I

The Nature of Realism

Realism, as an historical movement in the figurative arts and in literature, attained its most coherent and consistent formulation in France, with echoes, parallels and variants elsewhere on the Continent, in England and in the United States. Preceded by Romanticism and followed by what is now generally termed Symbolism, it was the dominant movement from about 1840 until 1870–80. Its aim was to give a truthful, objective and impartial representation of the real world, based on meticulous observation of contemporary life. This definition will determine the direction of the present study, but it inevitably raises a number of questions. For whereas such terms as Mannerism, Baroque or Neo-classicism – whatever difficulties they may present – are generally used to define stylistic categories, proper to the visual arts, the word Realism is also closely connected with central philosophical issues. In order to isolate the peculiar implications of Realism, considered as an historical, stylistic movement or direction in the arts, we must first consider some of the problems arising out of the different and sometimes diametrically opposed senses in which the term can be used.

REALISM AND REALITY

A basic cause of the confusion bedevilling the notion of Realism is its ambiguous relationship to the highly problematical concept of reality. A recent exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and at the Tate Gallery in London, for example, was entitled 'The Art of the Real' and consisted not – as the uninitiated might have expected – of recognizable views of people, things or places, but of large striped or stained canvases and mammoth constructions of plywood, plastic or metal. The title chosen by the organizer was neither wilfully mystifying nor capricious. It was a contemporary manifestation of a long philosophical tradition, part of the main-stream of Western thought since the time of Plato, which opposes 'true reality' to 'mere appearance'. 'All things have two faces', declared the sixteenth-century theologian, Sebastian Franck, 'because God decided to oppose himself to the world, to leave appearances to the latter and to take the truth and the essence of things for himself.' This is an extreme statement of a notion which echoes down through the aesthetic theory of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. 'True reality lies beyond immediate sensation and the objects we see every day', said Hegel. 'Only what exists in itself is real. . . . Art digs an abyss between the appearance and illusion of this bad and perishable world, on the one hand, and the true content of events on the other, to reclothe these events and phenomena with a higher reality, born of the mind. . . . Far from being simple appearances and illustrations of ordinary reality, the manifestations of art possess a higher reality and a truer existence.' Later in the century Baudelaire maintained, in his sketch for a critique of Realism, that, in contradistinction to Realist doctrine, poetry itself was most real and was 'only completely true in another world' since the things of this world were merely a 'hieroglyphic dictionary'. Many of the most vociferous opponents of Realism based their attacks on these grounds: that it sacrificed a higher and more permanent for a lower, more mundane reality.*

The commonplace notion that Realism is a 'styleless' or transparent style, a mere simulacrum or mirror image of visual reality, is another barrier to its understanding as an historical and stylistic phenomenon. This is a gross simplification, for Realism was no more a mere mirror of reality than any other style and its relation *qua* style to phenomenal data – the donnée – is as complex and difficult as that of Romanticism, the Baroque or Mannerism. So far as Realism is concerned, however, the issue is greatly confused by the assertions of both its supporters and opponents, that Realists were doing no more than mirroring everyday reality. These statements derived from the belief that perception could be 'pure' and unconditioned by time or place. But is pure perception – perception in a vacuum, as it were – ever possible?

In painting, no matter how honest or unhackneyed the artist's vision may be, the visible world must be transformed to accommodate it to the flat surface of the canvas. The artist's perception is therefore inevitably conditioned by the physical properties of paint and linseed oil no less than by his knowledge and technique – even by his choice of brush-strokes – in conveying three-dimensional space and form on to a two-dimensional picture plane. Even in photography, which comes closer to fulfilling the demand for 'transparency', the photographer's choice of viewpoint, length of exposure, size of focal opening and so on, intervene between the object and the image printed on the paper. Similarly in literature, the most vividly convincing nineteenth-century Realist novels interpose the barriers of 'he said' and 'she whispered meaningfully', between reader and experience. Or they alternate lengthy, if objective, descriptions of clothing and furniture with set passages of conversation, in a manner opposed to our actual more free-flowing consciousness of experience which was only later developed by such writers as Proust, Virginia Woolf, Joyce or Robbe-Grillet. The cinema has been described by André Bazin as 'a re-creation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time'. Yet, even the cinema fails to realize the time-honoured dream of capturing reality and capturing it whole which has been one of the aspirations of art since at least as early as the time of Pliny.

Although it is hard to believe that Parrhasios' grapes could have deceived even the most gullible of birds, the old story reveals, like the bravado of *trompe l'œil* painting and ingenious experiments with the *camera obscura*, that perennially obsessive desire of artists to bring reality back alive, to escape from the bonds of convention into a magic world of pure verisimilitude. If mid twentieth-century artists and writers are sceptical about the possibility of attaining this aim, is it not partly because of their and our – equally obsessive – preoccupation with and self-consciousness about the *means* of art: the formal demands of paint and canvas, the self-generating power of the structure of language whether literary or visual? The very aspirations of realism, in its old naïve sense, are denied by the contemporary outlook which asserts and demands the absolute independence of the world of art from the world of reality and, indeed, disputes the existence of any single, unequivocal reality at all. We no longer accept any fixed correspondence between the syntax of language, or the notational system of art, and an ideally structured universe.

In the mid nineteenth century, however, scientists and historians seemed to be revealing at breakneck speed more and more about reality past and present. There were no apparent limits to the discovery of what could be known about man and nature. Realist

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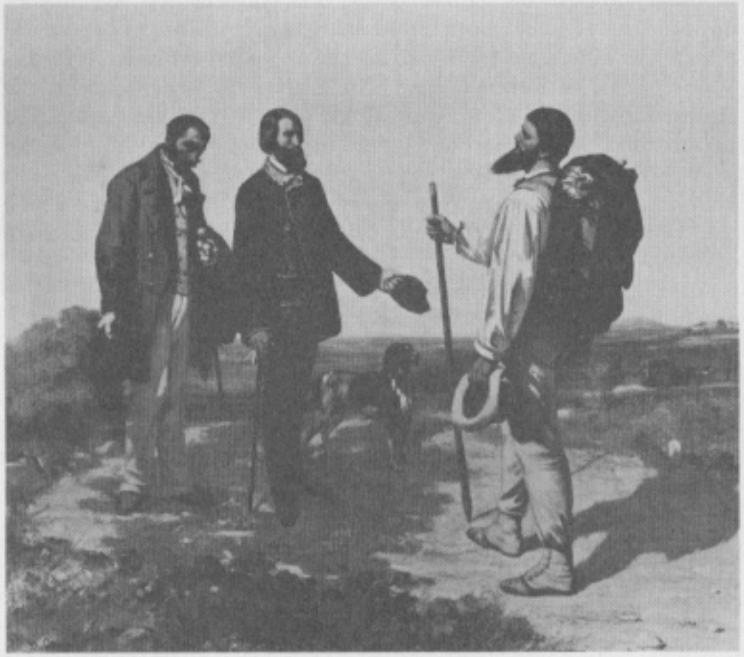
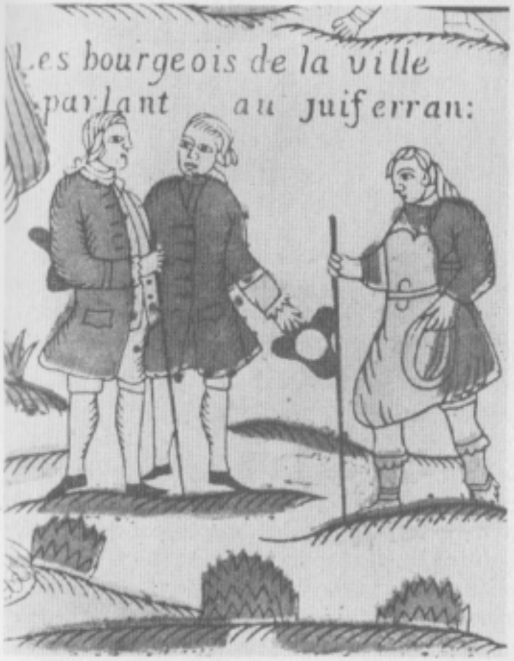
* A philosopher would distinguish more sharply than I have done here between the various meanings that have been given to the term 'realism' even in the discussion of art: (a) as implying a close correspondence between the depiction and the depicted object or between a description and what it describes; (b) as implying that mere imitation or mirroring of actual objects is surpassed and we confront the thing itself; (c) as implying that what is represented is an 'idea' or norm or unchanging prototype of the actual things in the world, and that it eliminates whatever is particular or peculiar to an actual object which instantiates the 'idea'. Closely connected with this view is the criticism of art that it can never in fact make manifest such super-sensible ideas.

Hegel attempted to bridge the gap between 'idea' and 'actuality' as, later, did Baudelaire with his notion of 'nature transposed into a more lucid medium'.



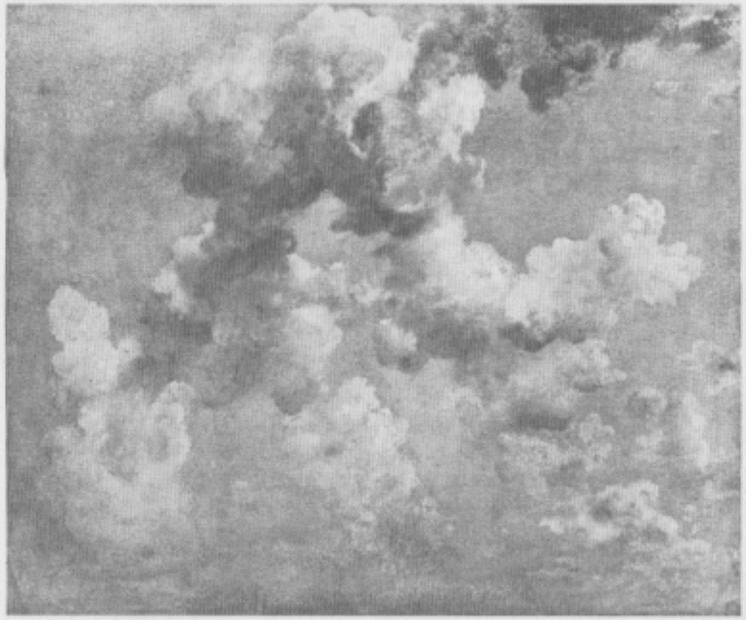
1. *The Meeting*, 1854. Gustave Courbet

writers and artists were likewise explorers in the realm of fact and experience, venturing into areas hitherto untouched or only partly investigated by their predecessors. For although the notion of a 'styleless style' may be itself part of the self-created myth of the nineteenth century, the role played by actual objective investigation of the external world in the creation of Realism cannot be ignored. The history of art is more than a succession of stylistic and iconographic conventions modified by occasional 'comparisons' with perceived reality – 'stylistic rectifications' as André Malraux has called them. Courbet's *Meeting* [1], for example, was clearly based on a prototype in popular imagery [2]: yet Courbet observed the countryside around Montpellier with scrupulous attention to its peculiarities and he recorded the local flora, the bright clear atmosphere of the Midi, as well as the appearance of himself, Bruyas and his servant, with striking and convincing accuracy. What is more, he succeeded in achieving his aim: creating an image that looks like and was for long held to be an objective, almost photographic, record of an actual event.


Les bourgeois de la ville
parlant au juif erran:

2. *The Wandering Jew*, n.d.
Popular print

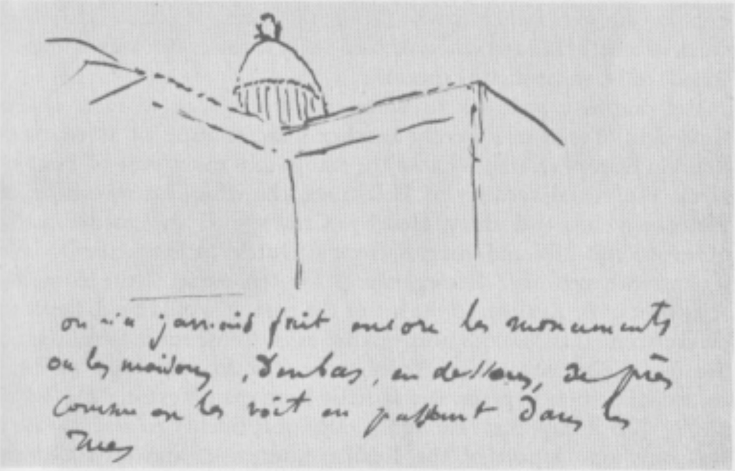
If one takes the opposition between convention and empirical observation in art as a relative rather than an absolute criterion, one can see that in Realism the role played by observation is greater, that by convention smaller. John Constable's cloud studies of 1821–2 are a case in point [3]. As Ernst Gombrich has shown, they were partly based on engravings by the eighteenth-century water colourist Alexander Cozens. But they were still more intimately connected with Constable's own observations of the sky, both as a miller and a painter, and were also influenced by the meteorologist Luke Howard who investigated and classified cloud forms. However much he may have depended on the pre-existing *schemata* provided by Cozens – as Gombrich claims – Constable used Cozens's prototypes not as ready-made formulae, which with a few judicious alterations would serve to fill the top of a landscape, but as *aides mémoires* – or, rather, *aides recherches* – for his own far more precisely observed representations. His cloud studies are, in fact, classified as cirrus or strato-cumulus formations and the time and place of their execution are indicated in many cases.


3. *Cloud Study*, *c.* 1822. John Constable

Constable may not have been aiming for scientific accuracy alone; but by accepting natural phenomena as the appropriate object for representation in his cloud studies, by restricting his experience to the phenomenon itself and neither interpreting it symbolically nor using it as a medium to express an *état d'âme*, he was very much an artist of the nineteenth century and one who points the way to later developments within the Realist movement. It is no accident that advanced French landscape painters like Corot and Huet admired him in the thirties and forties.

Degas, according to Gombrich, 'dismissed the excited talk of his impressionist friends with the remark that painting was a conventional art and that they would better occupy their time by copying drawings by Holbein'. But this is only part of the story. In his notebooks, Degas reiterated in both words and sketches his passion for concrete, direct observation and notation of ordinary, everyday experience: 'Do every kind of worn object . . . corsets which have just been taken off . . . series on instruments and instrumentalists . . . for example, puffing out and hollowing of the cheeks of bassoons, oboes, etc. . . . On the bakery, the bread: series on journeyman bakers, seen in the cellar itself or through the air vents from the street. . . . No one has ever done monuments or houses from below, from beneath, up close, as one sees them going by in the streets.' [4] For Degas there was no necessary contradiction between copying Holbein and re-

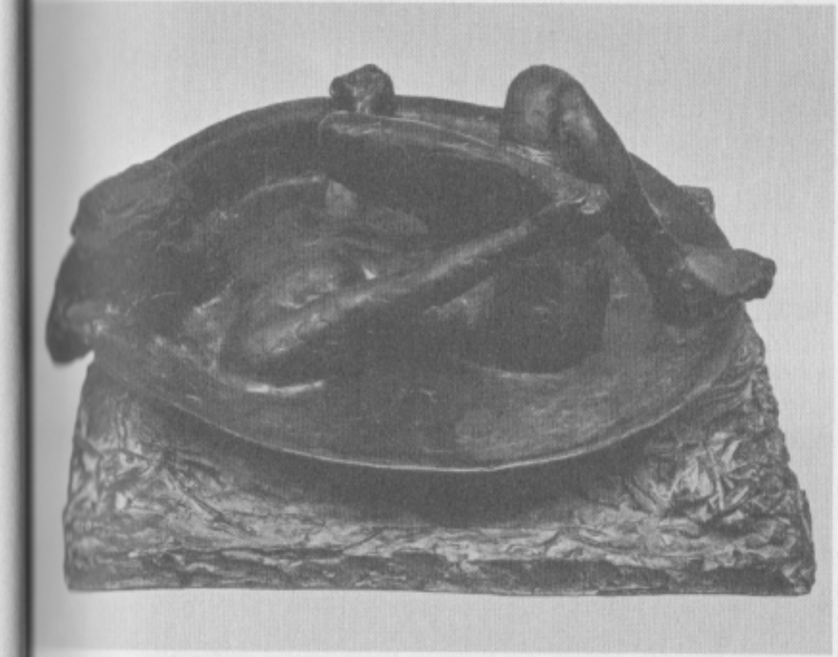
4. *Building Seen from Below*, *c.* 1874–83. Edgar Degas


on n'a jamais fait encore les monuments
ou les maisons, d'en bas, en dessous, de près
comme on les voit en passant dans les
rues

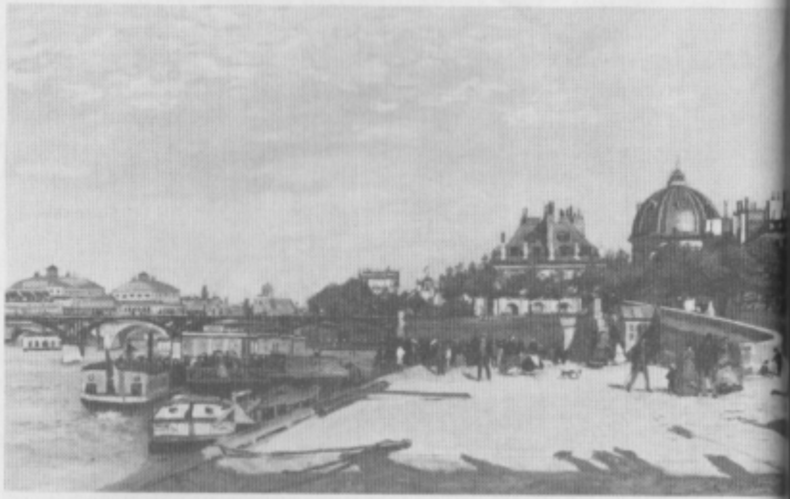
cording the novel themes of his own time in his own way. Nor need there ever be any conflict between an interest in draughtsmanship or the great masters of the past and a preoccupation with the present and the development of a system of notation appropriate to it. As George Moore pointed out, Degas chose unusual themes such as the ballet girl, the washerwoman, the housewife bathing herself [5], precisely because 'the drawing of the ballet girl and the housewife is less known than that of the Nymph and the Spartan youth'. And he added: 'Painters will understand what I mean by the drawing being "less known" - that knowledge of form which sustains the artist like a crutch in his examination of the model, and which as it were dictates to the eye what it must see.' Moore, and other critics sympathetic to the Realists, regarded convention and *schemata* merely as crutches, not as necessary components of art and, furthermore, crutches which could be, and sometimes were, dispensed with. This may be part of Realist myth - yet it is also part of Realist reality.

The history of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art is indeed, as Gombrich declares, the story of the struggle against *schemata*; and the major weapon in this struggle was the empirical investigation of reality. When Constable said that he tried to forget that he had ever seen a picture as he sat down to paint from nature, or Monet that he wished he had been born blind and then suddenly received his sight, they were not merely placing a high premium on originality. They were stressing the importance of confronting reality afresh, of consciously stripping their minds, and their brushes, of secondhand knowledge and ready-made formulae. So radical and extreme an approach was new. And its success is attested by their works - whether or not we consider fidelity to reality (however understood) to be an aesthetic criterion.

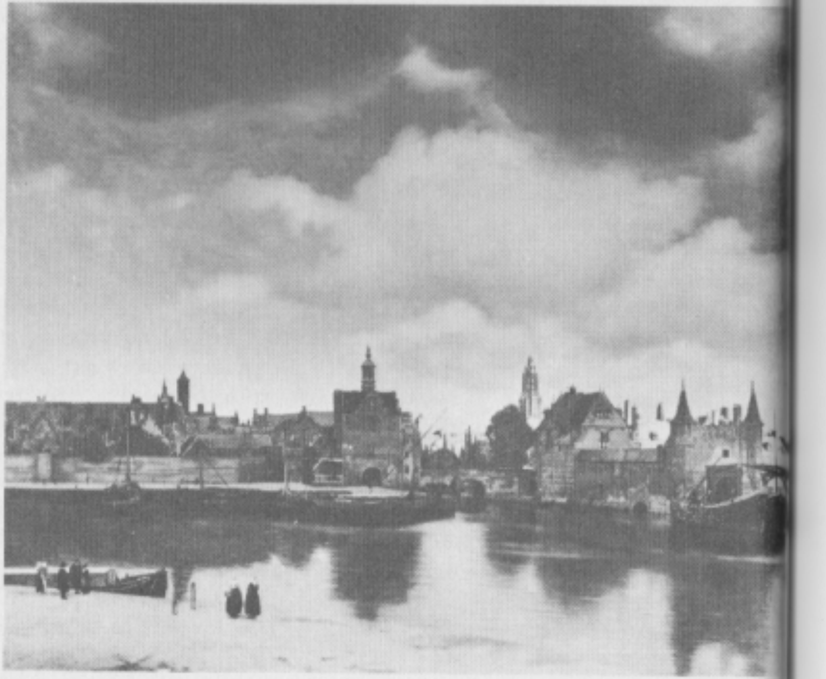
Yet one may well ask to what extent this was, in fact, a new approach. Was it not merely another manifestation of a recurrent trend in European art? What of the scrupulous exactitude of Jan van Eyck, the visual veracity of Velasquez, the relentless recording of varicose veins and dirty feet by Caravaggio, the meticulously observed still-lifes and interiors by the Dutch 'little masters' of the seventeenth century? Disregarding, for the present, the complex relationship of Realism to the art of the past, it would be difficult to demonstrate that Manet's portraits are in any sense more faithful than those of Velasquez or that Renoir's *Le Pont des Arts* [6] is a closer record of a specific place at a specific time than Vermeer's *View of Delft* [7]. But important though it might be, fidelity to visual reality was only one aspect of the Realist enterprise; and it would be



Le Tub, *c.* 1886. Edgar Degas



6. *Le Pont des Arts, Paris, c.* 1868. Auguste Renoir



7. *View of Delft, c.* 1660. J. Vermeer

erroneous to base our conception of so complex a movement on only one of its features: verisimilitude. To understand Realism as a stylistic attitude within its period, we must therefore turn to some of the Realists' other aspirations and achievements.

REALISM, HISTORY AND TIME

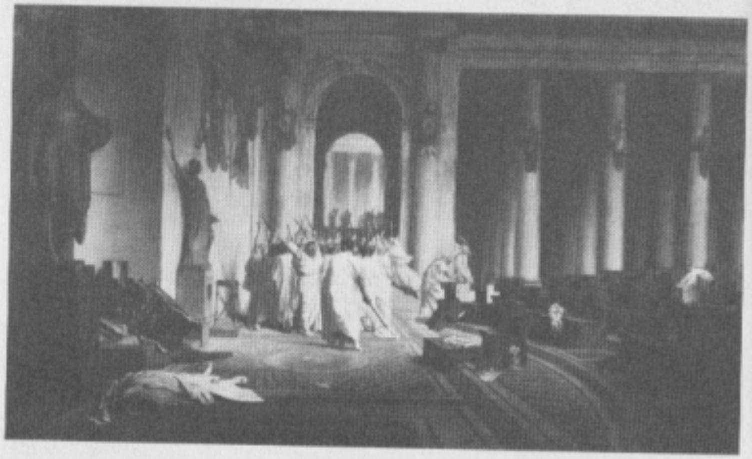
A new and broadened notion of history, accompanying a radical alteration of the sense of time, was central to the Realist outlook. Furthermore, new democratic ideas stimulated a wider historical approach. Ordinary people – merchants, workers and peasants – in their everyday functions, began to appear on a stage formerly reserved exclusively for kings, nobles, diplomats and heroes. 'Give up the theory of constitutions and their mechanism, of religions and their system', demanded Hippolyte Taine, apostle of the new historical approach, 'and try to see men in their workshops, in their offices, in their fields, with their sky, their earth, their houses, their dress, tillage, meals, as you do when, landing in England or Italy, you remark faces and gestures, roads and inns, a citizen taking his walk, a workman drinking.' This insistence on the connection between history and experienced fact is characteristic of the Realist outlook. As Flaubert pointed out in a letter of 1854: 'The leading characteristic of our century is its historical sense. This is why we have to confine ourselves to relating the facts.' A true understanding and representation of both past and present was now seen to depend on a scrupulous examination of the evidence, free from any conventional, accepted moral or metaphysical evaluation. Indeed, in the radical if rather coarsely materialistic view of Comte or Taine, the morals and ideas of past and present were simply one kind of evidence, in no way different from physical evidence, to which indeed they might be reduced. 'Vice and virtue are products, like vitriol and sugar', wrote Taine. 'Let us then seek the simple phenomena for moral qualities as we seek them for physical qualities.' Applying this attitude to art, Courbet declared in 1861 that 'painting is an essentially *concrete* art and can only consist of the presentation of *real and existing things*. It is a completely physical language, the words of which consist of all visible objects; an object which is *abstract*, not visible, non-existent, is not within the realm of painting.'

It is hardly paradoxical that the era in which history was canonized as a scientific (or pseudo-scientific?) discipline also saw the end of History Painting – that time-honoured pictorial assertion of permanent values and eternal ideals centred around the nexus of heroic antiquity. Painters did not cease to paint subjects from Greek and

Roman history: far from it. And certain critics urged a return to the appropriate 'grand manner'. But what they now produced were, for the most part, historical genre paintings: scenes from the everyday life of Greece and Rome, scrupulously accurate in costume and setting, and as devoid of elevated sentiment as of noble form. In other words, History painters had become anecdotal painters of history, and most of them found the décor and picturesque costumes of the Middle Ages or the Renaissance more sympathetic than those of the ancient world. Delacroix, who had extended his own range of historical and literary sources, criticized modern painters who 'call themselves history painters. That claim must be totally refuted', he wrote, 'The history-painter is he who represents heroic deeds, and these lofty deeds are to be found exclusively in Greek and Roman history . . . subjects drawn from other eras produce nothing but genre paintings.'

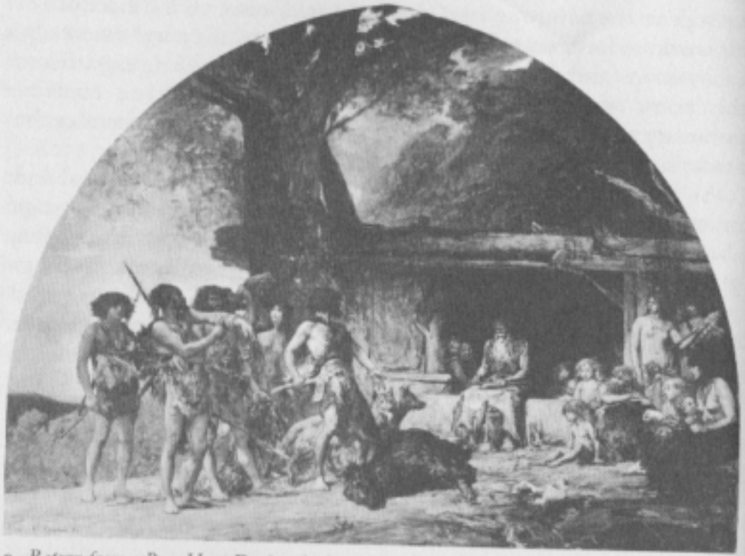
Whether the painting of historical subjects had been degraded or enriched by this new concept of history is a matter of opinion; but there can be no dispute that it had been irrevocably altered by the mid nineteenth century. And indeed some academic painters were affected by it no less than their opponents, the Realists. Gérôme's *Death of Caesar* [8] and Poussin's *Death of Germanicus* are both set in the ancient world; but Gérôme's photographic veracity and insistence on the concreteness of a specific historical event could hardly be further removed from Poussin's elevated generalization and moral distancing. No matter what his choice of subject or his professed attitude to the nature of art, Gérôme would seem, on the evidence of his work, to have shared Courbet's view that painting was essentially an *art concret* and demanded a similarly *concret* visual language. From this point of view it is simply Courbet's insistence on contemporaneity as a necessary condition of the concrete that separates the academic artist from the innovator.

8. *Death of Caesar*, 1865(?). J.-L. Gérôme

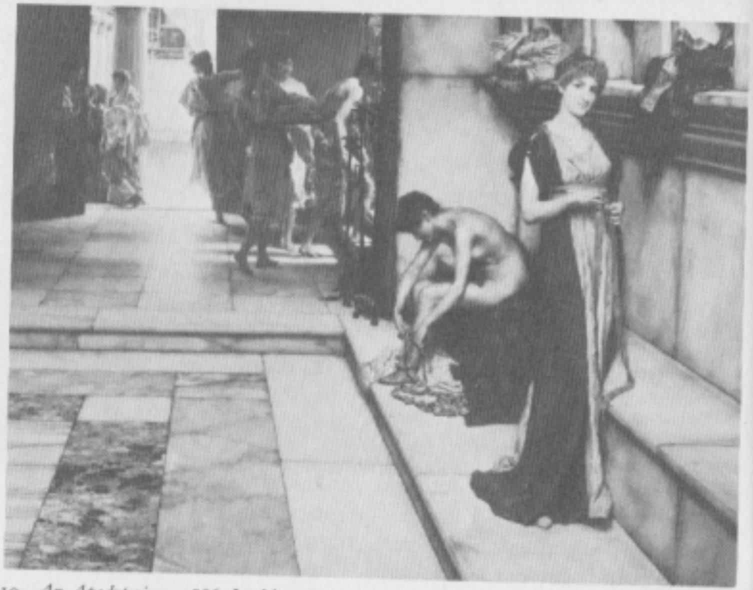


related to growing materialism (?)

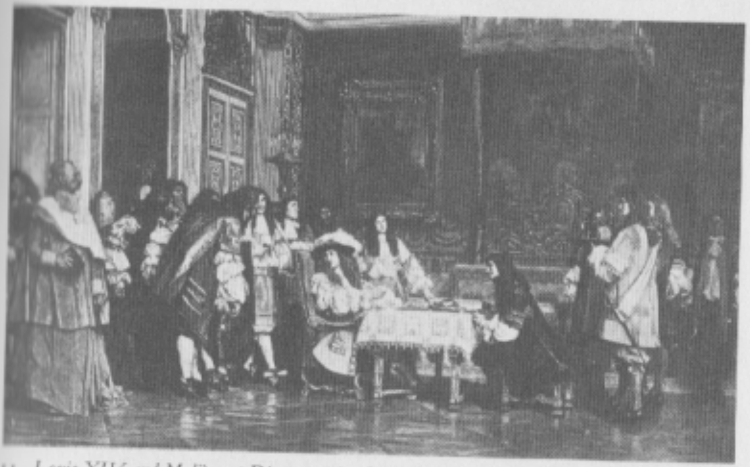
As the treatment of historical subjects became more factual and mundane towards the mid century, so the chronological range available to artists was expanded. The limits of time itself were being gradually pushed back from Archibald Ussher's judicious starting-point in 4004 B.C. The fluid relativism of a perpetually revised scientific hypothesis replaced the story of Creation and the metaphysical absolute it implied. History and value, history and faith, which had been inseparable since the earliest creation myths and integrated in the doctrine of the Christian Church, were irremediably torn asunder by the Higher Criticism and the New Geology. What was left was history as the facts, in a vast landscape extending from the mists of prehistoric times to the Comtean precincts of present-day experience. Fernand Cormon's *The Stone Age*, Alma-Tadema's *Apodyterium*, Gérôme's *Louis XIV and Molière at Dinner*, and Renoir's *Le Moulin de la Galette* [9, 10, 11, 12] – unlikely companions though they may be from a purely aesthetic standpoint – are vivid examples of this newly expanded historical sense. All four paintings share a common attempt to place the daily life of a given chronological period in a convincing and objectively accurate milieu. The Realist, of course, insisted that only the contemporary world was a suitable subject for the artist since, as Courbet put it, 'the art of painting can only consist of the representation of objects which are visible and tangible for the artist', and the artists of one century were therefore 'basically incapable of reproducing the aspect of a past or future century'. But artists who kept to subjects from the past were by no means unaffected by considerations of factual accuracy and freedom of choice of subject quite similar to Courbet's. As Gerald Ackerman has pointed out, many mid nineteenth-century painters of historical scenes attempted to satisfy Taine's demand for actuality as the *sine qua non* of history, through a sense of probability, painting them as if they had been present. It is the demand for contemporaneity and nothing but contemporaneity, which here separates the Realists from their fellow artists. If Alma-Tadema's painting might be called a 'genre painting of antiquity', Courbet's might equally well be termed a 'history painting of contemporary life'. By the mid nineteenth century the distinction had become a very slender one; but, as we shall see, for the Realist it was the crucial distinction.



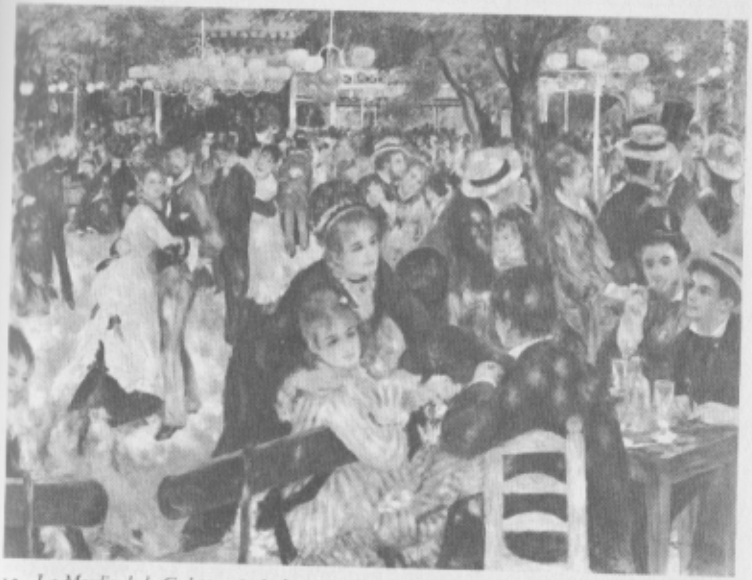
9. *Return from a Bear Hunt During the Stone Age*, 1882. Fernand Cormon



10. *An Apodyterium*, 1886. L. Alma-Tadema



11. *Louis XIV and Molière at Dinner*, 1863. J.-L. Gérôme (engraving after)



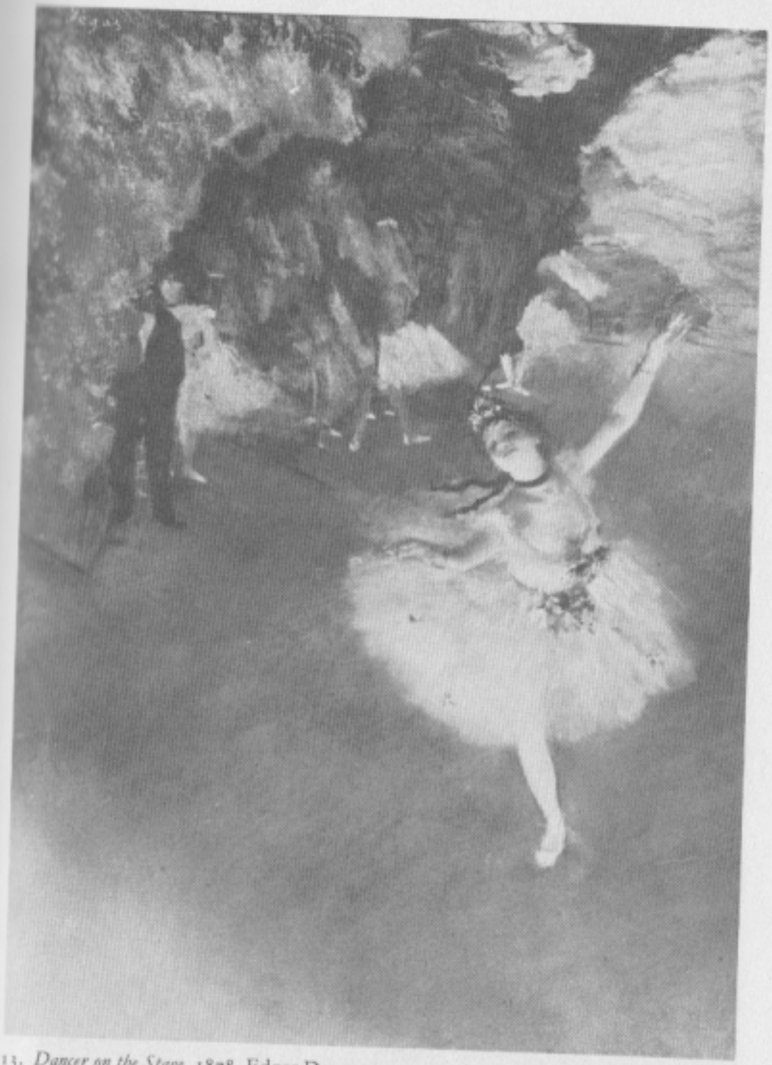
12. *Le Moulin de la Galette*, 1876. Auguste Renoir

The Realists held that the only valid subject for the contemporary artist was the contemporary world. '*Il faut être de son temps*' became their battle-cry. 'I hold the artists of one century basically incapable of reproducing the aspect of a past or future century', wrote Courbet. 'It is in this sense that I deny the possibility of historical art applied to the past. Historical art is by nature contemporary. Each epoch must have its artists who express it and reproduce it for the future . . . The history of an era is finished with that era itself and with those of its representatives who have expressed it'. And his major supporter in the '*bataille réaliste*', Champfleury, maintained that the 'serious representation of present-day personalities, the derbies, the black dress-coats, the polished shoes or the peasants' sabots', had a far greater interest than the frivolous knick-knacks of the past.

The moral implications of 'contemporaneity' were suggested by the critic Castagnary who, in his Salon of 1863, praised the 'naturalists' for 'putting the artist back into the midst of his era, with the mission of reflecting it', and French society for producing painting 'that describes its own appearances and customs and no longer those of vanished civilizations'. But artists with this belief sometimes had to make sacrifices for it. On the eve of the 1866 Salon the young Bazille told his parents: 'I have chosen the modern era because it is the one I understand best, that I find most alive for living people', adding the rueful postscript '– and that is what will get me rejected'. In his Salon of 1868 Zola called the young Monet, Bazille and Renoir *Les Actualistes* – 'the painters who love their times from the bottom of their artistic minds and hearts. . . . They do not content themselves with ridiculous *trompe l'œil*; they interpret their era as men who feel it live within them, who are possessed by it, and who are happy to be possessed by it. . . . Their works are alive because they have taken them from life and they have painted them with all the love they feel for modern subjects.'

As Realism evolved, the demand for – and conception of – contemporaneity became more rigorous. The 'instantaneity' of the Impressionists is 'contemporaneity' taken to its ultimate limits. 'Now', 'today', 'the present', had become 'this very moment', 'this instant'. No doubt photography helped to create this identification of the contemporary with the instantaneous. But, in a deeper sense, the image of the random, the changing, the impermanent and unstable seemed closer to the experienced qualities of present-day reality than the imagery of the stable, the balanced, the harmonious. As Baudelaire said: 'modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent'.

This insistence on catching the present moment in art – whether the encounter of Courbet and his patron on the road to Sète in *The Meeting* [1], the *corps de ballet* making a *révérence* in a Degas or a chance effect of light or atmosphere in a Monet landscape – is an essential aspect of the Realist conception of the nature of time. Realist motion is always motion captured as it is 'now', as it is perceived in a flash of vision.



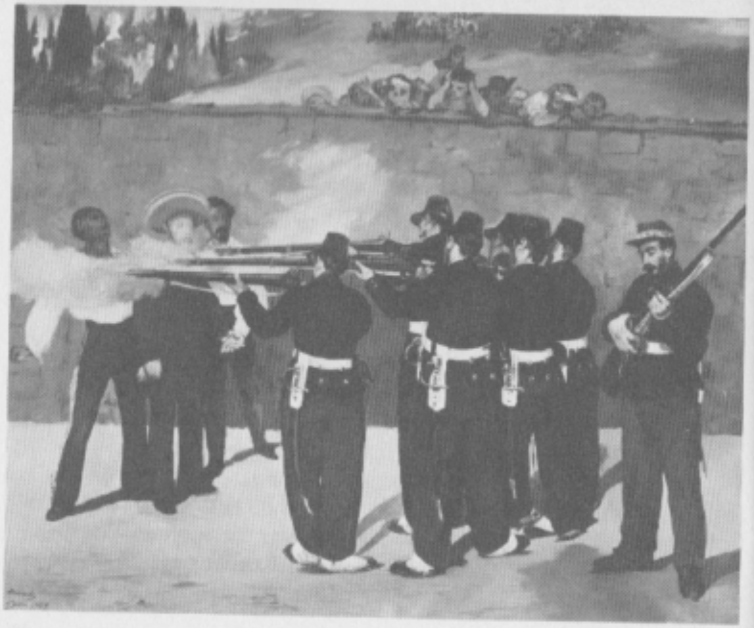
13. *Dancer on the Stage*, 1878. Edgar Degas

Earlier painters had, of course, often represented physical movement. But even so dynamic a picture as *La Ronde* by Rubens shows how little they were concerned with capturing a specifically observed instant of action. Instead, Rubens constructed a kind of generalized, eternal paradigm of violent physical action, with a beginning, middle and end within the context of the pictorial space, each pose carefully calculated to link with the next in an unbroken chain. He depicted the general idea of movement – movement as a permanent ideal entity – rather than a perceived moment of specific activity. In pre-nineteenth-century art, time was never a completely isolated instant but always implied what preceded and what would follow. In classical art and all *schemata* based upon it, the passage of time is condensed and stabilized by means of a significant kinetic summary.

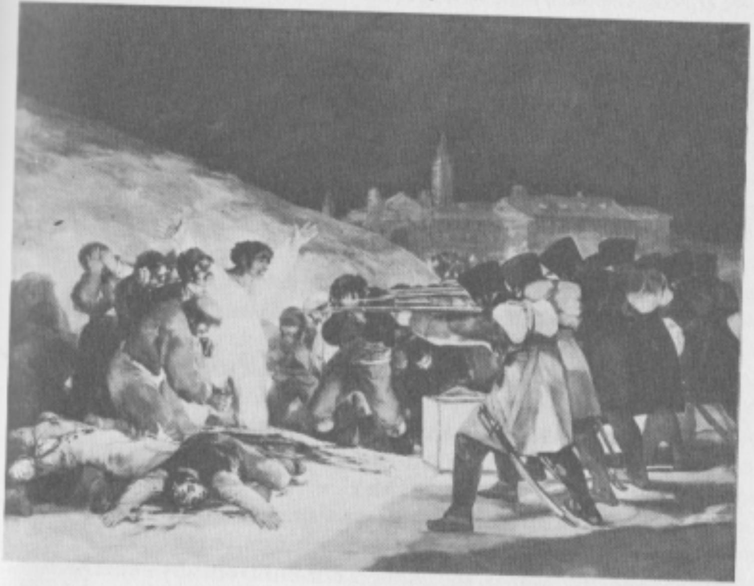
A Realist, like Degas, destroyed this paradigm of temporal continuity in favour of the disjointed temporal fragment. In such a work as the *Dancer on the Stage* [13], Degas showed no interest in conveying any ideal image of movement but concentrated on creating the equivalent of a concrete instant of perceived temporal fact – an isolated moment. The poses of the figures, far from leading step by step to a climax, are deliberately disconnected from one another; the directions of movement diverge from rather than converge on a point of motion and significance. The appearance of a single moment is painted from a viewpoint which makes its discreteness, its lack of significant compositional or psychological focus most apparent. Time is seen as the arrester of significance not – as in traditional art – the medium in which it unfolds.

This emphasis on the temporal fragment as the basic unit of perceived experience, like the equation of concrete fact with reality itself, accompanied the elimination or reduction of traditional moral, metaphysical and psychological values in Realist works. Adversaries were quick to accuse the Realists of producing works emotionally and morally, as well as formally, lacking in continuity and coherence. The acceptance of what is immediately experienced, and of nothing beyond it, as the entire meaning of the event depicted – characteristic, for example, of Manet's *Execution of the Emperor Maximilian* [14] – led critics to accuse the artist of lack of feeling, of inability to comprehend, or at least to create, a pictorial equivalent for the moral and psychological implications of a chillingly brutal subject, as had Goya in his *Third of May* [15]. Yet the sense of detachment, the lack of metaphysical overtones in Manet's painting came from no moral unconcern at the

14. *The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian*, 1867. Édouard Manet



15. *The Third of May, 1808*, 1814, Francisco de Goya



event, still less from political indifference or artistic ineptitude. Manet must have reacted to the outrage as much as any other staunch republican. His sense of its importance is revealed simply by his careful attention to the actual details of the execution, his painstaking compilation of eye-witness reports and photographs, and his repeated large-scale recreations of the scene from life in his studio. Manet, unlike Goya, carefully contrived to rivet the 'meaning' of his painting to firm, concrete facts – the momentary appearance of the execution of the Emperor, a particular, documented historical event – rather than transforming it into a more generalized commentary about the eternal inhumanity of man to man like Goya's *Third of May*.

This difference is due, at least in part, to the difference in the temporal attitudes controlling each work. For Goya, meaning unfolds, within the pictorial world, in time and space, progressing from the grey undifferentiated background of 'before' to the stark, light-revealed climax of the men being executed – 'now' – to the lumpish, blood-encrusted fallen figures at the very boundary of the pictorial world – 'afterwards'. This progression in time – emphasized by light, by intensification of colour saturation, and by the degree of materiality of the paint surface itself – is bound to an underlying moral conviction of the senselessness and bestiality of such events. The intimation that we are confronted by the same group of victims in three stages of their agony intensifies its pathos and our sense of its inevitability and hopelessness. There is more than a little reminiscence of the Stations of the Cross in these anonymous figures, as is hinted at by the open-armed gesture of the man in the centre. The rebels of Madrid, struck down by their grey, faceless executioners, are assimilated to a humanized up-dating of Christ's Passion. The contrast between light and shade, between human disorder and mechanized regularity, from left to right, intensify the moral and metaphysical impact of Goya's masterpiece.

In Manet's painting there is none of this temporal-emotional unfolding, no sense of the confrontation of a climactic moment of truth, prepared for by almost inchoate intimations and followed by a harrowing aftermath within the painting itself, none of the pictorial analogies or contrasts that make Goya's painting a paradigm of an eternal, and recurrent, human situation. Maximilian's death takes place in historical rather than metaphysical time. The time is the present, the place is Queretaro, Mexico, the victims are neither more nor less human than their executioners, the spectators are anonymous observers, as are we who observe the painting itself. The event is a terrible one, but Manet, the painter, refrains from any overt pictorial judgement: it is what it is, when it is, where it is, nothing more. The horror is contained within the fact, as in an instantaneous war-news photograph. For the Realist, horror – like beauty or reality itself – cannot be universalized: it is bound to a concrete situation at a given moment of time.

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