
THE PAINTING *of* MODERN LIFE

PARIS IN THE ART OF MANET AND HIS FOLLOWERS

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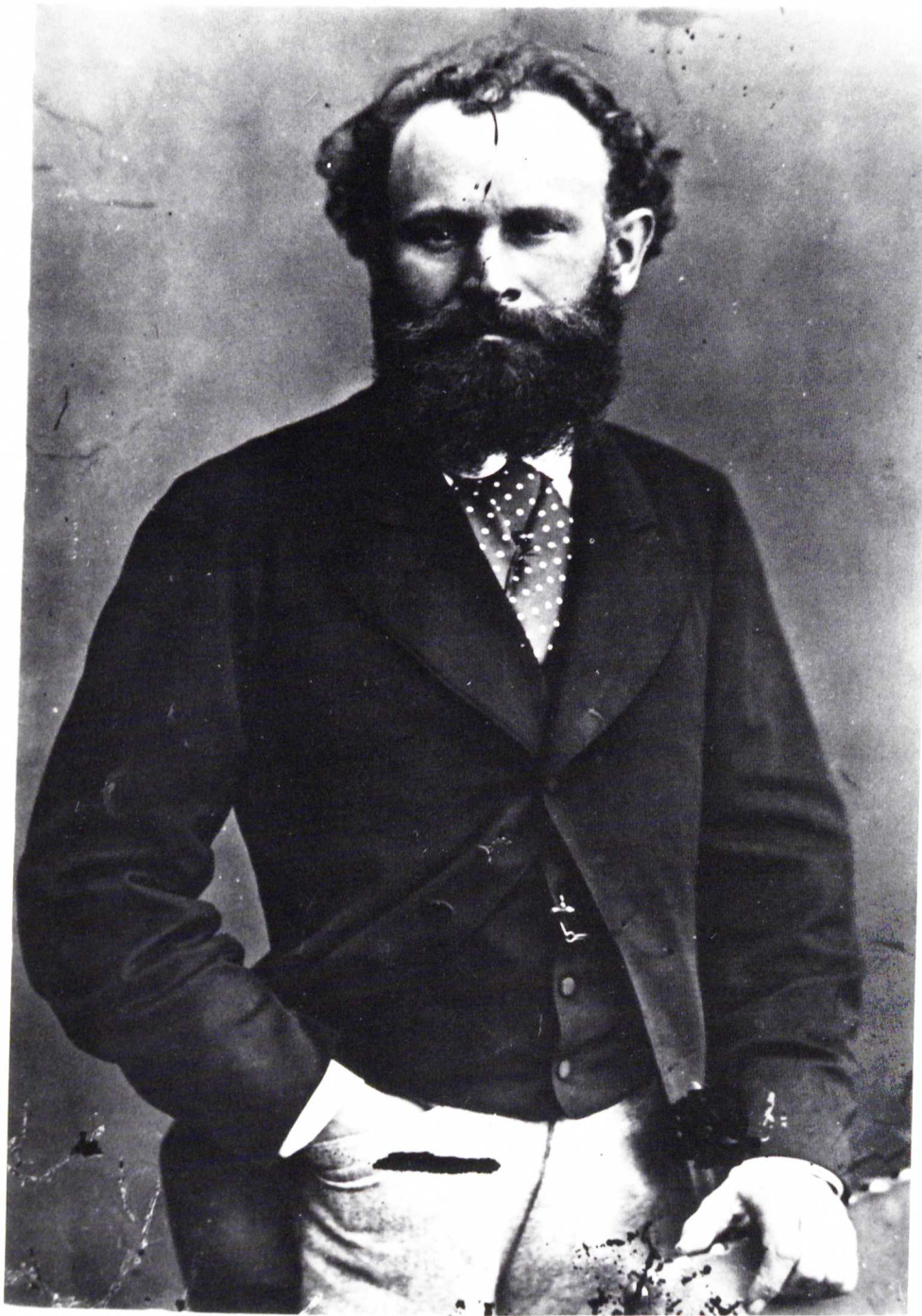
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CONTENTS

	Illustrations · ix
	Acknowledgements · xvii
	Introduction · 3
CHAPTER ONE	The View from Notre-Dame · 23
CHAPTER TWO	Olympia's Choice · 79
CHAPTER THREE	The Environs of Paris · 147
CHAPTER FOUR	A Bar at the Folies-Bergère · 205
	Conclusion · 259
	Notes · 271
	Bibliography · 319
	Index · 327



Nadar, photograph of Manet, c. 1875.

INTRODUCTION

This book is about Impressionist painting and Paris. It had its beginnings, as far as I can tell, in some paragraphs by Meyer Schapiro, published first in January 1937 in a short-lived journal called *Marxist Quarterly*. Early Impressionism, wrote Schapiro, depended for its force on something more than painterly hedonism or a simple appetite for sunshine and colour. The art of Manet and his followers had a distinct “moral aspect,” visible above all in the way it dovetailed an account of visual truth with one of social freedom.

Early Impressionism . . . had a moral aspect. In its discovery of a constantly changing phenomenal outdoor world of which the shapes depended on the momentary position of the causal or mobile spectator, there was an implicit criticism of symbolic social and domestic formalities, or at least a norm opposed to these. It is remarkable how many pictures we have in early Impressionism of informal and spontaneous sociability, of breakfasts, picnics, promenades, boating trips, holidays and vacation travel. These urban idylls not only present the objective forms of bourgeois recreation in the 1860's and 1870's; they also reflect in the very choice of subjects and in the new aesthetic devices the conception of art as solely a field of individual enjoyment, without reference to ideas and motives, and they presuppose the cultivation of these pleasures as the highest field of freedom for an enlightened bourgeois detached from the official beliefs of his class. In enjoying realistic pictures of his surroundings as a spectacle of traffic and changing atmospheres, the cultivated rentier was experiencing in its phenomenal aspect that mobility of the environment, the market and of industry to which he owes his income and his freedom. And in the new Impressionist techniques which broke things up into finely discriminated points of color, as well as in the “accidental” momentary vision, he found, in a degree hitherto unknown in art, conditions of sensibility closely related to those of the urban promenade and the refined consumer of luxury goods.

As the contexts of bourgeois sociability shifted from community, family and church to commercialized or privately improvised forms—the streets, the cafés and resorts—the resulting consciousness of individual freedom involved more and more an estrangement from older ties; and those imaginative members of the middle class who accepted the norms of freedom, but lacked the economic means to attain them, were spiritually torn by a sense of helpless isolation in an anonymous indifferent mass. By 1880 the enjoying individual becomes rare in Impressionist



1. Edouard Manet, *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863.

art; only the private spectacle of nature is left. And in neo-Impressionism, which restores and even monumentalizes the figures, the social group breaks up into isolated spectators, who do not communicate with each other, or consists of mechanically repeated dances submitted to a preordained movement with little spontaneity.¹

The argument in these paragraphs has some strange shifts, and I have done my share of quibbling with them. For instance, the actual bourgeois's being brought on to enjoy Impressionist painting, and to revel in its consonance with his day-to-day experience, is no doubt marvellous; but it does not seem to me much more than a metaphor, and is surely not warranted by what we know of this painting's first purchasers and enthusiasts. Equally, it is not clear if Schapiro believes that once upon a time the bourgeoisie, or at least its enlightened members, really did delight in an "informal and spontaneous sociability," and that only later did estrangement and isolation

come to characterize the pleasures on offer in these “commercialized or privately improvised forms.” If that is the argument, we might ask how informal and spontaneous is the sociability depicted already in Manet’s *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, or for that matter in Monet’s, with its anxious regard for the latest fashions and its discreet servant (in livery?) crouched on the other side of the tree.

But these objections are small beer. Schapiro’s “Nature of Abstract Art” was an essay, after all; and the few lines it devoted to Impressionist painting still seem to me the best thing on the subject, simply because they suggest so tellingly that the form of the new art is inseparable from its content—those “objective forms of bourgeois recreation in the 1860’s and 1870’s.”

That is the suggestion which this book takes up. The reader will find that discussing it in any detail—and trying to get at least a little way beyond suggestion and metaphor—involves me in repeated use of the terms “class,” “ideology,” “spectacle,” and “modernism.” Therefore it might be helpful if I offered straightaway some definitions of concepts which may appear obscure, or at any rate disputable. The trouble is that defining any one of them, especially the first, entails a string of very general, not to say banal, propositions on the nature of society as such. Nevertheless I shall proceed, with only the standard proviso that the definitions which follow are not worth much apart from the instances given in the text.

2. Claude Monet, *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, 1865–66.



It sounds right—it corresponds to normal usage—to say that any social order consists primarily of classifications. What else do we usually mean by the word “society” but a set of means for solidarity, distance, belonging, and exclusion? These things are needed pre-eminently to enable the production of material life—to fix an order in which men and women can make their living and have some confidence that they will continue to do so. Orders of this sort appear to be established most potently by representations or systems of signs, and it does not seem to me to trivialize the concept of “social formation”—or necessarily to give it an idealist as opposed to a materialist gloss—to describe it as a hierarchy of representations. That way one avoids the worst pitfalls of vulgar Marxism, in particular the difficulties involved in claiming that the base of any social formation is some brute facticity made of sterner and solider stuff than signs—for instance, the stuff of economic life. It is one thing (and still necessary) to insist on the determinate weight in society of those arrangements we call economic; it is another to believe that in doing so we have poked through the texture of signs and conventions to the bedrock of matter and action upon it. Economic life—the “economy,” the economic realm, sphere, level, instance, or what-have-you—is in itself a realm of representations. How else are we to characterize money, for instance, or the commodity form, or the wage contract?

I believe it is possible to put this kind of stress on representation and remain, as I want to, within the orbit of historical materialism. Everything depends on how we picture the links between any one set of representations and the totality which Marx called “social practice.” In other words, the notion of social activity outlined so far can be sustained only if we simultaneously recognize that the world of representations does not fall out neatly into watertight sets or systems or “signifying practices.” Society is a battlefield of representations, on which the limits and coherence of any given set are constantly being fought for and regularly spoilt. Thus it makes sense to say that representations are continually subject to the test of a reality more basic than themselves—the test of social practice. Social practice *is* that complexity which always outruns the constraints of a given discourse; it is the overlap and interference of representations; it is their rearrangement in use; it is the test which consolidates or disintegrates our categories, which makes or unmakes a concept, which blurs the edge of a particular language game and makes it difficult (though possible) to distinguish between a mistake and a metaphor. (And in case the imagery of plenitude which creeps in at this point should be misread, I shall add that it too—social practice itself—is analyzable, at least in its overall structures and tendencies.)

In capitalist society, economic representations are the matrix around which all others are organized. In particular, the class of an individual—his or her effective possession of or separation from the means of production—is the determinant fact of social life. This is not to say that from it can be read off immediately the individual's religious beliefs, voting habits, choice of clothes, sense of self, aesthetic preferences, and sexual morality. All of these are articulated within particular, separate worlds of representation; but these worlds are constricted and invaded by the determining nexus of class; and often in the nineteenth century the presence of class as the organizing structure of each separate sphere is gross and palpable: only think of the history of bourgeois costume, or the various ways in which the logical structure of market economics came to dominate the accounts on offer of the self and others. This makes it possible to expand the concept of class to include facts other than the economic: for instance, to talk of certain forms of entertainment or sexuality as “bourgeois.” There seems to me no harm in doing so: it registers a connection which was perceived by the actors themselves, and it would be pedantry to avoid the usage altogether; but we should be clear about the liberties being taken and beware, for example, of calling things “inherently bourgeois” when what we are pointing to is relation, not inherence. This caution has more of a point, perhaps, when we turn from the bourgeoisie to its great opposite in the nineteenth century, since here we are so clearly dealing with a class and a set of “class characteristics” still in the making—as evinced by the simple instability of vocabulary in the case, from *peuple* to *prolétariat*, from *classes laborieuses* to *classe ouvrière*.

Class will in any case necessarily be a complex matter: to make the simplest point, there is never only one “means of production” in society for individuals to possess or be denied: any social formation is always a palimpsest of old and new modes of production, hence old and new classes, and hybrids born of their mating. Notably, for the purposes of this book, it is clear that the reality designated at the time—in the 1870s, say—as *petit bourgeois* included men and women whose trades had previously allowed them a modicum of security in the city's economic life, but who had been robbed of that small safety by the growth of large-scale industry and commerce; but it also included new groups of workers—clerks, shop assistants, and the like—who were the products, offensively brand-new and ambitious, of the same economic changes, and whose instability had nothing to do with the loss of bygone status but, rather, with the inability of the social system to decide what their situation, high or low, might be in the new order of things. To call these different people *petits bourgeois* was not wrong: it may strike us now as profound of contemporaries to

have seen from the start how the various fractions would be made, by monopoly capitalism, into one thing. But the one thing, in the case of class, is regularly made out of the many and various.

It is somewhat the same with ideology, since I use the word to indicate the existence in society of distinct and singular bodies of knowledge: *orders* of knowing, most often imposed on quite disparate bits and pieces of representation.² The sign of an ideology is a kind of inertness in discourse: a fixed pattern of imagery and belief, a syntax which seems obligatory, a set of permitted modes of seeing and saying; each with its own structure of closure and disclosure, its own horizons, its way of providing certain perceptions and rendering others unthinkable, aberrant, or extreme. And these things are done—I suppose this is the other suggestion carried in the word—as it were *surreptitiously*. Which is to say that ideologies, like any forms of knowledge, are constructs; they are meanings produced in a special and partial social practice; they are most often tied to the attitudes and experiences of a particular class, and therefore at odds, at least to some extent, with the attitudes and experience of those who do not belong to it. (This is a cautious statement of the case: in fact there is often a positive antagonism between the ideological frames of reference belonging to different and conflicting classes; it is hard to avoid the sense of bourgeois ideology actively struggling in the nineteenth century to include, invert, or displace the meanings of those classes the bourgeoisie sought to dominate. I shall point to such a struggle taking place, for example, in the café-concert, or in the attempts made to stabilize an image of prostitution.) But in any case, the function of ideology is as far as possible to dispose of the very ground for such conflicts. Ideologies tend to deny in their very structure and procedures that they have any such thing: knowledge, in ideology, is not a procedure but a simple array; and insofar as pictures or statements possess a structure at all, it is one provided for them by the Real. Ideologies naturalize representation, one might say: they present constructed and disputable meanings as if they were hardly meanings at all, but, rather, forms inherent in the world-out-there which the observer is privileged to intuit directly.

Therefore one ought to beware of a notion of ideology which conceives it merely as a set of images, ideas, and “mistakes,” for its action on and in the process of representation is different from this: it is more internal, more interminable. Rather, an ideology is a set of limits to discourse; a set of resistances, repetitions, kinds of circularity. It is that which closes speech against consciousness of itself as production, as process, as practice, as subsistence and contingency. And of necessity this work of deletion is never done: it would hardly make sense to think of it finished.

About the concepts of “spectacle” and “spectacular society” it is not so easy to be cut and dried. They were developed first in the mid-1960s as part of the theoretical work of a group called the Situationist International, and they represent an effort to theorize the implications for capitalist society of the progressive shift within production towards the provision of consumer goods and services, and the accompanying “colonization of everyday life.”³ The word “colonization” conjures up associations with the Marxist theory of imperialism, and is meant to. It points to a massive *internal* extension of the capitalist market—the invasion and restructuring of whole areas of free time, private life, leisure, and personal expression which had been left, in the first push to constitute an urban proletariat, relatively uncontrolled. It indicates a new phase of commodity production—the marketing, the making-into-commodities, of whole areas of social practice which had once been referred to casually as everyday life.

The concept of spectacle is thus an attempt—a partial and unfinished one—to bring into theoretical order a diverse set of symptoms which are normally treated, by bourgeois sociology or conventional Leftism, as anecdotal trappings affixed somewhat lightly to the old economic order: “consumerism,” for instance, or “the society of leisure”; the rise of mass media, the expansion of advertising, the hypertrophy of official diversions (Olympic Games, party conventions, *biennales*). The Situationists were primarily interested, in ways which have since become fashionable, in the possible or actual crisis of this attempt to regulate or supplant the sphere of the personal, private, and everyday. They described the erosion of family controls in later capitalist society, and derided their febrile replacements—the apparatus of welfare, social work, and psychiatry. They put great stress on, and a degree of faith in, the signs of strain in just this area: the question of Youth, the multiplication of delinquent subcultures, the strange career of “clinical depression,” the inner-city landscape of racism and decay. The concept of spectacle, in other words, was an attempt to revise the theory of capitalism from a largely Marxist point of view. The most celebrated of Situationist metaphors—it comes from a book by Guy Debord—is meant more soberly than it may seem at first sight: “The spectacle is *capital* accumulated until it becomes an image.”⁴

There are various problems here: for instance, deciding when exactly the spectacular society can be said to begin. One is obviously not describing some neat temporality but, rather, a shift—to some extent an oscillation—from one kind of capitalist production to another. But certainly the Paris that Meyer Schapiro was celebrating, in which commercialized forms of life and leisure were so insistently replacing those “privately improvised,” does seem to fit the preceding description quite well. And it will be argued

Mallarmé's statement of the modernist case is primitive, and therefore optimistic and clear-cut—perhaps misguidedly so—in its picture of the future. The stress on exactness, simplicity, and steadfast attention is something which was to recur in the next hundred years, but it can hardly be said to be characteristic of the art to which Manet gave birth. The steadfast gaze rather quickly gave way to uncertainty (in this the case of Cézanne is exemplary). Doubts about vision became doubts about almost everything involved in the act of painting; and in time the uncertainty became a value in its own right; we could almost say it became an aesthetic. A special and effective rhetoric was devised—it is in full possession of the field by the time one encounters it in the art criticism of the Symboliste magazines of the late 1880s—in which the preference of painting for the not-known, the not-arranged, and the not-interpreted was taken largely as an article of faith. Painting has a subject, these critics say, and it is rightly that area of experience we dismiss in practical life as vestigial and next to nothing.⁸ Art seeks out the edges of things, of understanding; therefore its favourite modes are irony, negation, deadpan, the pretence of ignorance or innocence. It prefers the unfinished: the syntactically unstable, the semantically malformed. It produces and savours discrepancy in what it shows and how it shows it, since the highest wisdom is knowing that things and pictures do not add up.

This is an approximate definition of modernism, and it is not meant to suggest that modern art is incapable of criticizing its own assumptions or exceeding this one frame of reference. A proper treatment of Picasso's *Demiselles d'Avignon*, say, or Eliot's *Ash Wednesday*, would be concerned with the hold of conventions of uncertainty in such cases, but also with the degree to which both works succeed in turning the conventions against themselves, so that Picasso might be said to end up with an image of the female body which is not simply a tissue of fragments (it is more solid and whole than most others he painted in less refractory modes), and Eliot eventually to state the grounds of Christian belief with a kind of orderly plainness.

In general, the terms of modernism are not to be conceived as separate from the particular projects—the specific attempts at meaning—in which they are restated. An example of that truism would be the notorious history of modernism's concern for "flatness." Certainly it is true that the two dimensions of the picture surface were time and again recovered as a striking fact by painters after Courbet. But I think that the question we should be asking in this case is *why* that literal presence of surface went on being interesting for art. How could a matter of effect or procedure seemingly stand in for value in this way? What was it that made it vivid?

The details of an answer will of course be open to argument as to emphasis, evidence, and so forth; but surely the answer must take approximately this *form*. If the fact of flatness was compelling and tractable for art—in the way it was for Manet and Cézanne, for example—that must have been because it was made to stand for something: some particular and substantial set of qualities which took their place in a picture of the world. So that the richness of the avant-garde, conceived as a set of contexts for art in the years between, say, 1860 and 1918, might best be redescribed in terms of its ability to give flatness such complex and compatible values—values which necessarily derived from elsewhere than art. On various occasions, for instance, flatness was imagined to be some kind of analogue of the “Popular” (a curious fiction whose history is partly traced in chapter four). It was therefore made as plain, workmanlike, and emphatic as the painter could manage; loaded brushes and artisans’ combs were held to be appropriate tools; painting was henceforth honest manual labour. (A belief of this kind underlies even Mallarmé’s argument: earlier in the 1876 text he can be found describing the Impressionist as “the energetic modern worker” about to supplant “the old imaginative artist,”⁹ and greeting the development on the whole with glee.) Or flatness could signify modernity, with the surface meant to conjure up the mere two dimensions of posters, labels, fashion prints, and photographs. There were painters who took those same two dimensions, in what might seem a more straightforwardly modernist way, to represent the simple fact of Art, from which other meanings were excluded. But during this period that too was most often an argument about the world and art’s relation to it—a quite complex argument, and stated as such. Painting would replace or displace the Real, accordingly, for reasons having to do with the nature of subjectivity, or city life, or the truths revealed by higher mathematics. And finally, unbrokenness of surface could be seen—by Cézanne par excellence—as standing for the evenness of seeing itself, the actual form of our knowledge of things. That very claim, in turn, was repeatedly felt to be some kind of aggression on the audience, on the ordinary bourgeois. Flatness was construed as a barrier put up against the viewer’s normal wish to enter a picture and dream, to have it be a space apart from life in which the mind would be free to make its own connections.

My point is simply that flatness in its heyday *was* these various meanings and valuations; they were its substance, they were what it was seen *as*; their particularity was what made flatness a matter to be painted. Flatness was therefore in play—as an irreducible, technical fact of painting—with all of these totalizations, all of these attempts to make it a metaphor. Of course, in a way it resisted the metaphors, and the painters we most admire

insisted also on its being an awkward, empirical quiddity; but “also” is the key word here: there was no fact without the metaphor, no medium without its being made the vehicle of some sense or other.

In other words, the terms of modernism—even or especially those that seemed to be given in the simple act of painting—were also constructs; and part of the purpose of this book is to describe the circumstances in which they first crystallized out. Those last two words are intended to suggest a sort of sealing and congealing as well as a simple assumption of order, since at the same time that the terms were arrived at there was a closure against consciousness of them *being* terms, and therefore against an awareness of modernism having circumstances—apart from the tautologous one of modernity. That blanking out of history is hard to escape from. It is not enough to say, as we all do now, that the terms of modernism and the facts of Parisian life are somehow linked. Such an insight too easily leads to our asserting not much more than the tautology I just referred

4. Pierre-Auguste Renoir,
Les Parapluies, 1881-86.





5. Gustave Caillebotte, *Rue de Paris, temps de pluie*, 1877.

to. The argument I go on to make in this book is somewhat less watertight, I hope: I wish to show that the circumstances of modernism were not modern, and only became so by being given the forms called “spectacle.” On the face of things it seems that Impressionist painting was one of those forms, but the question is: How completely? Are we to take Impressionism’s repertoire of subjects and devices as merely complicit in the spectacle—lending it consistency or even charm—or as somehow disclosing it as farce or tragedy? Is the truth of the new painting to be found in Renoir’s *Parapluies* or in Caillebotte’s *Rue de Paris, temps de pluie*—in the sheer appeal of modernity, or its unexpected desolation? Are they grand and poetic still, these people in their cravats and patent-leather shoes, “these millions . . . who do not need to know one another” and who lead their modern lives accordingly?¹⁰ Or has something occurred to make the very idea of heroism in modern life—even one as hedged in with ironies as Baudelaire’s had been—already seem the relic of a simpler age?

There are surely readers who right from the start of this introduction found Schapiro's account overheated, and have been wondering since where the traditional notion of Impressionism has gone. Are we supposed these days to give up believing in the "painting of light" and the simple determination of these artists to look and depict without letting the mind interfere too much? The answer to that question is obviously no. The problem, on the contrary, is to rediscover the force of these terms—light, looking, strict adherence to the facts of vision—since they have nowadays become anodyne. Here, for example, is Jules Laforgue's description of the Impressionist at work, in an article written in 1883:

In a landscape bathed with light, in which entities are modelled as if in coloured grisaille, the academic painter sees nothing but white light spreading everywhere, whilst the Impressionist sees it bathing everything not in dead whiteness, but in a thousand conflicting vibrations, in rich prismatic decompositions of colour. Where the academic sees only lines at the edges of things, holding modelling in place, the Impressionist sees real living lines, without geometrical form, built from thousands of irregular touches which, at a distance, give the thing life. Where the academic sees only things set down in regular, separate positions within an armature of purely theoretical lines, the Impressionist sees perspective established by thousands of imperceptible tones and touches, by the variety of atmospheric states, with each plane not immobile but shifting.

. . . The Impressionist sees and renders nature as she is, which is to say solely by means of coloured vibrations. Neither drawing, nor light, nor modelling, nor perspective, nor chiaroscuro: these infantile classifications all resolve in reality into coloured vibrations, and must be obtained on the canvas solely by coloured vibrations.

In this small and limited exhibition at Gurlitt's, the formula is clearest in Monet . . . and Pissarro . . . where everything is obtained by means of a thousand small touches, dancing off in all directions like so many straws of colour—each struggling for survival in the overall impression [*en concurrence vitale pour l'impression d'ensemble*]. No more isolated melodies, the whole thing is a symphony, which itself is life, living and changing, like the "forest voices" of Wagner's theories each struggling for existence in the great voice of the forest, just as the Unconscious, the law of the world, is the great melodic voice resulting from the symphony of consciousnesses of races and individuals. Such is the principle of the Impressionist school of *plein air*. And the eye of the master will be the one which will discern and render the keenest gradations and decompositions, and that on a simple flat canvas. This principle has been applied in France, not systematically but by men of genius, in poetry and in the novel.

This description will probably strike the late-twentieth-century reader as outlandish, at least in its final paragraph. We are not used to accounts of unprejudiced looking which lead so precipitately to Wagner's theories of symphonic form and Hartmann's of the Unconscious. Impressionism

for us is a domestic and charming style, and excesses of enthusiasm or derogation in the face of it seem equally far from the truth. Were not those writers in 1877 simply facetious when they recoiled from Renoir's *Balanoire*—of all pictures!—with the epithets “bizarre,” “apocalyptic,” and “sublime de grotesque”?¹¹ Are we supposed to take any more seriously Laforgue's Darwinian straws of colour, his forest voices, or those brush-strokes of Renoir's which one critic perceived as leaving light behind them like “grease spots on the clothing of his figures”?¹²

I am not sure. These epithets and analogies are foreign to us now, but it seems safe to assume that there was something in the paintings that originally provoked them. (There is no better writing on Impressionism than Laforgue's: his excess seems bound up with his powers of description.* He was, after all, a master of understatement where he thought it appropriate). These critics' original sense of things can be retrieved, I think, only if we try to unlearn our present ease with Impressionism—above all our conviction that its dealings with the world are somehow specially direct.

This will be partly a matter of looking at Impressionist pictures again and being struck by their strangeness. Let us take, for example, a landscape Pissarro showed at the same exhibition in which Renoir's *Balanoire* ap-

* Laforgue's description of the Impressionist project—the passage I quoted was collected in his *Mélanges posthumes*, pp. 136–38—brings Cézanne to mind. In Cézanne's art, “seeing” is certain that it takes possession not just of straws of colour but of objects made out of them; it believes that it *has* the world, in all its fullness and articulation, and that the world is present *in seeing, strictly and narrowly conceived*. Yet at the same time it seems to grow progressively uncertain as to how its procedures give rise to the separateness and connection of things. Thus the task of representation comes to be twofold: to demonstrate the fixity and substance of the world out there, but also to admit that the seer does not know—most probably cannot know—how his or her own sight makes objects possible. The more one looks, the more one attends to interruptions and paradoxes in perception, and the more one suspects that the fixity of things is to be found exactly there, at the point where vision gives up the ghost. (The edges of things, to take an example Cézanne mused over in his letters, are undoubtedly *there* in vision, but in a specially perplexing way. A painter can fix them with a final line, but that line should somehow enact its own arbitrariness. Out of the manifold edges of an apple or a shoulder the painter makes one edge, visibly a contrivance, visually nonetheless convincing.)

In Cézanne, we could say, painting took the ideology of the visual—the notion of seeing as a separate activity with its own truth, its own peculiar access to the thing-in-itself—to its limits and breaking point. It is not surprising that this was done in a degree of isolation from the actual community of modernism (since an ideological community can be defined as that set of discursive and institutional constraints which turns its members always away from the edges or inconsistencies of their practice). Nor is it odd that Cézanne's achievement was immediately subject to a series of strong misreadings by those who remained in the avant-garde world—the series culminating in that proposed by the Cubists, whereby Cézanne's art was rendered serviceable for a further round of modernist claims to truth (know-nothing epistemology abruptly giving way to know-everything ontology, the latter more than half pretending to be philosophy, which at least the former had not).



6. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *La Balançoire*, 1876.

peared, his *Coin de village, effet d'hiver* (Plate I). Pissarro's whole contribution to the show that year came in for rough handling from the critics. "M. Pissarro," wrote one Ernest Fillonneau, "is becoming completely unintelligible. He puts together in his pictures all the colours of the rainbow; he is violent, hard, brutal. From an *effet* which might well have been acceptable, he makes something unbelievable, against seeing and even against reason."¹³ It was not enough, some writers thought, for the artist's friends to tell the viewer to stand back and see the pictures from the other side of the room:

We have had enough of them repeating that, to judge the Impressionists, one has to take one's distance. At fifty paces, they assure us, arms bulge, naked legs protrude from skirts, eyes light up, the painting takes on body, ease, movement, each colour asserts itself and each tone leaps to its proper place. Thus it gives the impression of something seen and translated by the feelings rather than with every form defined. One or two of the coterie just about realize this programme; and all of them take pains, the sweat standing out on their brow, to spread their colour all over the canvas, in pursuit of transparency all the while, and, putting green in their shadows, they stay muddy, without freshness or relief.¹⁴

7. Paul Cézanne, *Une Scène au bord de la mer*, 1877.



Cézanne one knew about: he was clearly mad. But on reflection, Pissarro was almost as wayward:

There is no way to figure out M. Cezanne's [*sic*] *impressions d'après nature*; I took them for palettes that had not been cleaned. But M. Pissarro's landscapes are no more legible and no less prodigious. Seen close up, they are incomprehensible and awful; seen from afar, they are awful and incomprehensible. They are like rebuses with no solution.¹⁵

These criticisms are ungenerous, but they point to things in the paintings which truly are odd and ought to be recognized as such. The pattern of brushstrokes which Pissarro uses on the right-hand side of the *Coin de village*—where the branches half obscure the sides of a house, some shuttered windows, and a door—is very near to not being pattern at all (Plate II). If we look at the picture at arm's length (the painter's distance), the various marks which may stand for branches, shadow, scrub, plaster, tiling, the lines of eaves or tree trunks, all do their job of representing in a way which barely makes sense. The individual marks are scratched and spread into one another as if they had been worked over too long or too emphatically; sometimes the surface of the paint is visibly swollen with separate dabs of raw colour, and sometimes it is overlaid, almost cancelled out, with one or two declarative smears of red or green. The purpose of all this is not clear at arm's length: it is hard to see what produced the build-ups and erasures, or the sudden shifts of colour along the line of a branch or the edge of a roof. And presumably these things would have been obscure even to the painter as he put the particular touches down.

Not irretrievably so, of course: if he moved back from his work the marks would eventually congeal and release something seen—the way light falls on a house front or the space between one tree trunk and another. The technique was nonetheless strange, for as Pissarro was painting—I mean the word “painting” in a crude materialist way, as modernist writers might use it—he would have had no very well-formed notion of what the paint could stand for and how effectively. While it was being made the likeness was barely one at all, and at best the justice of it was provisional; no doubt the thing did resolve at a distance, and the painter went back and back to the proper point to look and compare. But the walk back was itself an odd distancing; it was as if a space had to be kept between painting and representing: the two procedures must never quite mesh, they were not to be seen as part and parcel of each other. That was because (the logic here was central to the modernist case) the normal habits of representation must not be given a chance to function; they must somehow or other be outlawed. The established equivalents in paint—between that colour and that shadow or that kind of line and that kind of undergrowth—are always

false. They are shortcuts for hand and eye and brain which tell us nothing we do not already know; and what we know already is not worth rehearsing in paint.

So painting put equivalence at a distance. No doubt Pissarro and his friends believed that the look of the world would be found eventually, but only in a dance of likenesses guessed at or half glimpsed, and always on the point of disappearing into mere matter. For it was matter—paint itself—which was the key to any authentic likeness being rediscovered.

There is certainly a set of Realist intentions still at work here, and even the stress on painterly substance could be and occasionally was justified in empirical terms. “For the sun,” said Alfred Sisley, “if it softens certain parts of the landscape, intensifies others, and these effects of light which take on an almost material form in nature must be rendered in material form on canvas.”¹⁶ Perhaps Pissarro would have been happy with some such form of words applied to his painting; but they still would not have explained the kind of elaborate indirectness I have been pointing to. It does not seem to follow, after all, from a simple commitment to optical truth. Painting was now supposed to be about seeing, and the painter determined to stick to the look of a scene at all costs. But doing so proved exquisitely difficult: it involved a set of fragile and unprecedented equations between the painted and the visible, and above all it meant keeping the two terms of the equation apart, insisting on them as separate quantities.

No wonder a writer in *Le Télégraphe* in 1877 could toy with the idea of figuration’s disappearing altogether from painting of this kind. He offered the following synopsis for an “Impressionist novel” which would surely soon replace, he thought, the “excessively minute descriptions” of Zola:

A white—or black—form, which could be a man unless it be a woman, moves forward (is it forward?). The old sailor shudders—or is it sneezes?—we can’t be sure; he cries, “Let’s go!” and throws himself into a whitish—or blackish—sea (we can’t be sure) which could well be the Ocean.¹⁷

And did not all this ambiguity have to do at bottom with the character of modern life? “The Impressionists proceed from Baudelaire,” wrote Jules Claretie.¹⁸ Their exhibition “shows this much, that painting is not uniquely an archaeological art and that it accommodates itself without effort to ‘modernity.’”¹⁹ Well, perhaps “effort” is the wrong word for Pissarro’s procedures, or even Cézanne’s, but surely this writer’s confidence somewhat misses the point of the pictures he is describing; and the careful scare-quotes he puts round that final “modernity” rather give the game away. If it was so delicate a matter to insert the concept into a sentence in 1877,

then getting it into a picture promised to be no easy task. "Yes or no, must we allow art to effect its own naturalization of the costume whose black and deforming uniformity we all suffer? In other words, must we paint the stovepipe hat, the umbrella, the shirt with wing collar, the waistcoat, and the trousers?"²⁰ It remained to be seen what the attractive new category meant when it was reduced to such particulars, and what kind of accommodation art could make with it.