



# GUSTAVE DORÉ ON THE SUBLIME

By Pierre Beaudry, July 2, 2013



**Figure 1** Gustave Doré (1832-1883), *Les Saltimbanques* (The Entertainers) 1874.

## FOREWORD

During the present crisis period, people will require pedagogical means to educate the emotions of their fellowman on the question of the sublime based on the principles of Frederick Schiller. This is one of the most important tasks that this organization has to undertake during the present historical period, because no other organization in the world is capable of providing such a need that is necessary to successfully fight and win against the forces of violence that the British-Dutch Empire is currently preparing against humanity with their population reduction schemes.

Therefore, since Lyn has stressed the importance of the principle of classical artistic composition as a means to understand and master the task before us, I thought that a brief investigation into the question of the sublime as treated by the French artist, Gustave Doré, would be a useful enterprise for elevating our morally degenerate society to a higher standard.

## THE SALTIMBANQUES AND THE CHRISTIAN MARTYRS OF GUSTAVE DORÉ.

*“We have to look at ourselves as playing the role that he (Shakespeare) did, in his Henry V. And by understanding the insight of what he did explicitly, which very few people seem to recognize any more, they don’t understand what the play is! They don’t really get the significance! They just think it’s an argument, of some kind. They don’t see that the one is the truth and the other is not – and that’s the difference.”*

Lyndon LaRouche

*“Think of the sublime as the only power capable of destroying terrorism.”*

Dehors Debonneheure

How can we take the physical principle of irony in classical artistic composition and use it as an effective tool to increase the energy-flux density in the minds of people from the top-down and not from the bottom-up? How can that form of intervention be used as the standard of measurement for the improvement of mankind? Those are the questions that Gustave Doré posed with *Les Saltimbanques*, and this is the reason why the intention underlying this painting is aimed at causing an axiomatic change in the mind of observer.

During the early 1870’s France was involved in a revanchist war with Germany and Gustave Doré, an Alsatian born artist, was painfully aware of what this tragedy meant for Europe, and for mankind more generally. Like all the patriotic German and French artists of his time, Doré was highly focused on using his artistic composition talents to elevate the spectator to a higher level of mental creativity by using all manners of ironies that were available to his art. For the German treatment of this same question, see my report [UNHEIMLICH!](#)

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The painting of *Les Saltimbanques* was meant to provoke a whole series of questions that are not easy to answer. For example: Why do classical artistic compositions always represent a state of mind instead of a simple object of sense perception? What is the purpose of such ironies? For example, this painting raises the question: “What is the difference between a tragic and a sublime conception of death?” Doré contributed the most to the elevation of the human soul by drawing and painting the difference between the tragic and the sublime. Like Frederick Schiller, Doré spared no opportunity to make that dramatic difference accessible to spectators with the intention of improving their minds by understanding the function of irony as the key to the process of increasing energy-flux density in the minds of people. This is what made Doré such a great classic.

Although he is mostly renowned for treating this subject in his illustrations of Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*, François Rabelais’s Five Books on *The Adventures of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, and Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Doré also demonstrated the dynamic between the tragic and the sublime in some of his less known paintings, notably in *Les Saltimbanques* and in *La Nuit dans le Cirque* or *Les Martyrs Chrétiens*. The French word “saltimbanque” comes from the Italian “*saltare in banco*,” meaning “to jump on a platform,” or more specifically to perform as an acrobat. However, the acrobatics that Doré performed pertain to the higher platform of the mind in defiance of the sense-certainty of perception.

The subject of *Les Saltimbanques* portrays the aftermath of a tragic accident that has just taken place to a family of circus performers, when their funambulist child fell from the tightrope he was walking on. It is important, although not necessary, to read what the artist had to say about that painting in order to better understand his intention. Just before he presented his work before the public, in 1874, Doré gave an interview to the American *Appleton’s Journal* representative in Paris, in which he clearly made known what he had in mind when he painted it. The dialogue with the interviewer went as follows:

[...] “[Interviewer:] Turning to that picture of ‘The Mountebanks,’ which had so struck me, I asked if the poor wounded child were going to die.

“Yes,” answered M. Doré, “he is dying. I wished to depict the tardy awakening of nature in those two hardened almost brutalized beings. To gain money they have killed their child and in killing him they have found out that they had hearts.”

“Is it to be exhibited?” I asked.

“I think of sending it to London to be exhibited and engraved there,” he answered. “Had it been finished, I should have sent it to the Salon, where it would have made a good contrast with ‘The Christian Martyrs.’ Being in so entirely different a style. The English engraver wishes me to call it ‘Behind the Scenes,’ but its French title will be I think simply ‘Agony.’”

“It matters little what it is called,” I said, “It tells its own story; but were it mine, I should call it, in English, ‘Heartbreak.’ ” ([Appleton’s Journal](#), Issues 276-301, D. Appleton and Company, New York, 1874, p. 81)

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Of course, the interviewer had obviously completely missed the point that Doré was making, because the “tardy awakening of nature” was not referring to a “practical image” that people identified with. Doré was referencing the “sublime.” While most people tend to see only the tragic aspect of this painting and tend to give it some popular opinion interpretation, the author made it plain, in that interview, what his intention was. The tableau of *Les Saltimbanques* requires no description and no interpretation; simply an insight into the creative process. The question the critical observer must ask is: “Whose agony is Doré referring to?” Is it the agony of the people inside of the painting or is it the agony outside of it? The fact that all of the eyes inside of the painting are either closed or staring vacantly outside the frame of this painting should be enough to make you realize that the question was intended for you, the spectator, to solve. The intention is not to sympathize with the “Agony” of the saltimbanques, but to internalize what this “Agony” means for the benefit of mankind.

Although Doré rightfully identified the painting as “Agony,” the state of mind of agony in the composition must be taken to a higher level than that of the tragic moment presented to sense perception inside of the painting. Doré is referring to the paradoxical state of mind that has one foot inside and the other outside of the box, so-to speak. However, when you include the active participation of the “outside” spectator, and place him in such a paradoxical state, within the process of the composition, then everything is changed. What you have, here, is a clinical insight into the nature of clownesque characters reflecting the paradoxical nature of human life in general. The painting acts like a drama where the spectator must go through an axiomatic change. However, most people will not relate to that, because they won’t even think to look for that. And, that is what the drama is all about: necessity or freedom! Here is how Frederick Schiller identified the solution to this paradoxical state. In his essay *On the Sublime*, Schiller wrote:

“‘No man must 'must',” the Jew Nathan says to the Dervish, and this adage is truer to a greater extent than one would perhaps be willing to allow. The will is the genetic characteristic of man as species, and even reason is only its eternal rule. All nature proceeds rationally; man's prerogative is merely that he proceeds rationally with consciousness and intent. All other things “must”; man is the being that wills.

“For just this reason nothing is so unworthy of man than to suffer violence, for violence undoes him. Whoever offers us violence calls into question nothing less than our humanity; whoever suffers this cravenly throws his humanity away. But this claim to absolute liberation from everything violent seems to presuppose a being possessing force enough to repel every other force from itself. If it is claimed by a being who does not occupy the highest rank in the realm of forces, an unhappy contradiction arises thence between aspiration and capacity. (Frederick von Schiller, *On the Sublime*, New York, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1984, p. 193)

Unfortunately, some people do not recognize reason and will commit violence against mankind, because what they see is what they want to see; and they become slaves of sense perception. That is the most evil characteristic of oligarchism. What oligarchs want to see is what is obvious to their eyes; and that is why they are tragic characters. However, what they do not see, and this is what leads to their demise, is that the cowardness of mankind can be overpowered by the human will.

What Doré does, is he puts you, the spectator, before a paradox that I would call the *paradox of the saltimbanques*, which cannot be discovered unless the painting is investigated from the vantage point of the sublime as opposed to the tragic. Then, you will discover certain shadows which reflect a state of mind as opposed to the mere objects of perception. The higher sublime emotion that Doré is calling on the spectator to discover in his own mind resides, therefore, in taking a step back from the painting, get out of the box completely, and ask: “What is the difference between the tragic and the sublime?” And, in order to be able to answer that question, the spectator has to identify and solve the *paradox of the saltimbanque*.

How do you do that? First of all, you have to identify that the purpose of a saltimbanque is to make people laugh at their own misfortunes. In that sense, there is a clown in each one of us although we may not always aspire to make people laugh. Regardless, that is the laughable nature of a clown. However, what happens when the fool’s mask drops and reveals the truth? When you look at the Doré painting, no one laughs. Why not? That’s the problem Doré wants you to solve. Why do you “normally” laugh at a clown’s misfortune and yet you cannot laugh before this painting? Doré has put you into the trap of sense deception: “How can people laugh at the tragedy of a saltimbanque?” You cannot, and yet you have to because that is the saltimbanque purpose. How is the spectator supposed to react before such a paradoxical quandary? The situation is as if you were trapped one foot in the box and one foot outside of the box. And, if you don’t watch yourself, you can very easily be pulled into the trap with both feet inside of the box. Here, you are supposed to laugh and you cannot laugh! This is not a very comfortable situation to be in.



**Figure 2** Gustave Doré, *La Nuit dans le Cirque*. 1871. (The Night in the Circus), also known as *Les Martyrs Chrétiens*, (Christian Martyrs).

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Doré puts you in such a quandary, because he wants you to discover that the higher purpose of artistic composition has the power of destroying violence against mankind; when you willfully refuse to be a victim. He calls on the observer to leave behind him the domain of pleasure and pain, abandon the fallacies of sense certainty, and access the absolute liberation of the mind. In order to help you discover this, he even told the interviewer that his intent was to contrast the *Les Saltimbanques* with another painting that he had composed three years earlier, at the time of the German invasion of France, and which he entitled *The Night in the Circus*, or *Christian Martyrs*. (Figure 2)

These Christians are all dying in the circus, on Nero's order, just like the child is dying, on his parent's order. Ask yourself: "What's the difference between the two forms of death?" *Les Saltimbanques* is completely tragic; the *Christian Martyrs* is completely sublime. What Doré represented in both paintings, is that the two contradictory emotions are ultimately dependent on what one considers the purpose of human life. One "*must*" die like an animal; the other is "*willing*" to die like a human being. The same brutalized humanity can go either way, depending on the difference in nature between man and beast. This is the difference that Doré wanted the spectator to discover by comparing the two paintings. How did he represent that difference? By pointing to the fact that the sublime is the human power that is capable of acting against and destroy the terrorist nature of oligarchism.

Finally, the point that Doré is making is that the true meaning of human life is to empower mankind with the strength of acting against the domination of powers and principalities in the world. Remember what Doré said: "I wished to depict the tardy awakening of nature in those two hardened almost brutalized beings." In other words, it is the tragic that makes clowns of us all, not the clown that makes the tragic. Thus, don't rely on the genius of others to take up leadership in this insane world. You do not need the minds of others when you mind the needs of others; you merely need to internalize the benefit of others in your own sublimity.

**FIN**