

Chapter Two Impressionism and Naturalism

from Robert L. Herbert,

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The only, the true sovereign of Paris I will name for you: he is the *flâneur*.

—A. Bazin, *L'Époque sans nom, esquisses de Paris 1830–1833*,
1833

That kind of man [the *flâneur*] is a mobile and passionate daguerreotype who retains the faintest traces of things, and in whom is reproduced, with their changing reflections, the flow of events, the city's movement, the multiple physiognomy of the public mind, the beliefs, antipathies, and admirations of the crowd.

—Victor Fournel, *Ce qu'on voit dans les rues de Paris*, 1858

... we like to *pose*, to make a spectacle of ourselves, to have a public, a *gallery*, witnesses to our life. So profit from this Parisian mania in order to enrich your album with sketches, your notebooks with remarks, and your cerebral portfolios with observations.

—Alfred Delvau, *Les plaisirs de Paris*, 1867

The *flâneur*, the purposeful male stroller, was a principal performer in the theater of daily life in Paris in mid-century, if we judge by his importance in writings of the era. A journalist, writer, or illustrator, he looked about with the acute eye of a detective, sizing up persons and events with a clinical detachment as though natural events could tell him their own stories, without his interference. He was an ambulatory naturalist whose objectivity set the stage for Impressionism. Among the painters, only Manet, Degas, and Caillebotte could be counted among the *flâneurs*, but the other impressionists adopted the characteristic features of this modern Parisian: objectivity and a devotion to contemporary life. This means that naturalism, a term of literary derivation, should also be used to interpret Impressionism. The appropriateness of the term has already been shown in the previous chapter, when Duranty's views and Caillebotte's *Man at the Window* were juxtaposed. Impressionist painting was noteworthy for its rejection of romanticism and for its wholehearted plunge into contemporary life. The impressionists turned their backs on the drama of romantic painting of the 1830s and 1840s, upon its exotic subjects, its declamatory manner, its appeal to the viewers' emotions by virtue of displaying the artist-author's feelings. They also spurned most of the art of the Barbizon painters who had followed romanticism, but who had retained many of its characteristics: "romantic naturalism" is an appropriate epithet for vanguard art of the 1850s. The impressionists overlapped with the Barbizon artists and learned from them but, except for Pissarro and Cézanne, they rapidly left behind the world of peasants, villagers, and pastoral animals, together with the biblical and mythological past that such images evoke. Instead, they turned towards Paris and its suburbs, towards images of leisure and entertainment that Corot or Millet would have regarded with disdain: café-concert, theater, racetrack, riverside bathing, pleasure boating. Brilliantly colored singers and fashionably dressed Parisians supplanted peasant women in homespun; horses were mounted by jockeys, not by farmers; peonies and gladioli replaced cabbages; swimmers and boaters in straw hats were pictured on the water's edge, not rivermen.

Because parallels with writers are more evident for Manet and Degas than for Renoir or Monet, it is with their historians that we find the furthest advances towards a broader conception of Impressionism. Scholars have pointed out their devotion to contemporary urban settings and have brought out the paradoxical qualities of an art that was "natural," and yet thrived on artifice; comparisons with Baudelaire and the Goncourt brothers have been revealing. In particular, the idea of the *flâneur* has been a welcome borrowing from literature, and it is the ideal beginning point for an inquiry into impressionist naturalism.¹

The Artist as *Flâneur*

The Parisian *flâneur* was the role in which Baudelaire, Manet, Degas, Caillebotte, Duret, Duranty, Halévy, and Edmond de Goncourt cast themselves as did so many of the artists and writers of their era. That it was a role, a pose, was already evident in the 1830s, when the *flâneur* was first clearly

defined.² This personage was so much in vogue, it was said, that all the men of Paris imitated him even though few could claim his intrinsic qualities. The *flâneur* was characterized by exquisite manners and by impeccable dress, on which he lavished a great deal of time. He was devoted to newspapers, in order to be abreast of all current events and current gossip, and since the 1830s was the very decade in which a thriving daily press first became established in Paris, *flâneur* and journalism were interconnected.³ The *flâneur* promenaded on the boulevards where he displayed himself while reconnoitering all that went on. In Walter Benjamin's famous formulation:

The street became a dwelling for the *flâneur*; he is as much at home among the facades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls. . . . The walls are the desks against which he presses his note-books; news-stands are his libraries and the terraces of cafés are the balconies from which he looks down on his household after his work is done.⁴

The *flâneur's* apparently idle strolling was the essence of his character, for he guarded his freedom of action (in an interior such as a salon or restaurant he could be pinned down), while looking about so keenly that he was the best-informed person in Paris. Like a policeman,⁵ he had acute powers of observation and could deduce much from external details. Paris became a theater for him, and the streets were its principal stages.

Aloof from direct involvement, always detached and unruffled, the *flâneur* rather consciously emulated the British aristocrat and gentleman. He was, in fact, one of the key players in that social phenomenon, anglomania. The British were the principal foreign investors in French commerce and industry, and were the most influential foreigners in Paris in the 1830s and 1840s. They financed, built, and staffed most of the first French railways, they were major suppliers of agricultural and industrial equipment, they were the source of new ideas about animal breeding, and they were the originators of the terms, and often the conventions, of early modern sports, above all, horse racing, rowing, sailing, and running ("le footing"). The French debt to British manners included the establishment of the first men's clubs in Paris, so prominent subsequently in the impressionist period: the Cercle de l'Union in 1828, and Le Jockey Club in 1833. The French dandy—at first called a *fashionable*—was not quite the same as his British model. Comte d'Orsay, Alfred de Musset, Roger de Beauvoir, Barbey d'Aurevilly, and Baudelaire made a considerable transformation of their model. Barbey d'Aurevilly was chiefly responsible for converting dandyism into an artistic/intellectual pose and, further, into "an attitude of protest against the vulgarized, materialistic civilization of the bourgeois century."⁶ Baudelaire, thirteen years younger than Barbey, conferred his unique genius upon this pose and is of special interest to historians of Impressionism because of his friendship with Manet. In poems and essays, he gave memorable expression to key concerns of the *flâneur*: the excitement of Paris crowds, the ability to move anonymously among them, the power of cool observation when supported by underlying passion, the ability to create an enduring art work from a transitory bit of modern life.⁷

By the early 1860s, the Parisian *flâneur* had absorbed many

of the leading characteristics of the dandy. The dandy was not necessarily a *flâneur*, but the *flâneur* was almost always a dandy. In his British top hat and formal clothes, however, the *flâneur* was not immediately distinguished from the mass of French upper-class men of the Second Empire. In other words, an aloof manner, fastidious dress, absorption in newspapers and current gossip, and strolling along public thoroughfares formed the exterior that most upper-class men presented to Parisian society. The *flâneur*, to those who knew him, could nonetheless be distinguished from his look-alikes by the subtlety of his observations and by the use to which he put them. His conversations were rich in things esthetic and elegant, not in such mundane matters as sales or investments, and he flaunted his wit in artful phrases whose irony was fully appreciated only by the inner circle of writers, painters, musicians, intellectuals, and *fashionables* to whom they were addressed. These witty sallies were not idly thrown out. They were the coinage of the *flâneur's* reputation, and it was upon his reputation, in reciprocal relationship with his talent, that his success depended.⁸ He did not despise money (Delvau's words cited at the head of this chapter include the verbs "profit" and "enrich"), but despised talking about it. The *artiste-flâneur* disguised the true nature of his profession by speaking not about the money it yielded, but about the terms of his art. This allied him, in appearance at least, with the aristocrats of old, whose inherited wealth authorized devotion to the arts and disdain of the materialistic bourgeoisie.

We have already seen pictures of the *flâneur*. He appears in Béraud's *Paris, On the Boulevard* (Pl. 22), to the right of center, in a characteristic pose. Detached from the others to show his indifference to the ordinary, he reads his paper. The other figures are mere strollers and gapers (*badauds*), but, a true *flâneur*, he is busy with his thoughts and capable, like a detective, of sizing up his surroundings while appearing to be absorbed in his paper. In Caillebotte's *Le Pont de l'Europe* (Pl. 27), the artist shows the *flâneur* in a more active guise, equally characteristic of the role. He is moving briskly along the street, separated from the others by his costume (therefore by his class) and by the purposeful way he reconnoiters his surroundings. He is actually working at his trade for, as Delvau advised, he is stuffing his "cerebral portfolios" with observations to be used later.

Manet was a notable example of the *flâneur*. In his dress, his exquisite manners, his *savoir-faire*, and his devotion to shocking the bourgeoisie, he epitomized this urban species. Degas was so much the lone wolf that he deviated from the type, but he shared many of the *flâneur's* qualities and represented him often in his paintings. We might first look at his delineations of the *flâneur* and then at the way both artists interpreted Parisian life as artists and *flâneurs*.

In his portrait of James Tissot (Pl. 36), Degas shows his painter friend as the dandy he was, a *flâneur*-dandy who has been out for a stroll, and who has dropped in on his friend for a moment. Degas displays him as though he were a fashion model. He puts his top hat and cape, carelessly but ostentatiously, on the table and gives a rakish angle to his stick, to emphasize his refined indifference. Closer inspection shows that the weight of Tissot's body, sprawled sideways in the chair, is on his elbow. This, the twist of his upper body, and



36. Degas, *James Tissot*, 1868. Metropolitan Museum.

the drawn-in feet, reveal that he is on the qui-vive, ready to depart at a moment's notice.

Degas has therefore drawn a portrait of a *flâneur* by putting on show his refined casualness, his status as stroller-visitor, his alertness—and by abstaining from the traditional psychology of expression. Some might accuse him of failing to interpret character because Tissot's face shows no revealing emotion, but of course a *flâneur* and a dandy are properly characterized by seeming indifference. And Degas hints at his *own* aloofness, that of the *artiste-flâneur*, by sticking to externals, by refusing to become involved with his sitter. He denies Tissot any interior feelings and hides his profession. Tissot is surrounded by paintings, it is true, but these would be associated with the artist whose studio he is visiting. He is made into a painter without paintings, a mere *élegant*.

By so treating him, Degas seems to put down a rival painter, and yet there is a clue to Tissot's profession. Just to the right of his head is a portrait of Frederick the Wise, which then passed for a work by Cranach.⁹ His prominent moustache prompts a comparison with Tissot's, so, to the inner circle of his and Degas's friends, Tissot would have been associated with the sixteenth-century painter. Another piece of wit suitable to the *artiste-flâneur* is the treatment of the easel to

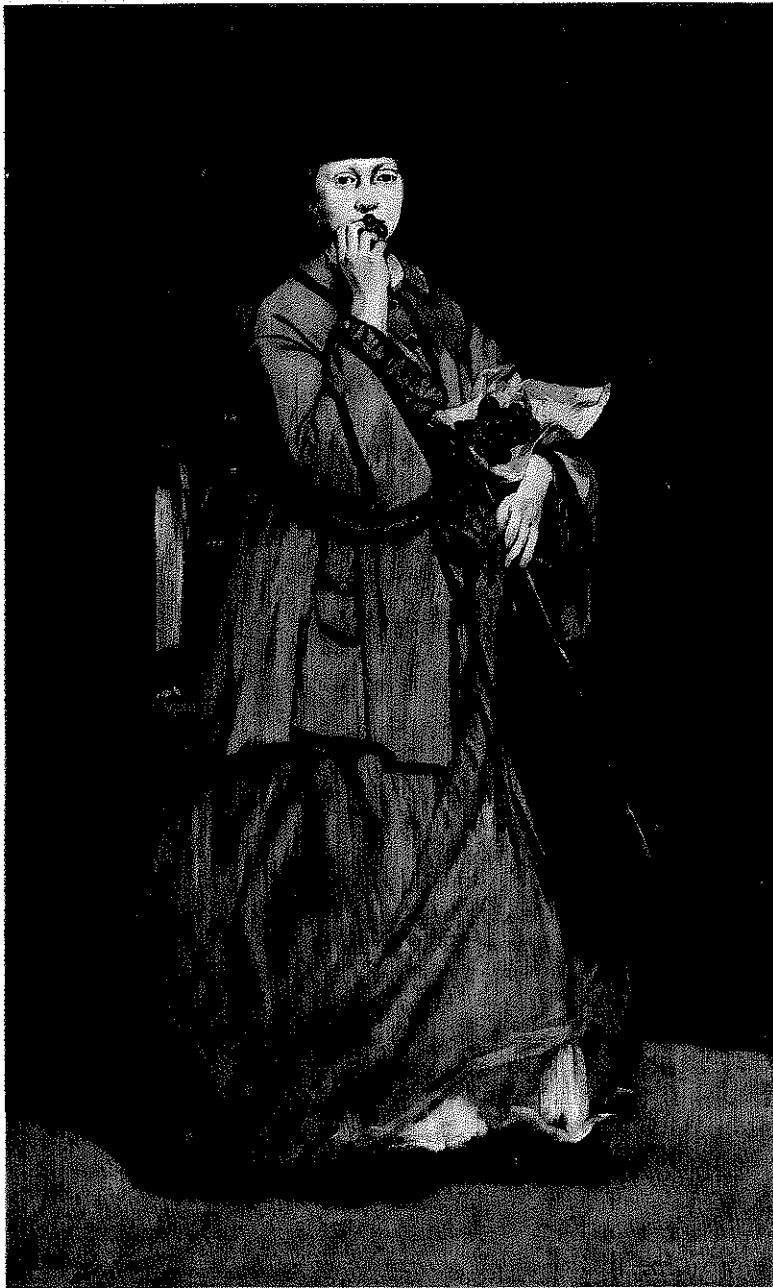
the right. It leans rather amusingly into the composition, reinforcing the tilt of Tissot's body. The easel's precariousness is emphasized by the absence of its rear leg. It was once there, but was painted out (a prominent portion shows through along the base of the large canvas behind it): another example of Degas's wit, or a bit of forgetfulness?¹⁰



37. Degas, *The Place de la Concorde*, 1875. Presumed destroyed.

It is as a *flâneur* that Degas presented another of his artist friends, the printmaker vicomte Lepic. In *Place de la Concorde* (Pl. 37), Lepic, impeccably dressed in his light walking coat, strides resolutely to our right. He clenches his cheroot firmly in his teeth, squeezes his umbrella between his cocked left arm and his body, and, like Caillebotte's *flâneur* (Pl. 27), pushes his right arm behind his back: all indications of his purposeful, absorbed strolling. A veritable distillation of the *flâneur*, Lepic proves his aristocratic remoteness by showing no interest in whatever has attracted his daughters' attention. Although they have their own upper-class tone (the daughter to the right emulates her father's upraised chin), they have the opposite of the *flâneur's* indifference. We do not know what has drawn their curiosity—an omission that Degas teases us with—but by looking to the left, they augment Lepic's detachment. The dog seconds their role, and its pedigreed look makes it a fit companion (Lepic was a dog breeder). The man on the left who stares at this group supplies another contrast to Lepic. He lacks Lepic's more formal coat, and he stands there as a mere *badaud*, an onlooker who is easily distracted by what comes within his notice. "The idler [*badaud*]," wrote Victor Fournel, "under the influence of the spectacle, becomes an impersonal being; he is no longer a man: he is the public, the crowd." Lepic appears as Fournel's true *flâneur*, who observes and reflects, instead of taking part, who is therefore entirely in control and "in full possession of his individuality."¹¹

Manet less often represented the *flâneur* in his paintings, but was himself a very complete exemplar of the breed. "With Manet," wrote his friend Antonin Proust, "the eye played such a big role that Paris has never known a *flâneur* like him nor a *flâneur* strolling more usefully."¹² He recounted how Manet would make quick visual notes while out walking, and



38. Manet, *The Street Singer*, c. 1862. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.

in one instance he gave the genesis of a painting. It is *The Street Singer* (Pl. 38) of 1862:

I have said what a *flâneur* Manet was. One day we were ascending what has since become the boulevard Malesherbes, in the midst of demolitions intersected by the yawning gaps of already leveled properties. The Monceau district had not yet been laid out. At each step Manet stopped me. Over here a cedar rose up isolated in the midst of a demolished garden. The tree seemed to search under its long arms for the clumps of destroyed flowers. "You see its skin," he said, "and the purplish-blue tones of the shadows?" Further along, the wreckers stood out white against the less white walls that were tumbling under their blows, enveloping them in a cloud of dust. Manet remained absorbed for a long time, admiring this spectacle. "There it is," he cried,

"the symphony in white major of which Théophile Gautier has spoken."

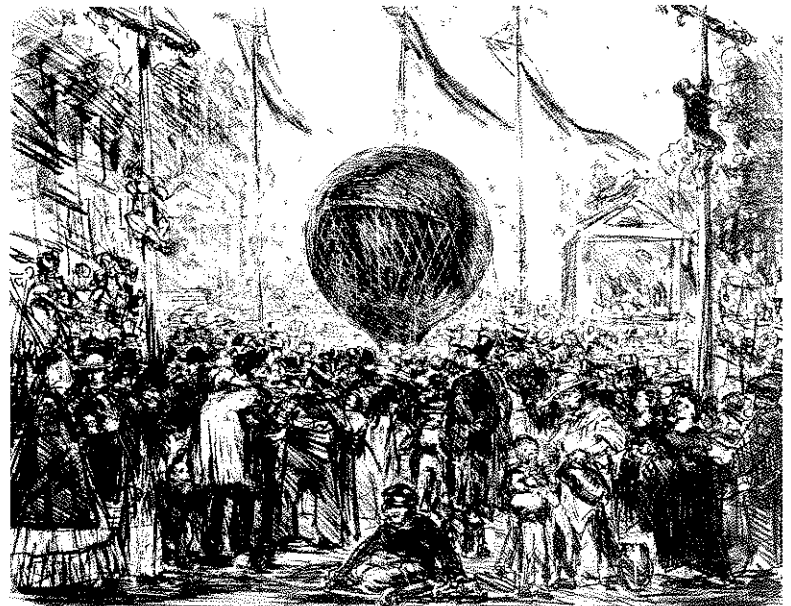
A woman was coming out of a sleazy cabaret, lifting up her skirt, holding a guitar. He went right up to her and asked her to come pose for him. She simply laughed. "I'll nab her again," he said, "and then if she still doesn't want to, I have Victorine."¹³

The first thing to notice in this citation is that Manet was strolling through a typical piece of Haussmannian Paris: vast destruction making way for a new avenue. His art was born of such transformations, but because he kept the *flâneur's* distance, the desolate cedar became a purple tone, and house-wreckers, a "symphony in white." This displacement of radical change, of destruction, into artistic terms, was a way of refusing direct involvement with it, of guarding one's emotional reserve. Indirect involvement is, however, vested in the painting that came out of this *flâneur's* experience.

Victorine Meurent modeled for Manet's picture. She is leaving the "sleazy cabaret," whose interior is visible over her shoulder. In her left hand the model/musician holds both her guitar and a fold of her dress, which she lifts to facilitate the forward movement of her feet. The resultant exposure of her undergarment reveals her lowly status and insinuates sexuality, typical of the *flâneur's* conception of such a woman's availability. Since her figure is essentially static, this suggestion of mobility aids the impression that she is leaving the cabaret (the left flap of the door has not yet swung shut). She is an itinerant who moves from place to place, mingling the illusory joy of her music with the plight of her vagabondage, a fate symbolized by the cherries she is eating, which stand not only for sexuality, but also for being down on one's luck.¹⁴

Manet's painting of 1862 is, after all, a gloss upon the extensive reshaping of Paris under Louis Napoleon. He did not represent the demolitions that surrounded him, but an itinerant whose lot in life was a commentary on the upheavals that the city and its people were undergoing. That same year,

39. Manet, *The Balloon*, 1862. New York Public Library.





40. Lefebvre, *Autumn*, 1883. Private collection.

in his lithograph *The Balloon* (Pl. 39), he juxtaposed a crippled boy with the balloon used by Louis Napoleon as a symbol of imperial progress.¹⁵ Like the *flâneur*-writer, he knew how to prompt his gifts with the telling incident, which he then developed into a finished piece. In doing so, he also, like Haussmann, ran roughshod over the historic past. Yes, in *The Street Singer* there are echoes of Velasquez and Spanish painting, but the brushwork and modeling were daringly abbreviated, and his view of contemporary life was far from the acceptable genre painting of the day. This is because of the absence of a moral statement that could be readily grasped.

Like Degas, Manet withheld any particular emotional expression from his model's face, which is masked by a blank stare. Lack of expression kept the observer at a distance, whereas contemporary urban genre guided the viewer towards a known attitude, one of amusement, condescension, or admiration. In *Autumn* (Pl. 40), for example, Jules Lefebvre pulled out all the stops of romantic pity. His figure is a homeless wanderer in the woods, cowering in anxiety and loneliness. Manet's painting strikes us as much more modern for having stripped away such appeals to sentiment. His *Street Singer* is one of a number of paintings that situated him at the beginning of his career as the *flâneur* who intended to shock Paris into recognizing his brilliance.

The Artist as Investigator

Among modern historians, it is Walter Benjamin who most brilliantly reconciled these seeming opposites, spontaneity and artistic control. His analysis was directed to literature, but its broad lines are applicable to painting as well. It is essentially a dual formulation: the artist as *flâneur*, who converts the street to his work-place, the issue already discussed, and the artist as detective, for whom the street is also a work-place. The detective, Benjamin wrote,

only seems to be indolent, for behind this indolence there is the watchfulness of an observer who does not take his eyes off a miscreant. . . . He develops forms of reaction that are in keeping with the pace of a big city. He catches things in flight; this enables him to dream that he is like an artist. Everyone praises the swift crayon of the graphic artist. Balzac claims that artistry as such is tied to a quick grasp.²⁸

For the artist-observer, Balzac used the analogies of bird of prey, and of the hunter transplanted to the city. Benjamin's choice of detective stems from his absorption in the literature of the *flâneur*,²⁹ perhaps directly from Victor Fournel's *Ce qu'on voit dans les rues de Paris* (what one sees in the streets of Paris) of 1858. Fournel begins a key chapter of his book by invoking Edgar Allen Poe's *Man in the Crowd*, the very same story Benjamin uses when he discusses the *flâneur*. In Poe's tale, the observer/author, from the window of a coffee house, spots among the passers-by a stranger whom he follows, convinced that his exterior announces a mystery to be solved. Fournel continues:

Like Poe, I have often isolated myself in the crowd, out in the street, in order to change myself into a spectator and sit in the pit of this improvised theater. . . .

It would certainly be a very interesting exercise to read the daily occupations, the varied professions, the intimate and domestic life that mark each person, posted on his

countenance, as it were, on his demeanor and tone of voice, as on the signboard of a shop; to look into the character indicated by a gait or physiognomy; to ask oneself what long habit of disorder or of probity, what series of virtues or of crimes have come to engrave an indelible and vivid expression on this or that face one is examining. . . .

It is thus that each day at my leisure I take the personal responsibility of doing some Gall and some Lavater. Nothing escapes my look which pierces the most impenetrable shadows. . . . Each individual furnishes me, if I wish, with the material of a complicated novel; and, like Cuvier reconstituting an animal from one tooth, and a whole world from one animal, I reconstitute all these scattered lives; I make move, think, and act at my will this theater of automats whose strings I hold.³⁰

Fournel's deployment of terms deserves careful study. He treats the street as a theater; he regards the crowd as would a detective or a caricaturist, bent upon singling out pronounced features (Gall and Lavater were phrenologists who established a "science" of reading character into cranial shapes); he claims for himself a piercing eye, not a passive one; he likens himself to Cuvier the natural scientist, and also to a puppet master who controls his manikins. In all these analogies, the artist-observer finds parallels for his own sense of mastering the urban crowd by converting well-chosen figures to his artistic purposes. Particularly useful to the historian are his comparisons with the detective and the natural scientist. Both are investigators, in whom the naturalist writers found allies.

The role of detective-investigator came logically to such writers as Edmond de Goncourt, and it is all the more striking a role in his case, because of his upper-class refinement. "Today I went searching for the human document in the region of the Ecole Militaire," he wrote in his diary in 1876:

One will never know, given our natural timidity, our discomfort among the plebeians, our horror of the *canaille*, how much the cost has been of the evil and ugly document with which we have constructed our books. This profession of conscientious policeman for the popular novel is assuredly the most abominable trade that an essentially aristocratic man can pursue.

However, the attraction of this new society. . . , then. . . the tension of one's senses, the multiplicity of observations and notes, the effort of the memory, the play of perceptions, the rushing and hasty work of a brain which is *spying* on the truth [qui *moucharde* la vérité], intoxicates the observer's sang-froid and makes him forget, in a sort of fever, the toughness and disgust of his observation.³¹

It is once again Degas, among the impressionists, whom such a passage evokes when we think of painters. Degas's *Women on a Café Terrace, Evening* (Pl. 47) seems the kind of "ugly document" that Edmond de Goncourt would have sought out while writing, say, *La fille Elisa* (1875), a novel about a prostitute.

The role of scientific investigator also came easily to writers of the Second Empire and Third Republic. By mid-century, the model of investigation derived from the natural sciences had become all-pervasive. It thoroughly penetrated the arts,

and lay behind the rejection of romanticism. Flaubert and Duranty stressed the need for the author to remove himself from the role of editor or judge of the action he described, and to acquire instead the precision and neutrality of the scientist. "Science, art, philosophy, all that is only description," wrote Duranty. The Goncourt brothers said their ambition was to create a "science," to make themselves "moral physionomists."³² They praised themselves for overcoming their instinctive revulsion in order to study medical cases which they used in composing *Germinie Lacerteux* (1865). In their introduction to that book they defined the novel as a "living form of literary study and social investigation." Zola admired Claude Bernard's scientific rationalism and claimed that his novels were based on the experimental method.

The best statement on scientific investigation as it relates to the arts was made by Ernest Renan. In his *L'Avenir de la science* (The Future of Science), he first claims that old masterpieces of art have lost much of their esthetic value because their original settings are no longer available to the observer: "A work of art has value only in its framework, and the framework of every work is its epoque." He then continues:

Doubtless the patient investigations of the observer, the numbers accumulated by the astronomer, the long enumerations of the naturalist, are hardly proper to inspire feelings of beauty. Beauty is not in analysis. But real beauty, that which does not rest on fictions of human fantasy, is hidden in the results of analysis. To dissect the human body is to destroy its beauty, and yet by this dissection, science comes to recognize a beauty of a superior kind. . . . Doubtless this enchanted world in which man lived before arriving at [modern] reflective life. . . has an inexpressible charm, and it may be that in face of this severe and inflexible nature that rationalism has created for us, some will regret the miracle, and will reproach experience for having banished it from the universe. But this could result only from an incomplete view of science. Because the real world which science reveals to us is far superior to the fantastic world created by the imagination.³³

We cannot pretend that Renan speaks for Degas, but the painter, like many naturalists, disowned the "fantastic world" of romanticism, and he would have agreed with Renan's insistence that accurate observation precede the play of the imagination. A close look at *Women on a Café Terrace, Evening* will show the value of comparing the attitude of the naturalist with that of the impressionist painter.

In his little composition, Degas situates us along the boulevard Montmartre, at nighttime. In the distance we see a crowded sidewalk and the gaslights of the shops of the *grands boulevards*. In the lower right corner sits a woman in a position of lassitude, wearing a revealing costume. Facing her is a young woman equally bored, her thumb to her teeth. Next to her is a woman leaving the scene, trailing her purse behind her, while a fourth looks to the right, as though she were about to take the chair being vacated. These two figures slip between the supports of the terrace roof; lacking top and bottom, these uprights lend an odd air of movement and tentativeness to the sidewalk café. To the right, disappearing behind the end of the terrace, is the form of a man striding by.



47. Degas, *Women on a Café Terrace, Evening*, 1877. Musée d'Orsay.

What should we make of all this? Aided by contemporary representations of costume, and by numerous witness accounts of the boulevard Montmartre, we deduce that the women are prostitutes, “beauties of the night,” to use Alfred Delvau’s phrase.³⁴ They find their clients among the men who are out shopping or going to and from nearby theaters. These women, like the two to the left in Degas’s composition, come and go from the terraces where they watch out for clients; they change places frequently out of impatience or to put themselves in more advantageous positions. Often they sit and wait, as Degas’s other two are doing. The one in the center has her thumb to her teeth, either to indicate boredom or, perhaps, to vent her disappointment. Georges Rivière, reviewing this pastel when it was exhibited in 1877, interpreted her gesture as meaning “not even this much!”—that is, no customers that evening.³⁵

The dark form of the man moving off to the right is a clue to the street commerce these women engage in, or at least a hint of it. Contemporary writers tell us of the great discretion observed by the middle-class client who, like a detective, could signal a prostitute without giving himself away to

others. The woman who is leaving to the left might well have been given a discreet sign by this man. When one stares at this little monotype for a time, a reciprocity develops between her movement and his. Moreover, in Degas’s brothel scenes (Pl. 115) and in his views of the backstage of the ballet (Pls. 105, 106), the male pursuer is frequently indicated by only a partial view of dark coat, trousers, and shoes. Of course, we cannot insist on a knowing exchange between Degas’s two figures, but the presence of a male passer-by is an essential element of this pastel. Degas makes us into an investigator, seated on that terrace, sizing up various clues in order to understand what is going on about us, wondering if that fleeting figure is Poe’s or Fournel’s man in the crowd. We then realize why Degas once defined his art in these terms: “A painting is a thing which requires as much trickery, malice, and vice as the perpetration of a crime; make counterfeits and add a touch of nature.”³⁶

In such works as *Women on a Café Terrace, Evening*, Degas seems to adopt that attitude of Renan’s man of science. He destroys the pre-modern world of fantasy and its noble ideals, among them its concept of feminine beauty and of the uplifting subject. He wrenches us into the present by his odd



48. Morisot, *Interior*, 1872. Private collection.

matter-of-factness, by this “severe and inflexible nature that rationalism has created for us.” Like the naturalist, Degas sets aside emotion. He does not interfere with the subjects of his inquiry and does not judge their actions. He merely presents “the patient investigations of the observer,” investigations only of that which could be present to the eye. He does this even if, to use Renan’s words again, his “enumerations . . . are hardly proper to inspire feelings of beauty.” Like Renan, he gives up the charm of earlier conceptions and instead lays before his viewer the results of his analysis, disclosing a new and a profound beauty, because “the real world which science reveals to us is far superior to the fantastic world created by the imagination.”

If Degas can reasonably be likened to the natural scientist,

as well as to the *flâneur*-writer and the detective, it is because he seems to survey his terrain dispassionately and then record his findings (we know he *creates*; he only seems to record) in an apparently neutral fashion, as though giving a report. This neutral vision is so vital to Impressionism that it needs to be given its own term: “detachment.” Although “objectivity” is an alternative—we shall examine the meaning Georg Simmel gave it—it seems to adhere more to the things being observed than to the observer. Detachment, by suggesting the act of disconnecting or disengaging, better suggests the artist’s conscious efforts to suppress his opinions and to remove any expression of the traditional judgments brought to bear on his subject. Curiously, this direct access to the subject, this elimination of authorial commentary, also detaches the ob-

server of the picture from its subject. Failing to have a clear guide from the author as to the attitudes to take, the observer is encouraged to adopt the same detachment. In *Women on a Café Terrace, Evening*, as we saw, we ourselves have to assume the position of a client on that terrace, trying to figure out what it is we are looking at. In Manet's *Railroad* (Pl. 31), we are also put to the test, because we are not supplied with the usual clues that would let us sort out the figures and our relationship to them. "Detachment," therefore, has the virtue of complexity. It describes the artist's viewpoint, but also the viewer's, and accordingly, lets us deal both with the genesis of the painting and its perception. The psychology of the viewer becomes intertwined with the artist's because of, not despite, his detachment.