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**The Obverse View: Another Look at Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Le 7 décembre 1815, neuf heures du matin* [*The Execution of Marshal Ney*] (1868)**

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In the light of recent re-evaluations of Jean-Léon Gérôme's practice and significance as a history painter, this article examines one of his most controversial and innovative artworks, *Le 7 décembre 1815, neuf heures du matin* (1868), which depicts the immediate aftermath of maréchal Michel Ney's execution by the Restoration regime in 1815. It argues that *Le 7 décembre 1815* subverts the classical genre of history painting specifically by its unsettling choice of moment, compositional structure and interplay of details in representing the execution of the erstwhile Napoleonic hero. Our contention is also that the artwork's unvarnished depiction of death aligns it with the practice of more radical contemporary artists, such as Manet, and so it continues to disturb its twenty-first century viewers for many of the same reasons that it troubled the art critics of the Second Empire.

In order to reassess the status of this work as a history painting, we will begin by revisiting the historiography of the execution which not only informs Gérôme's artwork but also sheds light on the fraught understanding of Ney's death in the socio-political climate of late 1860s France. This longer-term historiography of the event is often underplayed in art history accounts of Gérôme's painting. The exception to this rule is Claudine Mitchell's unpublished doctoral thesis (1985) on the representations of time in French history painting between 1860 and 1875 which devotes a lengthy section to analysing *Le 7 décembre 1815*. The current study thus builds on some of Mitchell's observations while problematizing the

painting's largely negative reception in 1868 by considering certain neglected aspects of its display, for example, the little-explored presence of other 'Neys' in the Salon of that year.

### *The Historiography of Ney's Execution*

In December 1815 news of a highly political court case gripped Restoration France. This was the trial before the Chambre des Pairs of Michel Ney, maréchal de l'Empire, duc d'Elchingen, prince de la Moskowa. Ney had joined the French army in 1787 and rose to prominence in the revolutionary wars of the 1790s, earning the reputation of being a recklessly brave cavalry general, wounded multiple times in battle. In 1804 he was made one of the eighteen maréchals de l'Empire and went on to contribute to important victories for Napoleon at Friedland in Prussia and on the Iberian Peninsula. In the disastrous Russian campaign of 1812 Ney secured a bridge at Berezina and was, as legend has it, the last French soldier to leave Russian soil. For this he was made Prince de la Moskowa and dubbed 'le brave des braves' by the Emperor. However, when Napoleon was defeated by the forces of the Sixth Coalition in 1814, Ney urged his abdication and was rewarded with a peerage by the returning Bourbon monarchy. Thus when Napoleon escaped from exile on Elba and returned to France in March 1815, Ney was sent to confront him, allegedly promising Louis XVIII that he would bring the former Emperor back to Paris 'dans une cage de fer'. But when Ney met Napoleon at Auxerre and saw his popular support, he switched allegiance, bringing his troops over to Napoleon's camp. Ney fought for the Emperor at Waterloo in June 1815; had five horses shot out from under him; and made two frankly suicidal charges at the British – one on horse and one on foot with the infantry. Both failed (Atteridge 1912; Hulot 2000).

After Waterloo Ney was arrested in southern France in August 1815 and was taken to Paris to face charges of high treason against the Bourbon monarchy. He was initially to be

tried by a 'conseil de guerre', a sort of extraordinary court-martial, composed of some of his former comrades in arms. But its jurisdiction was challenged by Ney's lawyers. As a Bourbon peer, in name if not in deed, the sole legitimate court by which he could be tried was the ultra-royalist Chambre des Pairs. After some initial legal wrangling, the trial opened on 4 December 1815 and by the evening of 6 December an overwhelming majority of 139 out of the 161 peers had found Ney guilty as charged. The verdict carried a death sentence, pronounced at 11.30pm that evening (Chambre des pairs de France 1815). Ney was informed of the sentence in his prison cell in the Palais du Luxembourg at 3am. Due to the controversy surrounding the trial, the court also decreed that the execution was to take place without delay and was set for 9am the same day, 7 December. Ney was allowed three visits before the execution: from his lawyer, his wife and children, and a priest (Kurtz 1957).

Military executions usually took place on the plaine de Grenelle to the west of the Champ de Mars, as had been the case for General Charles Huchet de la Bédoyère, executed by firing squad on the same charge as Ney in August 1815 (Doher 1963, 134-146). However, because of fears of popular unrest and possible rescue attempts, the young military commander of the city of Paris, le comte Louis-Victor-Léon de Rochechouart, received orders to carry out the execution not far beyond the gates of the Luxembourg gardens in the avenue de l'Observatoire. According to the military penal code of May 1793, which was still in force, the execution was to be performed by a twelve-man firing squad (Galisset 1829, 966-967). Rochechouart appointed as its commander the comte de Saint-Bias, a Piedmontese officer, and thus a subject of the king of Sardinia, since Rochechouart was keen to spare a French officer the task of ordering Ney's execution (1889, 437).

Dressed in civilian clothes, in order to obviate the public humiliation of having his military honours and grades stripped from him, Ney stepped out into the dismal December weather at approximately 8.30am. Taken to the site of execution in a closed carriage in the

company of a priest, he was a little surprised when the cortege stopped so shortly after setting off. Nonetheless, Ney stepped smartly out and expressly refused to kneel or wear a blindfold, as the military code stipulated. According to Rochechouart's first-hand testimony (1889, 439-442), as the two rows of the firing-squad soldiers raised their rifles, Ney took off his hat with his left hand, put his right hand to his heart, took one step forward and started to speak, denouncing his judgement. Saint-Bias shouted 'Feu!' and the maréchal was instantly riddled with six bullets to the chest, three to the head and neck, and one in the arm. He died instantly, falling as though 'foudroyé'. What happened next was in strict observance of the military penal code: Ney's corpse lay exposed at the site of execution for fifteen minutes, after which time it was recovered by veteran soldiers who took the body to the near-by Hôpital de la Maternité where the grief-stricken family came to collect it. They also swiftly arranged for Ney's burial in Père-Lachaise cemetery the following day.

Scandalized reports of the execution were widespread, increasingly embroidered with picaresque details. For instance, *Le Moniteur universel* of 9 December 1815 reproduced the account of Ney's execution from the *Journal des débats* of the previous day, which consecrated the myth of the maréchal himself giving the order to fire: 'Placé en présence du peloton des vétérans chargés de tirer, il s'est écrié d'une voix forte: « Soldats, droit au cœur ! ». Ce furent ses dernières paroles ; il est à l'instant tombé percé de douze balles' (*Le Moniteur universel*, 9 décembre, 1815, 2). Large sections of the contemporary press also quietly deplored Ney's death, considering him a hapless scapegoat for the folly of Napoleon's Cent Jours and, more implicitly, the unfortunate object of an impolitic but irresistible desire for revenge characterizing the newly reinstalled Bourbon regime; a desire especially animating the cold and haughty duchesse d'Angoulême, sole surviving child of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette.<sup>1</sup>

Ney would be officially rehabilitated by the Second Republic whose provisional government commissioned the sculptor François Rude to create a statue of Ney for public edification; a commission only completed and unveiled under the Second Empire in September 1853. This monument, erected on the site of the maréchal's execution in the avenue de l'Observatoire,<sup>2</sup> represents him with his sword aloft, turning to roar encouragement at his troops. By this time a certain heroic account of Ney's last hours had hardened into 'fact' and was rehearsed repeatedly in the popular histories of the Restoration published in the 1850s and 1860s. Alphonse de Lamartine's *Histoire de la Restauration* reiterates the claims that Ney's execution was a politically motivated act, with the returning royalists choosing vengeance over magnanimity. Moreover, in shedding Ney's 'sang plébéien' (1862, 433), the Bourbons alienated the people, who would otherwise have applauded their clemency; and thus, with the glorious advantage of historical distance, Lamartine sees in this mistaken judgement of the early Restoration the seeds of its bloody overthrow fifteen years later. More significantly, perhaps, for later representations of Ney's execution, the historian-poet generates an atmosphere of chilling physical and moral decay in setting the scene: 'Une brume glacée rampait sur le sol et ne laissait qu'entrevoir les bras dépouillés des grands arbres du jardin royal' (430). Ney's carriage stops 'en face d'un long mur de clôture noir et fétide qui borde la contre-allée de cette avenue (430)' – a fit site to shoot a man down 'comme un animal immonde' (430). Contrasting with this mood is the maréchal's noble self-mastery:

Il plaça la main sur sa poitrine pour bien marquer la place de la vie à ses meurtriers: « Soldats, dit-il, visez droit au cœur ! » [...] On n'entendit qu'un seul coup : Ney tomba comme sous la foudre, sans une convulsion et sans un soupir. (431)

Lamartine goes on to attribute a revealing confusion to the first witnesses who came across the hero's body left in the road, passers-by asking each other 'quel était ce criminel abandonné sur la voie publique et fusillé par des soldats de la grande armée' (431). This deep ambivalence about the corpse sprawled in the street – hero or criminal – would inform later depictions of Ney's execution as well as their polarized interpretations.

Lamartine drew on other histories of the Restoration, most notably Achille de Vaulabelle's *Histoire des deux Restaurations, jusqu'à l'avènement de Louis-Philippe* (1857), which went through at least seven editions between 1844 and 1868. Vaulabelle's account of Ney's execution incorporates contemporary newspaper reports, such as that of *Le Moniteur universel*, as well as giving credence to the anecdote that the comte de Saint-Bias had frozen at the point of giving the signal to shoot and had been relieved of this duty by the comte de La Force, present at the execution as a colonel of the national guard (121). More animated retellings of Ney's trial, judgement and death, like that found in Armand Fouquier's collection of *Causes célèbres de tous les peuples* (1864, 1-32), also ensured that tales of the maréchal's heroism were kept alive in the public imagination. The *Causes célèbres* was an illustrated series and the issue detailing the maréchal's judgement and execution contained a black and white drawing of the firing squad taking aim at the victim as he stood with his hat in his left hand, his right hand on his heart (predictably captioned « Soldats, droit au cœur !... » [24]), as well as a pietà-like image of Ney's bullet-riddled body laid out on a bed in the Hôpital de la Maternité while a kneeling nun prays at his bedside (25). However, the written account of the execution in the *Causes célèbres* defers entirely to Vaulabelle's text, cited at length and 'considéré comme un modèle' (31). It was precisely this description of Ney's execution furnished by Vaulabelle that caught the attention of the painter Jean-Léon Gérôme when he read the fifth edition of the *Histoire des deux Restaurations* in 1860 (Vergnette 2010, 115). Crucially, for the painting that constitutes the subject of this article,

Gérôme was struck by one particular sentence of the account, which he underlined:

‘Conformément aux règlements militaires, le corps resta déposé pendant un quart d’heure sur le lieu d’exécution’ (Vaulabelle 1857, 121).

### *Jean-Léon Gérôme and the Salon of 1868*

Jean-Léon Gérôme had been a student of the Romantic artist Paul Delaroche. He made his name in the 1840s as part of the ‘néo-grec’ school meeting in the atelier of the Swiss painter Charles Gleyre. By the 1850s Gérôme was undertaking historical subjects more regularly, culminating in his monumental *Le Siècle d’Auguste: naissance de N.-S. Jésus-Christ* exhibited at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1855. The painting had been commissioned by the government of the Second Empire, in part to imply a cultural parallel between the glories of the Augustan age and the reign of Napoleon III. However, its confused, teeming scene, combining pagan and Christian figures in contrasting neoclassical and Germanic styles, met with little critical enthusiasm (Aubenas 2010, 73). As Gülru Çakmak has convincingly argued, it illustrated a ‘crisis’ in French history painting in the 1850s and forced the artist to revise his conception of history painting in the late 1850s and 1860s (2017, 13-30).

Despite this setback, Gérôme remained an influential figure in artistic and social circles into the 1860s. A guest of Napoleon III at Compiègne and a regular attendee of the salon run by the emperor’s art-loving cousin, princesse Mathilde, the artist married the daughter of the successful art dealer and publisher Adolphe Goupil in 1863 – the same year that he was appointed professor of painting in the Académie des beaux-arts. In 1865 he became a member of the Institut de France and in 1867 an officer of the Légion d’honneur (Ackerman 2000, 88). Politically, Gérôme appeared content to toe the imperial line as a not



particularly ideological Bonapartist, ambivalent about the Church, but with a penchant in his more historical works for celebrating military autocrats and absolutist monarchs such as Julius Caesar, Louis XIV and Napoleon I (Vergnette 2010, 113). A superficial, if not inaccurate, summary of his political and artistic credo of the time might be found in the state-commissioned work *Audience des ambassadeurs de Siam à Fontainebleau* completed in 1864 and displayed in the Salon of 1865. It depicts the reception of the envoys of the Siamese king Mongkut (also known as Rama IV) by the French imperial court at Fontainebleau in June 1861. As critics have pointed out, its composition is redolent of the famous Siamese embassy received by Louis XIV in 1686 as well as Jacques-Louis David's celebration of Napoleon I's imperial coronation in 1804 (des Cars and de Font-Réaulx 2010, 163-167). On the one hand, then, the *Audience des ambassadeurs* seems to stand as confirmation of Albert Boime's claim (1982) that Gérôme was established at this time among the 'emperor's stable of artists [who] recorded his colonial aspirations' (52); that Gérôme contributed thus to the 'official realism' sanctioned by the regime of the Second Empire. On the other hand, as Boime also recognized, the verisimilitude of detail in the painting does not save it from 'ringing false as a whole' (85). In a decolonizing study of the painting, Meredith Martin lays bare a number of reasons why Gérôme's depiction of the Siam embassy reception failed to deliver the ideological programme demanded of it by Napoleon III's commission. Its relatively small-scale canvas, the attention to detail lavished on the Oriental presents, clothes and faces of the Siamese party, the effeminizing focus on the empress rather than the emperor, its political repurposing by the Siamese court, all led to an unenthusiastic appreciation in the 1865 Salon. In terms of history painting in particular, the evocations of Louis XIV's celebrated engagement with Siam and the echoes of the imperial majesty of Napoleon I only served to present the artwork as 'an inferior, fraudulent imitation of the glorious regimes of the past' (Meredith 2017, 101).

This brings us to the principal contemporary criticism of Gérôme's history painting in the 1860s. A group of influential art critics consistently accused him of sullyng the grandeur of history painting – still considered aesthetically to be the pinnacle of pictorial art – with the conceits of genre painting, that is, the lucrative, bourgeois fashion for touching, smaller-scale tableaux of the exotic or mundane caught almost photographically 'in the act', so to speak (House 2008; Allan 2010). This was an impression only reinforced by Gérôme's canny exploitation of the new market in photographic reproductions of artworks, often via the studio of his art entrepreneur father-in-law. Certain critics traced this degradation of history painting back to the artist's apprenticeship under Delaroche who had practised a hybrid style of 'genre historique' (Allan 2010, 92) in loading his historical paintings with archaeological detail or anecdotal incident. The result was a dereliction of the artist's duty to invest his historical canvasses with compositions which stirred noble aspirations or useful remorse, as was the classical moral function of the best history painting (for example by David or Ingres). Instead Gérôme consolidated this preference for dislocated perspectives, distracting devices and menial detail over the exalted 'truths' of traditional history painting; and this was nowhere more in evidence than in his framing and depiction of the heroic male body, which was thereby insistently de-heroicized (House 2008, 265-266; Çakmak 2017, 155). All of these criticisms converged in the hostile responses to Gérôme's *Le 7 décembre 1815, neuf heures du matin* (1868, Figure 1), displayed in the Paris Salon of 1868. Charles Clément's acerbic review in the *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires* of 3 June 1868 prefaces his demolition of the painting with the view held by many of Gérôme's detractors at the time: that the artist was congenitally incapable of rising to the necessary 'poetic' and 'moral' heights required of history painting. The critic gives a master-class in damning with faint praise:

Ses qualités naturelles – un esprit d’observation des plus remarquables, une extrême habileté de main, un sentiment pittoresque délicat – ont pris le dessus. Les facultés poétiques, au contraire – l’imagination, la puissance de créer, de transformer, d’idéaler – se sont de plus en plus amoindries. M. Gérôme était né peintre de genre, et c’est sur ce terrain modeste qu’il a fait ses meilleurs ouvrages. [...] Si petit que soit le verre, l’important est de boire dans son verre. (1)

As it was, even before it was hung in the Salon, Gérôme’s *Le 7 décembre 1815* had been the object of a public row over its allegedly disrespectful representation of Ney’s execution. The only surviving son of the Napoleonic hero, the third prince de la Moskowa, requested that the artist withdraw the work so as not to offend his family (Ackerman 2000, 82). This request was repeatedly made on behalf of Ney’s son by the superintendent of fine arts, Alfred Emilien Nieuwerkerke, who allegedly also claimed that the painting contravened the Académie’s own ‘hautes convenances’ (About 1868, 729). Gérôme refused and, since the Emperor remained mute on the matter when he previewed the Salon, the painting was admitted. In his unfinished and unpublished autobiographical notes, drafted in 1874, the artist recalls the scandal and presents himself as a principled defender of artistic freedom of expression: ‘je tins ferme [...] lui déclarant [à Nieuwerkerke] que les peintres avaient le droit d’écrire l’histoire avec leur pinceau aussi bien que les littérateurs avec leur plume, ce qui est juste’ (Gérôme 1980, 17). This slightly bizarre inversion of *Ut pictura poesis* (‘as is painting so is poetry’) makes more sense in the context of contemporary critics’ repeated recourse to parallels of the artist and the writer’s compositional techniques, as we shall subsequently see. Gérôme goes on to remark in the same notes that the Salon authorities took their revenge by hanging his *7 décembre 1815* in a less-frequented corner of the exhibition. He also recalls that the painting proved equally problematic politically, since royalists saw it as crude Bonapartist propaganda while the Bonapartists themselves deplored the artist’s choice of subject which politicized art and demythologized its Napoleonic hero (Gérôme 1980, 17;

Ackerman 2000, 82; Mitchell 1985, 41-42). If the work was meant to rehabilitate the memory of Ney and ingratiate Gérôme further with the imperial court, it failed on both counts.

However, what is often overlooked in contextualizing the reception of *Le 7 décembre 1815* is that Gérôme's painting was not the only depiction of Ney's execution in the Salon of 1868 (About 1868, 729). In the sculpture display there stood prominently Henri-Alfred Jacquemart's *Michel Ney, le 7 décembre 1815* (1868, Figure 2), a life-size plaster statue of the maréchal dramatically baring his breast to the imminent volley of bullets. Also entered but ultimately withdrawn was Charles-Édouard Armand-Dumaresq's *Bourreaux malgré eux* (1868) which shows the comte de Saint-Bias yelling at the irresolute firing squad to take aim while a veteran soldier weeps behind them and the oddly diminutive figure of Ney opens his shirt and points to his heart (Mitchell 1985, 79; Scott 2010, 92). Why there were three competing representations of Ney's death submitted to the Salon that year remains a moot point. It is possible that a year before the centenary celebrations of Napoleon I's birth in 1869 (which was also the centenary of Ney's birth), artists fell under the Bonapartist zeitgeist and found in the stoic heroism of one of Napoleon's most celebrated generals a fitting theme to prelude the following year's commemorations. The subject had the added political advantage of serving as a timely reminder of the vengeful barbarity of the Bourbon monarchy. What is more certain is that Armand-Dumaresq and Jacquemart's artworks confirmed the fact that Gérôme had wilfully chosen to evacuate Ney's execution of all classical heroism. In their preference to depict the moment directly *before* the fatal shots were fired, the two artists may also have provided a model for the glorifying counter-discourses on Ney's death which inform much of the adverse criticism directed at Gérôme's painting.

Nonetheless, *Le 7 décembre 1815* was not without its admirers. The republican Paul Mantz (1868, 283) praised the masterful qualities of the painting: 'l'exécution est exacte et précise, et il semble qu'il se dégage de cette douloureuse composition une sorte de moralité

salutaire'. The anti-clerical Bonapartist Edmond About (1868) was similarly laudatory, noting an expressiveness in the work that was 'nette, forte et durable', so that the work emanated 'une vérité poignante' (729). Both critics were keen to remind their readers of the dire political circumstances of Ney's execution, amounting to what About calls 'un assassinat juridique' (729) committed, in Mantz's words, 'en ces heures de réaction qu'on voudrait pouvoir effacer de notre histoire' (283). What appears most troubling in Gérôme's painting is the way in which an historical act that played out more than fifty years earlier is suddenly and irresistibly made present. In About's critique this is rendered in the list of demonstrative articles used to describe the scene of execution: 'ce jour triste, ce terrain, fangeux, ce mur sale, ces soldats, criminels malgré eux' (729) – the last turn of phrase recalling Armand-Dumaresq's less successful depiction of the event. For Mantz the past made present lies in the blood that seems to be still seeping from the freshly felled victim: 'le cadavre du maréchal gît sanglant au pied de la muraille' (283). Yet the gruesome immediacy of the painting is seized upon and praised yet more insistently by a long-time critical ally of the artist, Théophile Gautier. Writing in *Le Moniteur universel* of 2 May 1868, the critic claims that 'le sujet n'a pas encore le recul du passé; il palpite et saigne toujours pour ainsi dire'. But unlike his fellow admirers of Gérôme's artwork, Gautier reduces the historical context of the event to the series of self-contradicting political slogans crossed out on the wall against which Ney is shot, and the 'Bolivar style' hat that lies next to the cadaver. History here becomes anecdote and costume drama. For what Gautier ultimately wants to celebrate in Gérôme's work is precisely the uncompromising, brutal present-ness of the image, the product not of its historical narrative but of its artistic acuity, proper to genre-painting, what he terms 'la réalité absolue du détail'. As Claudine Mitchell (2010, 97) has argued, the modernity of Gérôme's painting for Gautier resides not 'in the tragic fate of the historical figure but in the ways in which the depicted space becomes the picture of a mental climate'. *Le 7 décembre 1815*

believes its date-as-title, since it is not an historical record of Ney's death by firing squad, but the queasy evocation of witnessing the event, or rather its immediate aftermath, as though it were unfolding ineluctably before the viewer's eyes. Hence Gautier (1868) asserts that 'M. Gérôme a représenté cette exécution lugubre telle qu'elle a dû se passer. On dirait le procès-verbal peint d'un témoin oculaire'. The disturbing tension in the painting arises from it (re)presenting its subject as at once historical and immediate, there and here, then and now.<sup>3</sup>

The profound temporal ambivalence experienced in front of the painting, acclaimed by Gautier (1868) as its power of quasi-photographic testimony, is precisely what Gérôme's many detractors denounce in the work. As Charles Clément (1868) states: 'La photographie n'est pas plus de l'art que la chronique n'est de l'histoire'. Critics like Clément and Raoul de Navery (1868, 22) claim that the result of Gérôme's approach is to belittle and obscure the exemplarity of the historical subject, reducing it to a pictorial 'charade', 'rébus' or 'énigme'. In a further attack on *Le 7 décembre 1815*, Charles Blanc (1868), writing in the widely circulating *Le Temps*, declares that 'La peinture, qui ne vit pas de sous-entendus, ne trouve pas entièrement son compte dans le récit figuré du peintre'. This historical obfuscation is compounded by a spatial one. As its subject grows ever more inscrutable for future generations of viewers, or so writes Jules Grangedor (1868, 18), the painting will be seen to represent only 'un assassinat commis dans un lieu désert'. Hence the tawdry scene becomes indistinguishable from the depiction of a criminal assault, a traffic accident or a drunk lying unconscious in the road in one of the more insalubrious outskirts of Paris. Claudine Mitchell (1985, 27-30; 2010, 94-95) has highlighted the social and political ambiguities which haunt certain critics' contemptuous dismissal of Gérôme's artwork. They denigrate a painting which not only blurs the boundaries between the past event and present viewing, but also between a respectable avenue next to the Jardin du Luxembourg and a dirty stretch of road on the capital's lawless fringes. Socially, the vehemence of many critics' reaction to the painting

is intensified by this class-based reading of the work: the finely dressed victim of a possible 'street crime' (1985, 30) translates the middle-class viewers' latent terror of popular violence (1985, 54-55). Politically, the painting is suspect for other, equally troubling reasons: namely, the confusion between the rule of law and state-sponsored murder in the maréchal's trial and execution as well as Ney's own problematic wavering between support for the Bourbon monarchy and his former Emperor and commander-in-chief. For Mitchell (1985), *Le 7 décembre 1815* plays on a pervasive anxiety in 1868, common to a generation of Second Empire 'liberal professionals' which cuts across contemporary political loyalties, that France's revolutionary past and the particular violence of 1848 and 1851 (51-52) is not 'past' at all but bubbles away beneath the surface civility of the society, and in Gérôme's painting rises palpably from Ney's face-down corpse as the 'ghost of social war' (69). Intentionally or otherwise, then, for a regime such as the Second Empire which sat on its own rather shaky constitutional and genealogical foundations, these could be read as highly unwelcome equivocations (Baguley, 2000, 151). They also trouble Boime's assertion, cited earlier, that Gérôme is unproblematically a Bonapartist place-man in the arts and a representative of the regime's 'official realism' (1982, 46).

One of the more blistering critiques of *Le 7 décembre 1815*, from Jules-Antoine Castagnary (1869, 304-305), attributes the degradation of classical history painting not only to the artist but also to his superficial public. Castagnary claims that the once vital and patriotic 'people de Paris', able to appreciate the great historical masterpieces of David and Delacroix, has degenerated into an easily distracted 'foule' (302-303), seeking only eclecticism and contradiction. In the face of such decadence, the critic at once proposes a different way of seeing Gérôme's painting and describes a different image to be seen in its place. Here is his devastatingly naïve act of viewing:

J'en atteste les dieux, voici ce que j'ai vu. Un mur à droite; sur le sol, perpendiculairement à ce mur, un homme tombé la face contre terre. L'homme est vêtu de noir, et habillé de neuf. A deux pas de lui, tout neuf aussi et tout luisant, son chapeau est posé avec le même soin qu'il le serait sur un meuble de salon. Dans le fond, par l'angle de la perspective, une compagnie de soldats s'éloigne dans la brume. Et c'est tout. (304)

In its stead, he pictures less a different history painting than an historian's dramatic scenography of a public execution:

Il me montrera le condamné debout au pied du poteau, pâle, mais intrépide; le peloton aligné, silencieux et morne; la voix de l'officier qui commande, les fusils qui s'abaissent, la détonation qui retentit, le malheureux qui roule, culbuté sur lui-même, dans la boue et dans le sang. (304-305)

No painting could ever render simultaneously these successive acts; Castagnary is aware of this. But his vivid animation of Ney's execution is designed to demonstrate how Gérôme has evacuated the scene of its dramatic intensity, how he has preferred the stupefying aftermath to the terrifying spectacle: 'Le drame vous a fait peur, vous nous en montrez l'issue. L'action était trop véhémente pour vos petits moyens, vous nous en faites voir les suites' (305). In this much Castagnary justifies the practice adopted by other censors of Gérôme's painting, namely, to overwrite the artist's depiction of the moment *after* the execution with a stylized representation of the moment *before*. This is possibly informed by the alternative images of the scene furnished by Armand-Dumaresq and Jacquemart and is also found, for instance, in the texts of Navery (1868, 21) and Blanc (1868).

*Another Look at Le 7 décembre 1815, neuf heures du matin*



The critics' attempts to revise narratively Gérôme's artwork provide an indirect but significant acknowledgement that *Le 7 décembre 1815* is a highly unusual, not to say subversive, expression of nineteenth-century French history painting. As Mitchell notes, 'it was definitely a new moment for a painting representing a public execution' (1985, 27). The painting appears to disturb its contemporary viewers by capturing neither Ney's defiant last words nor his courageous steadfastness in the face of imminent death, nor even the very moment when the shots are fired (as in Edouard Manet's *Exécution de l'Empereur Maximilien du Mexique* [1868], which Linda Nochlin [1971, 31] terms 'the temporal fragment'). Instead Gérôme plunges viewers into the stunned wake of the event. The painting portrays the moment when an everyday mundaneness starts to resume while the historical event itself continues to recede, as represented in the very persons of the soldiers retreating into the gloom. It is an image which seems to ask the question: when does the historical event cease being historical? It is an image of a moment poised between historiography (the select narrative of certain past events) and historicity (the historical factuality of all past events); between the moment of execution which is used to construct meaning about the early Restoration and the moment just afterwards in which, to cite Mitchell (1985, 73), 'time fails to unfold meaning'. This is the ambivalence written into the title of the painting: the pinpointing of a unique historical moment which is just as much the marker of an unexceptional temporal sequence (Païni, 2010, 336). The dismissive interpretations of this painting as a possible road accident, casual attack or drunken fall inadvertently recognize that the painting renders the contingency of the historical event just as much as the event itself. And in doing so, it reveals something of the constructedness of all historical meaning-making.

It does so, moreover, in one small detail – reproduced in other controversial historical works by Gérôme. This is the executioner's backward glance. As Ney enters the historical

records in news-sheets and books as the Napoleonic maréchal shot for treason at 9 am on 7 December 1815, so his nameless executioners exit history, receding into the wintry greyness of the moment after. Yet the commanding officer, whom we know to be the comte de Saint-Bias, looks back. And in looking back with him at the corpse in the mud, the viewer re-enters history with him. The backwards gaze of the historical eyewitness is not the same as the viewer's necessary belatedness<sup>4</sup> – but it clearly connotes it. By extension it also connotes the belatedness which is the very substance of history, past matter making itself available for shaping as present meaning. Thus affectively for the viewer, the executioner's backward glance is also a moment of total interpretive possibility in the present of viewing. Hence it is invested by contradictory emotions that differ from beholder to beholder: it is one of fearful suspicion for Navery (1868, 22), of slyness for About (1868, 729) or of troubled melancholy for Mantz (1868, 283). In *Le 7 décembre 1815* the backwards glance in its equivocation is an act charged with the possibility of conversion – in emotional terms from fear to regret, in political terms from an allegiance to the Bourbons to sympathy for the defeated Bonapartists. This sense of possible conversion depicted by a backwards glance is more explicitly represented in the other Gérôme painting displayed in the 1868 Salon, the equally controversial *Consummatum est, La Crucifixion* (1868). Here the retreating Roman soldiers glance back up at the row of crosses standing out of frame, present only in their foreshortened shadows. These lingering guards looking backwards towards an out-of-shot Christ crucified are identifiable historically as Longinus and Stephaton who become the first Roman converts to Christianity (des Cars 2010, 136).

*Le 7 décembre 1815* decentres the historical moment temporally (in the wake of the event) and spatially (inserting a void between its figures). This is the challenge laid down to classical history painting by Gérôme and defined by John House as the artist's use of multiple critical dislocations: 'open spaces, divided centres of attention, sudden jumps of scale and

space'(2008, 265). Unlike neo-classical history painting which Wolfgang Kemp characterizes as an art that 'explains itself' (1985, 106) in the full intelligibility of meaning brought to it by the viewer's gaze, Gérôme's more 'realist' (114) history painting is rife with multiple indeterminacies that impede and disrupt comprehension. Gülru Çakmak (2017, 162, 173) goes further in extending this pervasive sense of hindrance and disruption to the viewer herself: Gérôme's compositional devices scramble classical comprehensibility but, as a result, they also unsettle the historically embodied viewer, somatically implicated in this act of historical witnessing. The viewer's own position becomes unsafe as, in the depiction of Ney's execution, the strong diagonals stretch time and perspective, obliging the viewer to adjust her point of view in front of the canvas, uncomfortably and vainly seeking a stance of definite intelligibility before the work. Instead of bringing this certainty to the viewer, the contradictory, incomplete, crossed-out political slogans on the wall compound this vexed search for meaning by their equivocal over-coding. The artist's oft-derided disaggregation of the historical scene into a series of 'charades', 'rébus' and 'énigmes' to be guessed at and then laboriously recomposed, is not the genre-induced limit of Gérôme's historical artistry but one of its fundamental innovations, as exemplified in *Le 7 décembre 1815*.

It has been claimed that Gérôme owed this so-called 'clue structure' to his first teacher, Delaroche (Çakmak, 2017, 47-56). The notion of a clue structure refers to Delaroche's art of the 'genre historique' in which the presence and arrangement of historiographical 'clues' trigger viewers to reconstruct in their imagination the acts preceding the depicted event, as in Delaroche's controversial *Assassinat du duc de Guise* (1834). In the case of Gérôme, these historiographical details may also serve as a means of competing with the advances in photography – or indeed help to facilitate the photographic reproductions of his paintings. Thus, in historical works in particular, detail becomes clue; and the more a self-sufficient meaning is sought in the painting, the more the clues accumulate. In the case of *Le*

7 décembre 1815, however, the overzealous interpretation of clues can be taken to a whole new level because of a subsequent conspiracy theory that attached itself to Ney's execution. This conspiracy holds that Ney's execution was faked as result of a complicity between English and French free-masons, notably Wellington and Talleyrand, spurred on to clemency and deception by the maréchal's wife and sympathetic Englishwomen, such as Mrs Hutchinson, a relative of the Iron Duke's. So, a firing squad of veterans loyal to Ney shot over his head on the signal given by the victim as he burst a bag of pig's blood placed over his heart (remember the gesture, 'Visez droit au cœur!'). His body was then spirited away and an empty coffin buried the following day while Ney galloped to the Channel and then sailed to America where he lived out his life in the Carolinas as the thinly disguised itinerant school-master Peter Stuart Ney (Gerard, 2011). The elements of this picaresque plot were first obsessively assembled by James Augustus Weston (1895) and were largely debunked by Dorothy Mackay Quynn (1961, 1972) in the 1960s and 1970s. However, as far as Gérôme's painting is concerned, a number of clues can be discerned which tally with the later conspiracist reading of the event: the bullet holes on the wall seem too wide of their mark if the figure of Ney is virtually resurrected against them; the sole gleam in the foreground is his wedding ring, a sly nod to his wife's successful efforts to save him; and the graffito 'Vive...' – an ironic injunction to live at the site of a public execution – is in fact a coded acclamation of Ney's survival and escape. Following Weston (1895), it has also been argued that a man hit by the force of nine or ten bullets would not fall *forwards*; although Gautier (1868) seems to have pre-empted this claim in his critique of May 1868 by stating that all victims of a shot to the heart naturally pitch forwards, not backwards.

The clue structures of Gérôme's works, however, are not just subtle appeals to the viewer's intellect in their intriguing historical detail. They are also the reproduction of the physical traces of the execution scene: the mouldering plaster of the wall, the cart-tracks, the

maréchal's own footprints in the mud and the smoking cartridges on the ground. Confronted with the Ney's footprints and the wisps of thin cartridge smoke rising from the earth, the viewer is always already too late on the scene. But what is more disturbing still is that, like the strong diagonals of wall and wheel-ruts, the cartridge smoke violates the interpretative distance sought by the viewer in front of the historical event; it rises forever off the painting and cannot be sidestepped. The footprints and smoke may be historiographical clues, but they are also representations of persistent material traces at the scene of execution, connoting live rounds fired and a body with mass and heft fallen. As such they signify the material meaninglessness of death and thus the inadequacy of any redemptive or transcendent meaning that the viewer might be tempted to piece together after the event (Nochlin 1971, 64). So the painting is at once a clue-based invitation to retell the event depicted and an obtuse refusal to see beyond the corpse.

Gérôme's depiction of Ney's execution is not just another exposition of death as in earlier paintings of political cadavers, such as Jacques-Louis David's iconic *La Mort de Marat* (1793). Crucially in *Le 7 décembre 1815* the viewer looks at someone else looking at the maréchal's dead body: the officer. His backward glance enjoins us to keep looking at the corpse, to judge the body in the road and give historical meaning to meaningless death. The officer is not making eye contact with the viewer, but with Ney's body. His is the obverse view, in its etymological sense of turning the object towards the observer. But crucially, he does so without any accompanying suggestion of a redemptive meaning in what he witnesses. What we are presented with is a lumpy, foreshortened corpse, the pictorial signifier of a brutally foreshortened life; in this respect, the same compressed perspective as produced the squat bundle of Caesar's body in *La Mort de César* (1867) or the shrunk shadows of Christ and the crucified thieves in *Consummatum est* (1868). In confronting its viewer with what Wolfgang Kemp (1985, 115) calls the 'dishonouring indifference' of Ney's death, this

scandalous image makes sense of the outraged critiques which claimed that the Napoleonic hero was indistinguishable from a traffic accident victim, a fall-down drunk or a murdered 'bourgeois' (Blanc, 1868). Edmond About (1868, 729), who nonetheless lauded the work, goes even further in suggesting that the maréchal's body is reified by death into disposable or discarded matter, likened to 'un paquet tombé d'une voiture et qu'on oublie de ramasser'. In its obstructive materiality (or its material obviousness – *ob viam*, 'in the way'), Ney's corpse resembles the scandalous banality of Manet's Christ in *Le Christ mort et les anges* (1864), and contributes to a more radical artistic realism that, as Linda Nochlin puts it, swept away 'the entire, age-old foundation of transcendental reality, in which death was the pivot between ethics and eternity' (1971, 98-99). Gérôme's *Le 7 décembre 1815* is a history painting of a political and material death that cannot be easily moralized or universalized.

As such, Gérôme's representation of Ney's corpse has no unequivocal message to communicate to posterity. This is most evident in the lack of a wound, the open 'mouth' of a bullet hole, or several bullet holes, through which neo-classical history painting would have 'cried' symbolically to its righteously moved public for justice, if not revenge (de Baecque, 1997), as, again, most famously in David's *La Mort de Marat* (1793). Instead, extreme bodily violence is reduced to just a stain, to another clue in the form of a blood spot on Ney's cheek. As a result, the corpse does not 'speak' to the viewer, in the sense of instructing her unambiguously how to interpret the image. Rather, the awkward, sprawled mass of the executed maréchal is positioned as part of a 'compositional structure [which] threatens the viewer's own corporeal wholeness' (as Çakmak claims of Gérôme's dead Caesar [2017, 158]), at once inviting her in and giving her no comfortable viewing point from which to enter the scene.

Some of Gérôme's earlier classical history paintings, such as *César mort* or *Phryne devant l'Aréopage*, had already been hostilely received by a good part of the art-critical

fraternity in the respective Salons of 1859 and 1861. However, the reception afforded *Le 7 décembre 1815* differs from that of the earlier paintings in its charged historiographical overtones; the sense of disdain or disgust felt before this latter work is compounded by its perceived socio-political threat to the established order. Hence, as Mitchell makes clear (1985, 52-54), the critics' almost unanimous outrage at the work is founded on an implicit distinction drawn between 'good' art providing a moral, civilizing message in depicting exemplary acts and figures in History (with an upper-case 'H') and a 'bad' art that stirs up the latent, ugly social divisions of 'political history' (with a lower-case 'h'). *Le 7 décembre 1815* clearly falls into this latter category. But we might add to Mitchell's observations that Ney's execution had an uninterrupted historiography of evoking feelings of guilt, shame, fear and disgust, echoing through the historians' accounts of the events of December 1815 from the moment news spread through Paris of Ney's surreptitious and squalid demise, neatly summed up in Lamartine's *Histoire de la Restauration* (1862, 432). In this sense, Gérôme's particular genius in *Le 7 décembre 1815* is to focus on the specific moment officially stipulated in the military penal code that demeaningly exposes the Napoleonic hero's body in the street in all its political and material obscenity. So the painting is categorically not the classical *mise en scène* of an exemplary death, but the unflinching depiction of an everyday cadaver, what we might call a *mise en obscène*. To conclude then, if Gérôme's representation of the immediate aftermath of Ney's execution arouses such strong and unsettling emotions, it is because it brings what Linda Nochlin (1971, 68) has called the usually private 'subheroic banality' of dying to the public drama of putting the Napoleonic hero to death.

### *Figures*

1. Gérôme, Jean-Léon. *Le 7 décembre 1815, neuf heures du matin*, 1868. Oil on canvas. 65.2 x 104.2 cm. Museums Sheffield, Sheffield. Courtesy of Museums Sheffield.
2. Jacquemart, Henri-Alfred. *Le maréchal Ney, le 7 décembre 1815*. 1868. Plaster. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nantes. VladoubidoOo [CC BY-SA 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>)] Accessed 23/02/2019

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<sup>1</sup> As a child, Marie-Thérèse, later duchesse d'Angoulême, had been aloof and arrogant. In an effort to temper her sense of superiority, Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette had forced her to frequent and play nicely with their servants' children and poorer children from outside the palace (Fraser, 2001, 197-198). These included Aglaé-Louise Auguié, daughter of the king's equerry and one of the queen's chambermaids, the future maréchale Ney. It is quite possible that this bitter personal memory contributed to the duchess's refusal to yield to pleas for clemency for her former playmate's husband.

<sup>2</sup> The statue was moved at the start of the twentieth century to allow for the construction of the Port-Royal RER station. It now stands opposite the station on the other side of the avenue de l'Observatoire to the west. For more on the commemoration of Ney in Paris, see Rolin (2002).

<sup>3</sup> This paradox of historical immediacy in *Le 7 décembre 1815* strengthened contemporary associations of Gérôme's art with the new aesthetics of photography (Allan 2010, 96). Critics, too, often view the painting

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through a photographic lens, such as Wolfgang Kemp (1985, 115) who claims that the enclosure wall against which Ney is shot glows with an unusual 'auratic light', as though the blank left by Ney stood as the photographic negative of the fallen hero. This photographic interpretation of Gérôme's depiction of Ney's death in turn invites readings of his art as a prefiguration of cinematographic recreations of historical events (Gotlieb 2010; Païni 2010, 334). However, Laurent Guido and Valentine Robert (2011) offer a useful corrective to the frequent assumption that Gérôme's art necessarily anticipates twentieth-century cinema.

<sup>4</sup> The belatedness of the historical gaze is redoubled here by what Cathy Caruth (1995, 11) identifies as the 'inherent belatedness' of trauma proper to the violence and scandal of Ney's execution that echo through successive French regimes and resonate still in the outraged critiques of Gérôme's work under the Second Empire.