seemed to guide an entire epoch—called the *Aufklärung* in German, the Enlightenment in English, and the *siècle des Lumières* in French—“night thoughts” (Edward Young) and “night sides” (Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert), nevertheless, forced their way into consciousness. Frequently the Enlightenment project itself directed attention to abysses which were initially unnoticed. In an attempt to explore the hidden realms of the human mind, pioneers of *Erfahrungsseelenkunde* (empirical psychology) found themselves confronted with an all-but-unmanageable abundance of psychological pathologies. Early psychology inevitably revealed that the uncanny and demonic had their true home in the human subject. Ambivalences also emphatically attracted attention in aesthetics and politics. The beautiful, which had previously generally been regarded as indisputably the highest goal of art, was now joined by the sublime as an aesthetic category in its own right. And the concern with providing a new foundation guided by reason for living together in society in the wake of the French Revolution led, within a few years, to the “Grand Terreur,” a reign of horrors of almost unthinkable brutality. As diverse these developments may have been, it nevertheless seems logical that the gloomy and unfathomable, that scenes of violence and madness should increasingly find their way into works of literature and the visual arts in the decades around 1800.

Mario Praz described this penchant for the dark and demonic in detail as early as 1930, in *La carne, la morte e il diavolo* (translated into English as *The Romantic Agony* in 1933). When the German translation was published in 1963 as *Liebe, Tod und Teufel*, the influential subtitle *Die schwarze Romantik* (Dark Romanticism) was added to sum up the remarkable, vexing presence of the horrible, uncanny, and pathological that at least since the early nineteenth century was no longer encountered solely on the margins of literature.¹ When we are faced with the works Praz cited to unfold his impressive panorama of this Dark Romanticism, the idea suggests that the emergence of all such gloomy and dark aspects should be understood as a phenomenon of Romanticism. The Italian literary scholar identified Gothic novels of the early English Romantics as one of the origins of this development, which was manifested especially impressively in the tales of Ludwig Tieck and E.T.A. Hoffmann and the works of the Marquis de Sade, Lord Byron, Edgar Allan Poe, and Gérard de Nerval. At first glance, the formulation Dark Romanticism may thus sound like a label for a clearly distinct era or literary movement. It almost seems as if it could harness all the distressing aspects of the uncanny and frightful that have haunted literature and art since the late eighteenth century. Was it perhaps just a passing fashion, a nervous exaggeration of Romanticism, a “fancy,” as people would have said at the time?

The very abundance of the examples Praz cites suggests something else. His Dark Romanticism is not simply an offshoot of Romantic art and literature, nor can the phenomenon be reduced to an attitude motivated purely by aesthetics. The subjects articulated in the works Praz classified as part of this phenomenon go deeper and touch on fundamental problems. Dark Romanticism is—if one takes it seriously and does not dismiss it premature-

ly as a marginal phenomenon in the history of literature—an early modern expression of the same tensions and contradictions that Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer sought to document in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.²

The distressing fascination that radiates from the unfathomable, uncanny, and frightful has had a lasting influence on visual culture since the late eighteenth century, as is already evident from the boom in eerie, nocturnal depictions. If such subjects were limited to the works of a few painters in the Baroque age, they obtained a previously inconceivable significance around 1800. Francisco de Goya, Henry Fuseli, William Blake, John Martin, Thomas Cole, Eugène Delacroix, and Carl Blechen granted a strikingly large amount of room for darkness in their works. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that they employed material and motifs in their work that also gave wing to the imagination of writers. Witches, ghosts, and lunatics populated their paintings; depictions of shipwrecks and violent acts become increasingly common as do depictions of dream images and apocalyptic visions; and familiar themes from the Bible or ancient mythology are increasingly joined by dark, sometimes brutal scenes from the Nibelungen saga, Shakespeare's dramas, or Goethe's *Faust*. In contrast to what the emphasis of Praz's classical presentation of the subject suggests, literature was not solely responsible for exploring such difficult to grasp phenomena as the unfathomable, the dark, and the frightful for which Dark Romanticism stands.

The painting of the decades around 1800 does not simply mirror the themes also treated in stories, poems, and other literary texts. Rather, the visual depictions of the diverse night sides of Romanticism are even more profoundly and fundamentally intertwined with their subject. For at the center of many depictions of the uncanny and frightening stand images or gazes. Just how doubtful and dubious the relationship between the image and the viewer becomes around 1800 can already be sensed from Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci," which Praz cites at the beginning of his study.³ Shelley adopts from ancient myth the captivating, deadly gaze of the head of the Gorgon, which invites the viewer into a fateful exchange of gazes. For the English poet, it is not so much the horror as the unfathomable beauty of Medusa to which the viewer is exposed. Very much in keeping with the ancient myth, gazing into the face ends with the viewer turning into stone. Yet, the poem does not restrict itself to the retelling the Medusa myth. Through its title and the addition, "in the Florentine Gallery," it unmistakably indicates that it is an ekphrasis of a painting. What seems initially to serve simply as a reference to a specific model—which today is attributed instead to a Flemish master from the early seventeenth century (fig. 1)—raises a new question: Does the uncanny effect of Medusa's gaze also seize the viewers who are merely looking at a painted depiction? Shelley's poem suggests such a supposition, and by so doing, breaks with one aspect of the ancient narrative. Whereas in the myth it was claimed that Perseus would not be affected by seeing the gaze of the Gorgon in a mirror, now even the image of Medusa, and not just the Gorgon's head itself, seems to pose an existential threat. Shelley speaks explicitly of "the lineaments of that dead face," which are graven on "the gazer's spirit" which has been turned to stone.⁴ Two motifs already occur in his poem that would become increasingly important after the turn to the nineteenth century: fear for the intactness of one's own gaze, and awareness of the fathomless power of images, which can seem to become the living counterpart of the viewer.

If gazes in literature were already capable of causing disquiet, that is all the more true of their visual depiction. For paintings, drawings, and prints not only graphically depict that which can also be found in literature, but they also address the sensory organ that seems to be at once particularly deceptive and threatened: the eye. An inquiry into the "night sides" in the visual arts need not be limited to a history of motifs that assembles depictions of the uncanny, demonic, or terrifying. Very much in that spirit, the following reflections refrain from describing a clearly outlined development in the history of art that would parallel Praz's Dark Romanticism in the history of literature. The focus of the discussion that follows will, however, be on the question of how the visual arts in the decades

Fig. 1
Flemish master, *Head of the Medusa*,
ca. 1610–20, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence



around 1800 employed its own means to approach the uncanny, the frightful, and the dark. It will discuss, above all, how images and gazes become powerful factors in the unfathomable activity around which the literature of Dark Romanticism also revolved.

The Unbridled Imagination

The fact that images have to be assigned a unique role when exploring “night sides” is already suggested by all the depictions of apparitions, visions, and nightmares. Around 1800, dream images of all sorts find their way into paintings, drawings, and prints in unprecedented numbers. We encounter ghostly and shadowy phenomena in the work of artists as different as Goya and Delacroix, but also Caspar David Friedrich and Carl Blechen.⁵ The presence of such dream images take on almost obsessive features in the paintings and drawings of Fuseli.⁶ Scenes from Shakespeare’s dramas, from John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, but also from the *Nibelungen* saga served the Swiss artist living in London as welcome occasions to depict an extraordinarily large number of witches, fairies, phantoms, and ghosts. In his penchant for such materials, he was by no means an isolated case; one could also think of George Romney or Fuseli’s student Theodor von Holst. But Fuseli also pursued the depiction of nocturnal dream images independently of any literary inspiration. Among his more impressive, fantastic creations are his paintings titled *The Nightmare*: depictions of an oppressive nightmare taking hold of a sleeping girl. Possible literary sources have been proposed for both versions, from 1781 (fig. 2, p. 16) and 1790–91 (cat. no. 23), in particular, Fuseli may have found inspiration in Thomas Middleton’s drama *The Witch* of 1616.⁷ But neither of his paintings can be said to be simply an illustration of the text; rather, they testify to a fundamental reflection on the essence of dream images. For on closer inspection it is unclear how the ghostly horse and the incubus sitting on the pit of the young woman’s stomach relate to their victim. It is obvious that the painting depicts neither simply the woman plagued by the nightmare nor just the eerie dream itself. The reality of the sleeping woman and her dream image fuse in a way that also causes the viewers to shudder. They may imagine themselves to be at a safe distance from the event depicted, but their gazes threaten to take on voyeuristic qualities, as suggested by the eyes of the incubus and the horse’s head. The spookily empty and yet strangely luminous eyeballs of the horse illustrate that such a gaze no longer testifies to rational control and mastery. The gaze itself seems to become a source

of violence and horror. Fuseli's *Nightmare* thus does not simply illustrate the transgression of the boundary between reality and fiction characteristic of the dream image. Rather, the painting also makes clear that we can no longer find a secure, external standpoint from which we could view, as a supposedly uninvolved party, the inherent dynamic of dreamlike manifestations.

A comparably gripping interplay of reality and the monstrous products of fantasy, between reason and the imagination runs through the *Caprichos* of Francisco de Goya (cat. nos. 3–6).⁸ Effronteries of the sort we encounter in plate 45, with the caption *There Is Plenty to Suck* (cat. no. 6), or plate 68 (cat. no. 5), only seem bearable if we evaluate them as aberrations of the imagination and disassociate them from our everyday perception. Indeed, the extensive advertisement in the *Diario de Madrid* of February 6, 1799, in which Goya announced the publication of his *Caprichos*,⁹ seems to suggest at first that these drastic depictions serve to protect reason against the importune advances of superstition, vices, folly, and errors. However, in the face of the sheer number of eighty aquatint etchings, one has to ask whether Goya really counted on viewers to still trust the ethos of the Enlightenment that he articulated in that announcement even after they had made their way to the last prints in the series. Reading between the lines of the advertisement already makes it clear that the *Caprichos* are far more ambivalent than that. The depiction of vices, errors, and bad habits was linked with the aim of making them look ridiculous and at criticizing them. Goya points out simultaneously that these motifs are, however, particularly well suited to “stimulating the artistic imagination.”¹⁰ This already suggests a worrying, even dangerous proximity of the visual worlds of artists and those of the unbridled imagination.

Goya appears to have reflected in a very fundamental way on the inaccessible meaning of the power of the imagination, which can only be controlled in limited fashion. The first of the two drawings (fig. 2) with which he prepared for what is probably the most famous print in the *Caprichos*—*The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (cat. no. 4)—leaves no doubt about the degree to which artistic practice and the imagination's own activities are interwoven. When Goya was working on the drawing in 1797, he was still planning to use this unusual motif as the frontispiece to the entire series. As the first image in the series of eighty plates it would have made revealed the situation we have to thank for the totality of the *Caprichos*. Goya may have been able to call upon an established tradition of artists' images and depictions of melancholy; among his possible sources of inspiration; the title page of Giuseppe Maria Mitelli's *Alfabeto in sogno* of 1683 deserves mention.¹¹ Nevertheless, this *Capricho* is more than a variation on the theme introduced. As Werner Hofmann has emphasized, Goya consciously plays with the double meaning of the word *sueño*, which means both “sleep” and “dream.”¹² Above all, however, the initial drawing already shows more than a simple depiction of the dream images that overcome the artist in sleep, when the strict rules of reason are suspended. For the schematic forms and manifestations do not simply rise out of the head of the sleeping artist, but also and, above all, crystallize from the seemingly unrestrained movement of his sketching pen. The viewers are exposed to the birth of phantoms and monsters from the interplay of free imagination and the unbridled drawing hand. Again and again, they encounter strokes, lines, and flourishes about which it is impossible to decide whether they function merely as hatching or are already the first suggestions of the emerging contour of a representational form. The drawing, we quickly realize, does not just depict the imagination's independent activity during sleeping and dreaming, but is also the place where it is carried out.

In the aquatint in which Goya ultimately worked out this idea (cat. no. 4), the roles that the lines, spots, and hatching play in this unbridling of the imagination seem to have been pushed into the background. Although the owls and bats remain disturbing as creatures of the night, the repertoire of motifs is nonetheless clarified. The fact that one of the owls on the left edge is holding an etching needle or a pen in its claws recalls only distantly the interplay of imagination and the drawing hand that had been laid out so impressively in



Fig. 2
Francisco de Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*), first preliminary drawing for *Capricho*, plate 43, 1797, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

the first drawing. Nevertheless, despite all its clarifications of the repertoire of motifs, the aquatint too has its own fathomable quality that it owes to the means of its visual representation. Whereas in the initial sketch the confusion of lines had accelerated the creation of the ghostly manifestations, now the nonrepresentational ground of the aquatint turns out to have a deeply disturbing aspect. Incomprehensibly to the viewers, it alternates between evoking a dark, deep space and the blank appearance of the simple picture plane. This uncontrollable oscillation of the diffuse, grainy background is revealed to be the true origin of the nocturnal creatures. Correspondingly, the fact that they are flying forward, toward the artist, clearly shows that they are themselves emerging from this incomprehensible ground.

The background of the aquatint also seems unfathomable in many of the other *Caprichos*. It is the reason that the uncanny, terrible, or embarrassing scenes cannot be clearly assigned either to reality or solely to a distant world of the imagination. Because Goya dispensed with classical linear perspective, with its unmistakable clarification of spatial relationships, but rather brings out the background of the aquatint which sometimes seems planar and sometimes deep, he locates his depictions in a placeless in-between world, filled nevertheless with connections to reality. The aquatint no longer serves to exclusively illustrate the barely controllable world of the images of the imagination, instead, it plays a crucial role in the production of these uncanny images.

Threatened and Disabled Gazes

If the senses can be deceived and led astray by the imagination and its monstrous products, it is hardly surprising that faith in the sense of sight would disappear. Goya's series of prints, especially the *Caprichos*, but also the *Proverbios* (cat. nos. 19–22) include large numbers of depictions of gazes that are marked by distress and horror or are turned away in fear from the advances of monstrous visions. Frequently, viewers are confronted with the motif of the veiled gaze, which suggests the helpless attempt not to see what cannot be and is, yet, undeniably present. Goya's *Flight of Witches* (cat. no. 2) offers just one of many variations on this motif. The eye, these works suggest, has to be regarded as one of the most sensitive organs of the supposedly sovereign individual. Anyone who seems to be only watching is already part of the event and is at risk of getting caught up in it.

Very much in this spirit, many gazes and pairs of eyes in works from around 1800 reveal traces of the diverse injuries Goya depicted so unsparingly. Empty, blind, or stupid gazes as well as staring or wide-open eyes lead us to suspect the horrible events or frightful fantasies preceded the moment depicted. Fuseli's *Mad Kate* (cat. no. 25) is exemplary of this new focus on a sense of sight that has lost its senses. The fact that the madness was caused by her lover who no longer returned from a sea voyage pales into almost meaningless anecdotal trappings in the face of the disturbing appearance of the young woman.¹³ Her mad gaze merely seems all the more urgent as a result. Because the gaze focuses directly on the viewer, the work breaks from its role of illustrating a poem by William Cowper and becomes a compelling questioning of our own gaze.

Fuseli's image of a madwoman was no isolated case around 1800. Goya's late drawing of a madman (cat. no. 16) exposed the viewer to a pair of similarly penetrating eyes. William Blake's rendering of Cain fleeing, in a mixture of desperation and madness, from the corpse of his own brother he has killed (cat. no. 33), also confronts us with a highly disturbing gaze. And Blechen's *Father Medardus* (cat. no. 89) also shows how the eyes communicate that someone is beside himself.¹⁴

What Fuseli, Goya, Blake, and Blechen share in their interest in pathological gazes is not just the penchant for an unusual motif. Rather, they are circling around a fundamental problem that concerns the viewer directly. Because every painting inevitably addresses our gaze, the depiction of gazes is necessarily especially significant. If an image suggests a risk



Fig. 3
Francisco de Goya, *One Can't Look* (*No se puede mirar*) from *The Disasters of War* (*Los desastres de la guerra*), plate 26, 1810–15, Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main

to the sense of vision, this cannot be without consequences for the viewers' insight. It is thus only logical when Goya in *The Disasters of War* (cat. nos. 8–11) leaves no doubt that the vulnerability of the gaze affects the viewer as well: *One Can't Look* (fig. 3) is the laconic comment of the caption beneath a scene in which a group of civilians are shown being shot.¹⁵ Just looking at this atrocity threatens to injure the viewers deeply because the act of cruelty they would have thought impossible overcomes them. Or they become complicit, because they stand on the side of those whose rifle barrels loom to the right into the pictorial field. In no case, however, can the viewer withdraw as a disinterested onlooker.

The Unfathomable Power of the Image

But the entanglement of art around 1800 in the uncanny, the monstrous, and the frightful goes even further. It is a frequent theme of the literature and poetry of the period that pictures cannot only depict or evoke the uncanny, but also themselves have an inscrutable, demonic effect that is no longer based solely on what is depicted. In addition to the dream of Pygmalion, which so deeply influenced the art and literature of the early modern period,¹⁶ there were many stories and reports of uncanny images. Friedrich Schiller's poem "The Veiled Image at Sais" (1795) exemplifies how older traditions—in this case Egyptian, Greek, and biblical motifs—can obtain a new urgency.¹⁷ The ballad tells of a young man who, on his search for the truth, finds the veiled monumental sculpture of Sais. The high priest's warning not to remove the veil, even though it conceals the truth, is ignored by the young man. Under cover of darkness, he sneaks up to the statue to tear away the veil—driven by the desire finally to "see" the truth. What he sees in the process, however, must remain a mystery. The priests find him the following morning: "pale and senseless," unable to speak of his experience: "Ever from his heart / Was fled the sweet serenity of life, / And the deep anguish dug the early grave."¹⁸ Fuseli slightly alters this narrative in a brush drawing produced between 1805 and 1810 (fig. 4), probably based on the same source, Plutarch's *Isis and Osiris*, that had inspired Schiller. In Fuseli's drawing, it is two warriors who have removed the veil and, frightened by the monstrous form of the goddess and the blinding light, are attempting to flee.¹⁹ All that remains of one of the two blasphemers is a foot; the other one suggests, with his left hand placed on his eyes, how frightening and harmful it is to look at



Fig. 4
Henry Fuseli, *Two Soldiers Fleeing from the Statue of Isis at Sais*, 1805–10, Kunsthau Zürich, Zürich, Collection of Prints and Drawings

Isis. Fuseli illustrates in a disturbing way how even supposedly lifeless, artificial images can threaten the viewers' gaze.

What Schiller evokes by literary means and in Fuseli is still limited to an illustration will take on a disturbing topicality in Romantic painting a few years later. The chamberlain Friedrich Wilhelm Basilius von Ramdohr may be considered one of the first art critics to have recognized this fundamentally new quality of Romantic painting. In his extensive, fundamental critique of Caspar David Friedrich's *Tetschen Altarpiece*, Ramdohr summed up the paintings numerous flaws and violations of conventions. His list finally culminates in the reproach that the painter was not concerned with aesthetic effect, but only with "pathological emotion."²⁰ Friedrich's painting, Ramdohr's apt formulation implies, does not simply offer a beautiful prospect of a landscape but rather aims to vex, even harm, the viewer. Whereas Ramdohr's judgment was decidedly critical in intention, a good year later Heinrich von Kleist reported, in clearly more ambivalent words, of a comparable experience he had in front of Friedrich's painting *The Monk by the Sea*. Based on a draft text by Clemens Brentano, Kleist wrote a critical assessment on the occasion of the presentation of an extraordinarily barren landscape painting at the 1810 exhibition of the Academy of the Arts in Berlin. By means of his literary writing he sought to respond to the challenge presented by the painting. Brentano had earlier noted that viewers in front of Friedrich's painting are prevented from inserting themselves into the scenery depicted. Brentano had thus identified one important convention that Friedrich's painting violates, for his contemporaries could customarily expect to be invited into a landscape painting, to forget that what is depicted is mediated by an artificial image, and become wanderers in nature, so to speak. Friedrich's painting *The Monk by the Sea*, Brentano observed, immediately makes itself recognizable as a painting and does not obscure its artificial status. Kleist takes up and intensifies this idea further. The fact that Friedrich's painting is not intended to have an illusionistic effect does not, in Kleist's viewer, deprive it of its effectiveness. Although Kleist did not doubt he was standing in front of a picture, he reported on a new, uncanny power of the painting: "The picture with its two or three mysterious objects lies before one like the Apocalypse . . . , and since in its uniformity and boundlessness it has no foreground but the frame, the viewer feels as though his eyelids had been cut off."²¹ Not what was depicted in the painting—for example, a stormy landscape, an erupting volcano, or the brute force of wild animals—shocks the viewers, but rather the painting itself, whose demarcating frame is specifically mentioned. With his monstrous metaphor, Kleist pointedly captured what distinguishes Friedrich's painting: It opts out of all the conventional compositional principles of landscape painting, dispensing even with a framing within the painting by means of trees or rocks as well as with a coherent, comprehensible rendering of space. All of the pictorial means that enable viewers to obtain a self-confident overview of the depiction are disregarded. Instead, the painting confronts the viewers with colorful stripes that sometimes look like mere planes and sometimes like unfathomably deep color fields. Quite contrary to what they are accustomed to, viewers are no longer under control of what is before their eyes. *The Monk by the Sea* is by no means a singular exception within Friedrich's oeuvre. Even what was perhaps his final oil painting, *Seashore by Moonlight* (cat. no. 77), challenges viewers with a spatial effect that makes measurement impossible and features a dark palette that scarcely allows to make out the details of the landscape clearly.²²

Kleist's metaphor of damaged eyes was long considered a kindred interpretation by a writer whose literary works were similarly uncompromising and radical as Friedrich's paintings. But the French art historian Pierre Wat has pointed out that the idea of eyelids being cut away takes up an ancient story that also met with great interest elsewhere in the early nineteenth century.²³ In his speech against the Roman politician Piso, Cicero reminded his audience of the general Regulus, who had been blinded by the Carthaginians by cutting away his eyelids. Clearly, it was this horrible tale that inspired Kleist's imagination to find a metaphorical correspondence to the provocation of Friedrich's painting. Whereas in Kleist

the viewer of the painting has to adopt the role of the victim Regulus, the painting itself has the task of becoming the perpetrator and, at the same time, illustrating the result of the act: the gaze stripped of its boundaries and any form of certainty. Kleist thus anticipated what Joseph Mallord William Turner would ultimately attempt to realize quite deliberately in a picture. His painting titled *Regulus* (fig. 5), a work he began in 1828 and then reworked in 1837, leaves viewers searching in vain for the tragic hero of antiquity.²⁴ Driven by the desire to make out the figure of the title somewhere in the blindingly bright view of a harbor, viewers immerse themselves in the painting, only to realize that they themselves have become the revenants of Regulus in the process. With Friedrich's *The Monk by the Sea* and Turner's *Regulus*, Romantic painting revealed ways not to depict disturbing, uncanny, or frightful moments, but rather, to trigger them in the viewer through the painting itself. What was once just the object of a narrative by pictorial means was now shifted to the relationship between the painting and the observer.

Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (fig. 6) does not appear initially to participate in this trend but is wholly dedicated to a realistic depiction of the terrible fate of a ship's crew.²⁵ The large-format painting depicts the fragile raft on which nearly 150 people had to escape when the French frigate *Méduse* ran aground in July 1816. Unable to navigate, the raft, which the ship's rescue boats quickly decided to leave to its fate, drifted for thirteen days on the open sea. Lack of provisions led to cannibalism. When another ship finally met up with the raft, only fifteen people could be saved. Géricault's painting seems to concentrate entirely on this frightful, scandalous incident. Yet, this carefully staged painting, for which the artist prepared extensively with sketches, already affects viewers directly if only because of its extraordinary format. The overpowering dimensions of the painting and the life-sized figures call into question any attempt to keep the event depicted at a distance. It almost seems as if the viewers themselves are intended to be forced into the role of victims. They share with the victims of the shipwreck the fate of looking about in desperation for possible salvation. Only the direction of the gazes of the figures in the center of the painting and the clear gesture of waving make the viewer aware at all that the tiny and schematic outlines of a sailing ship can be made out on the horizon to the right. At the same time, like the figures in the painting, they can never be certain they are not the victims of an optical illusion, thus making the initially self-confident gaze of the events uncertain.

The viewers are not simply made to identify with the shipwrecked figures. At least by the time their gaze falls on the shameless, pitilessly stretched out corpses, they recognize the dubiousness of their own situation. What attitude, what reaction could be appropriate when faced with this misfortune, which halts their breathing and freezes their gaze? The inscrutable power that characterizes the face of the mythical figure of Medusa seems to have been transferred imperceptibly to the painting that depicts the shipwreck of the eponymous frigate. Émile Zola was probably thinking of ancient myth very much in that spirit when he described a visit to the Louvre in his novel *L'Assommoir* and remarked of Géricault's painting: "They stood stock still in mute astonishment."²⁶ But presumably Géricault himself had noticed the hidden implications of the name of the ship that had come to grief. At least, the lifeless head of a man bedded down on a sack or satchel on the left edge of the painting, which Géricault added at the very end of his protracted labor on the painting, distantly recalls classical depictions of the head of Medusa. With its open mouth and snakelike tangle of straps, this detail of the painting recalls a famous depiction of Medusa by Peter Paul Rubens (fig. 7). And an oil study (fig. 8) on which Géricault may have based this section of the painting also features a similar echo of the disheveled hair in classical paintings of Medusa's head. Thus, the emblematic figure found its way, in altered form, into Géricault's painting. More than any other mythical figure, it stands for the uncanny power of gazes and images, and it was not without reason that it would again become particularly important for artists such as Arnold Böcklin, Franz von Stuck, and Salvador Dalí. Such unfathomable moments in which



Fig. 5
Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Regulus*,
1828-37, Tate, London

Fig. 6
Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1819, Musée du Louvre, Paris



horror stands clearly before our eyes and yet eludes our control represent the true, provocative core of Dark Romanticism.

Notes

- 1 See Mario Praz, *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica* (Milan and Rome, 1930); trans. Angus Davidson as *The Romantic Agony* (London, 1933).
- 2 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt am Main, 1969); trans. Edmund Jephcott as *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, Calif., 2002).
- 3 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Bruce Woodcock (Ware, 1994), pp. 408–09. See also Jerome J. McGann, “The Beauty of the Medusa: A Study in Romantic Literary Iconology,” in *Studies in Romanticism* 11 (1972), pp. 3–25; Carol Jacobs, “On Looking at Shelley’s Medusa,” in *Yale French Studies* 69 (1985), pp. 163–79; and William J. Thomas Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago, 1994), pp. 171–76.
- 4 “Yet it is less the horror than the grace / Which turns the gazer’s spirit into stone / Whereon the lineaments of that dead face / Are graven.” Shelley 1994 (see note 3), p. 408.
- 5 On the unfathomable aspects of Friedrich’s work, see László F. Földényi, *Caspar David Friedrich: Die Nachtseite der Malerei* (Munich, 1993).
- 6 See *Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imagination*, ed. Martin Myrone, exh. cat. Tate Britain (London, 2006).
- 7 See *ibid.*, p. 45.
- 8 See Fred Licht, *Francisco Goya* (New York, 2001), pp. 130–49; Werner Hofmann, *Goya: “To Every Story There Belongs Another”* (London, 2003), pp. 85–118.
- 9 For the text of the advertisement, see Werner Hofmann, “Der Traum der Vernunft; oder, Täter und Opfer,” in *Goya: Das Zeitalter der Revolutionen, 1789–1830*, ed. Werner Hofmann, exh. cat. Hamburger Kunsthalle (Munich, 1980), pp. 52–59, esp. 52.
- 10 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 52.



Fig. 7
Peter Paul Rubens and
Frans Snyders, *Medusa*,
ca. 1617, Kunsthistorisches
Museum, Vienna

Fig. 8
Théodore Géricault,
*Head of a Dead Young
Man*, 1818–19, Musée des
Beaux-Arts, Rouen

- 11 See Hanna Hohl, "Giuseppe Maria Mitellis 'Alfabeto in sogno' und Francisco Goyas 'Sueño de la razón,'" in *Museum und Kunst: Beiträge für Alfred Hentzen*, eds. Hans W. Grohn and Wolf Stubbe (Hamburg, 1970), pp. 109–18. For other possible sources for Goya's idea, see *Goya and the Spirit of Enlightenment*, eds. Alfonso E. Pérez-Sánchez and Eleanor A. Sayre, exh. cat. Museo del Prado (Boston, 1989), pp. 110–12.
- 12 Hofmann 2003 (see note 8), p. 130.
- 13 See Gert Schiff, *Johann Heinrich Füssli, 1741–1825: Text und Oeuvrekatalog* (Zurich, 1973), vol. 2, p. 567, cat. no. 1234; and *Johann Heinrich Füssli, 1741–1825*, ed. Werner Hofmann, exh. cat. Hamburger Kunsthalle (Munich, 1974), p. 194.
- 14 See *Carl Blechen: Zwischen Romantik und Realismus*, ed. Peter-Klaus Schuster, exh. cat. Nationalgalerie Berlin (Munich, 1990), p. 105.
- 15 See Hamburg 1980 (see note 9), p. 131.
- 16 See Andreas Blühm, *Pygmalion: Die Ikonographie eines Künstlermythos zwischen 1500 und 1900* (Frankfurt am Main, 1988); and, most recently, Victor I. Stoichita, *The Pygmalion Effect: From Ovid to Hitchcock*, trans. Alison Anderson (Chicago, 2008).
- 17 See Jan Assmann, *Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais: Schillers Ballade und ihre griechischen und ägyptischen Hintergründe* (Stuttgart, 1999).
- 18 Friedrich Schiller, "The Veiled Image at Sais," in *The Poems and Ballads of Schiller*, trans. Edward Bulwer-Lytton (Edinburgh, 1852), pp. 68–71; Friedrich Schiller, "Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais," in *Schillers Werke: Nationalausgabe*, vol. 1, *Gedichte in der Reihenfolge ihres Erscheinens, 1776–1799*, eds. Julius Petersen and Friedrich Beissner (Weimar, 1943), p. 256.
- 19 Given the position of the goddess's arm, Gert Schiff proposed that Isis herself could have removed the veil; see Schiff 1973 (see note 13), p. 585, cat. no. 1370. In light of the myth, however, this interpretation does not seem very plausible; see also Christian Klemm, *Johann Heinrich Füssli: Zeichnungen* (Zurich, 1986), p. 44; and *Füssli: The Wild Swiss*, eds. Franziska Lentzsch, Christoph Becker, and Christian Klemm, exh. cat. Kunsthau Zürich, Zurich (Zurich, 2005), cat. no. 98.
- 20 Friedrich Wilhelm Basilius von Ramdohr, "Über ein zum Altarblatte bestimmtes Landschaftsgemälde von Herrn Friedrich in Dresden, und über Landschaftsmalerei, Allegorie und Mystizismus überhaupt," in *Caspar David Friedrich in Briefen und Bekenntnissen*, ed. Sigrid Hinz, 2. ed. (Munich, 1974), pp. 134–51, esp. 146; see Johannes Grave, *Caspar David Friedrich: Glaubensbild und Bildkritik* (Zurich, 2011), pp. 33–61.
- 21 Heinrich von Kleist, "Feelings before Friedrich's Seascape," in *An Abyss Deep Enough: Letters of Heinrich von Kleist, with a Selection of Essays and Anecdotes*, ed. and trans. Phillip B. Miller (New York, 1992), p. 231; Kleist, "Empfindungen vor Friedrichs Seelandschaft," in *Kleist, Sämtliche Werke: Brandenburger Ausgabe*, vol. II/7, *Berliner Abendblätter I*, eds. Roland Reuss and Peter Staengle (Basel, 1997), pp. 61–62, esp. 61. On *The Monk by the Sea*, see most recently Grave 2011 (see note 20), pp. 63–81.
- 22 On the painting, see, most recently, Johannes Grave, *Caspar David Friedrich* (London and New York, 2012), p. 253.
- 23 Pierre Wat, *Naissance de l'art romantique: Peinture et théorie de l'imitation en Allemagne et en Angleterre* (Paris, 1998), pp. 67–68; see also Peter Bexte, "Die weggeschnittenen Augenlider des Regulus: Zur verdeckten Antikenrezeption in einem Wort Heinrich von Kleists," in *Kleist-Jahrbuch* (2008–09), pp. 254–66.
- 24 See John Gage, *Colour in Turner: Poetry and Truth* (London, 1969), p. 143; see also Pierre Wat, *Turner, menteur magnifique* (Paris, 2010); and Peter Bexte, "Sonnenblicke und Augenlider," in *Nachbilder: Das Gedächtnis des Auges in Kunst und Wissenschaft*, eds. Werner Busch and Carolin Meister (Berlin, 2011), pp. 19–33, esp.

- pp. 30–32. Gage's thesis has, admittedly, also raised objections; see, for example, Andrew Wilton, *J. M. W. Turner: His Art and Life* (New York, 1979), pp. 220–21; and Cecilia Powell, *Turner in the South: Rome, Naples, Florence* (New Haven, Conn., 1987), pp. 145–51.
- 25 See Lorenz Eitner, *Géricault's Raft of the Medusa* (London, 1972); Germain Bazin, *Géricault: Étude critique, documents et catalogue raisonné*, vol. 6, *Génie et folie: Le radeau de la Méduse et les Monomanes* (Paris, 1994); and Jörg Trempler, "Der Stil des Augenblicks: Ein Essay zu Théodore Géricaults Floss der Medusa," in Jean-Baptiste Henri Savigny and Alexandre Corréard, *Der Schiffbruch der Fregatte Medusa* (Berlin, 2005), pp. 191–240.
- 26 Émile Zola, *L'Assommoir*, trans. Margaret Mauldon (Oxford, 1995), p. 76; Émile Zola, *L'Assommoir (1877–1879)* in Zola, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 8, ed. Marie-Ange Voisin-Fougère (Paris, 2003), p. 65: "Tous, saisis, immobiles, se taisaient."