

The Painter of Modern Life

I Beauty, Fashion and Happiness

The world – and even the world of artists – is full of people who can go the Louvre, walk rapidly, without so much as a glance, past rows of very interesting, though secondary, pictures, to come to a rapturous halt in front of a Titian or a Raphael – one of those that have been most popularized by the engraver's art; then they will go home happy, not a few saying to themselves, 'I know my Museum.' Just as there are people who, having once read Bossuet and Racine, fancy that they have mastered the history of literature.

Fortunately from time to time there come forward righters of wrong, critics, amateurs, curious enquirers, to declare that Raphael, or Racine, does not contain the whole secret, and that the minor poets too have something good, solid and delightful to offer; and finally that however much we may love *general* beauty, as it is expressed by classical poets and artists, we are no less wrong to neglect *particular* beauty, the beauty of circumstance and the sketch of manners.

It must be admitted that for some years now the world has been mending its ways a little. The value which collectors today attach to the delightful coloured engravings of the last century proves that a reaction has set in in the direction where it was required; Debucourt, the Saint-Aubins and many others have found their places in the dictionary of artists who are worthy of study. But these represent the past: my concern today is with the painting of manners of the present. The past is interesting not only by reason of the beauty which could be distilled from it by those artists for whom it was the present, but also precisely because it is the past, for its historical value. It is the same with the present. The pleasure which we derive from the representation of the present is due not only to the beauty with which it can be invested, but also to its essential quality of being present.

I have before me a series of fashion plates¹ dating from the

Revolution and finishing more or less with the Consulate. These costumes, which seem laughable to many thoughtless people – people who are grave without true gravity – have a double-natured charm, one both artistic and historical. They are often very beautiful and drawn with wit; but what to me is every bit as important, and what I am happy to find in all, or almost all of them, is the moral and aesthetic feeling of their time. The idea of beauty which man creates for himself imprints itself on his whole attire, crumples or stiffens his dress, rounds off or squares his gesture, and in the long run even ends by subtly penetrating the very features of his face. Man ends by looking like his ideal self. These engravings can be translated either into beauty or ugliness; in one direction, they become caricatures, in the other, antique statues.

The women who wore these costumes were themselves more or less like one or the other type, according to the degree of poetry or vulgarity with which they were stamped. Living flesh imparted a flowing movement to what seems to us too stiff. It is still possible today for the spectator's imagination to give a stir and a rustle to this 'tunique' or that 'schall'.² One day perhaps someone will put on a play in which we shall see a resurrection of those costumes in which our fathers found themselves every bit as fascinating as we do ourselves in our poor garments (which also have a grace of their own, it must be admitted, but rather of a moral and spiritual type).³ And then, if they are worn and given life by intelligent actors and actresses, we shall be astonished at ever having been able to mock them so stupidly. Without losing anything of its ghostly attraction, the past will recover the light and movement of life and will become present.

If an impartial student were to look through the *whole* range of French costume, from the origin of our country until the present day, he would find nothing to shock nor even to surprise him. The transitions would be as elaborately articulated as they are in the animal kingdom. There would not be a single gap; and thus, not a single surprise. And if to the fashion plate representing each age he were to add the philosophic thought with which that age was most preoccupied or concerned – the thought being inevitably suggested by the fashion plate – he would see

what a profound harmony controls all the components of history, and that even in those centuries which seem to us the most monstrous and the maddest, the immortal thirst for beauty has always found its satisfaction.

This is in fact an excellent opportunity to establish a rational and historical theory of beauty, in contrast to the academic theory of an unique and absolute beauty; to show that beauty is always and inevitably of a double composition, although the impression that it produces is single – for the fact that it is difficult to discern the variable elements of beauty within the unity of the impression invalidates in no way the necessity of variety in its composition. Beauty is made up of an eternal, invariable element, whose quantity it is excessively difficult to determine, and of a relative, circumstantial element, which will be, if you like, whether severally or all at once, the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions. Without this second element, which might be described as the amusing, enticing, appetizing icing on the divine cake, the first element would be beyond our powers of digestion or appreciation, neither adapted nor suitable to human nature. I defy anyone to point to a single scrap of beauty which does not contain these two elements.

Let me instance two opposite extremes in history. In religious art the duality is evident at the first glance; the ingredient of eternal beauty reveals itself only with the permission and under the discipline of the religion to which the artist belongs. In the most frivolous work of a sophisticated artist belonging to one of those ages which, in our vanity, we characterize as civilized, the duality is no less to be seen; at the same time the eternal part of beauty will be veiled and expressed if not by fashion, at least by the particular temperament of the artist. The duality of art is a fatal consequence of the duality of man. Consider, if you will, the eternally subsisting portion as the soul of art, and the variable element as its body. That is why Stendhal – an impertinent, teasing, even a disagreeable critic, but one whose impertinences are often a useful spur to reflection – approached the truth more closely than many another when he said that 'Beauty is nothing else but a promise of happiness.'⁴ This definition doubtless overshoots the mark; it makes Beauty far too subject to the infinitely variable ideal of Happiness; it strips Beauty too neatly of its

aristocratic quality; but it has the great merit of making a decided break with the academic error.

I have explained these things more than once before.⁵ And these few lines will already have said enough on the subject for those who have a taste for the diversions of abstract thought. I know, however, that the majority of my own countrymen at least have but little inclination for these, and I myself am impatient to embark upon the positive and concrete part of my subject.

II The Sketch of Manners

For the sketch of manners, the depiction of bourgeois life and the pageant of fashion, the technical means that is the most expeditious and the least costly will obviously be the best. The more beauty that the artist can put into it, the more valuable will be his work; but in trivial life, in the daily metamorphosis of external things, there is a rapidity of movement which calls for an equal speed of execution from the artist. The coloured engravings of the eighteenth century have once again won the plaudits of fashion, as I was saying a moment ago. Pastel, etching and aquatint have one by one contributed their quota to that vast dictionary of modern life whose leaves are distributed through the libraries, the portfolios of collectors and in the windows of the meanest of print shops. And then lithography appeared, at once to reveal itself as admirably fitted for this enormous, though apparently so frivolous a task. We have some veritable monuments in this medium. The works of Gavarni and Daumier have been justly described as complements to the *Comédie Humaine*.⁶ I am satisfied that Balzac himself would not have been averse from accepting this idea, which is all the more just in that the genius of the painter of manners is of a mixed nature, by which I mean that it contains a strong literary element. Observer, philosopher, *flâneur* – call him what you will; but whatever words you use in trying to define this kind of artist, you will certainly be led to bestow upon him some adjective which you could not apply to the painter of eternal, or at least more lasting things, of heroic or religious subjects.

Sometimes he is a poet; more often he comes closer to the novelist or the moralist; he is the painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity that it contains. Every country, to its pleasure and glory, has possessed a few men of this stamp. In the present age, to Daumier and Gavarni (the first names which occur to the memory) we may add Devéria, Maurin, Numa, historians of the more wanton charms of the Restoration; Wattier, Tassaert, Eugène Lami – the last of these almost an Englishman in virtue of his love for aristocratic elegance; and even Trimolet and Traviès, those chroniclers of poverty and the humble life.

III The Artist, Man of the World, Man of the Crowd, and Child

Today I want to discourse to the public about a strange man, a man of so powerful and so decided an originality that it is sufficient unto itself and does not even seek approval. Not a single one of his drawings is signed, if by signature you mean that string of easily forgeable characters which spell a name and which so many other artists affix ostentatiously at the foot of their least important trifles. Yet all his works are signed – with his dazzling *soul*; and art-lovers who have seen and appreciated them will readily recognize them from the description that I am about to give.

A passionate lover of crowds and incognitos, Monsieur C. G.⁷ carries originality to the point of shyness. Mr Thackeray, who, as is well known, is deeply interested in matters of art, and who himself executes the illustrations to his novels, spoke one day of Monsieur G. in the columns of a London review.⁸ The latter was furious, as though at an outrage to his virtue. Recently again, when he learnt that I had it in mind to write an appreciation of his mind and his talent, he begged me – very imperiously, I must admit – to suppress his name, and if I must speak of his works, to speak of them as if they were those of an anonymous artist. I will humbly comply with this singular request. The reader and I will preserve the fiction that Monsieur G. does not exist, and we shall concern ourselves with his drawings and

his watercolours (for which he professes a patrician scorn) as though we were scholars who had to pronounce upon precious historical documents, thrown up by chance, whose author must remain eternally unknown. And finally, to give complete reassurance to my conscience, it must be supposed that all I have to say of his strangely and mysteriously brilliant nature is more or less justly suggested by the works in question – pure poetic hypothesis, conjecture, a labour of the imagination.

Monsieur G. is an old man. Jean-Jacques is said to have reached the age of forty-two before he started writing. It was perhaps at about the same age that Monsieur G., obsessed by the throng of pictures which teemed in his brain, was first emboldened to throw ink and colours on to a white sheet of paper.⁹ Truth to tell, he drew like a barbarian, or a child, impatient at the clumsiness of his fingers and the disobedience of his pen. I have seen a large number of these primitive scribbles, and I must own that the majority of those who are, or claim to be, connoisseurs in this matter, might well have been pardoned for failing to discern the latent genius which abode in such murky daubs. Today, after discovering by himself all the little tricks of his trade and accomplishing, without advice, his own education, Monsieur G. has become a powerful master in his own way, and of his early artlessness he has retained no more than what was needed to add an unexpected seasoning to his rich gifts. When he comes across one of those early efforts of his, he tears it up or burns it with a most comical show of bashfulness and indignation.

For ten years I had wanted to get to know Monsieur G., who is by nature a great traveller and cosmopolitan. I knew that for some time he had been on the staff of an English illustrated journal,¹⁰ and that engravings after his travel-sketches, made in Spain, Turkey and the Crimea, had been published there. Since then I have seen a considerable quantity of those drawings, hastily sketched on the spot, and thus I have been able to read, so to speak, a detailed account of the Crimean campaign which is much preferable to any other that I know. The same paper had also published, always without signature, a great number of his illustrations of new ballets and operas. When at last I ran him to earth, I saw at once that it was not precisely an *artist*, but rather

a *man of the world* with whom I had to do. I ask you to understand the word *artist* in a very restricted sense, and *man of the world* in a very broad one. By the second I mean a man of the whole world, a man who understands the world and the mysterious and lawful reasons for all its uses; by the first, a specialist, a man wedded to his palette like the serf to the soil. Monsieur G. does not like to be called an artist. Is he not perhaps a little right? His interest is the whole world; he wants to know, understand and appreciate everything that happens on the surface of our globe. The artist lives very little, if at all, in the world of morals and politics. If he lives in the Bréda district, he will be unaware of what is going on in the Faubourg Saint-Germain. Apart from one or two exceptions whom I need not name, it must be admitted that the majority of artists are no more than highly skilled animals, pure artisans, village intellectuals, cottage brains. Their conversation, which is necessarily limited to the narrowest of circles, becomes very quickly unbearable to the *man of the world*, to the spiritual citizen of the universe.¹¹

And so, as a first step towards an understanding of Monsieur G., I would ask you to note at once that the mainspring of his genius is *curiosity*.

Do you remember a picture (it really is a picture!), painted – or rather written – by the most powerful pen of our age, and entitled *The Man of the Crowd*?¹² In the window of a coffee house there sits a convalescent, pleasurably absorbed in gazing at the crowd, and mingling, through the medium of thought, in the turmoil of thought that surrounds him. But lately returned from the valley of the shadow of death, he is rapturously breathing in all the odours and essences of life; as he has been on the brink of total oblivion, he remembers, and fervently desires to remember, everything. Finally he hurls himself headlong into the midst of the throng, in pursuit of an unknown, half-glimpsed countenance that has, on an instant, bewitched him. Curiosity had become a fatal, irresistible passion!

Imagine an artist who was always, spiritually, in the condition of that convalescent, and you will have the key to the nature of Monsieur G.

Now convalescence is like a return towards childhood. The convalescent, like the child, is possessed in the highest degree of

the faculty of keenly interesting himself in things, be they apparently of the most trivial. Let us go back, if we can, by a retrospective effort of the imagination, towards our most youthful, our earliest, impressions, and we will recognize that they had a strange kinship with those brightly coloured impressions which we were later to receive in the aftermath of a physical illness, always provided that that illness had left our spiritual capacities pure and unharmed. The child sees everything in a state of newness; he is always *drunk*. Nothing more resembles what we call inspiration than the delight with which a child absorbs form and colour. I am prepared to go even further and assert that inspiration has something in common with a convulsion, and that every sublime thought is accompanied by a more or less violent nervous shock which has its repercussion in the very core of the brain. The man of genius has sound nerves, while those of the child are weak. With the one, Reason has taken up a considerable position; with the other, Sensibility is almost the whole being. But genius is nothing more nor less than *childhood recovered at will*¹³ – a childhood now equipped for self-expression with manhood's capacities and a power of analysis which enables it to order the mass of raw material which it has involuntarily accumulated. It is by this deep and joyful curiosity that we may explain the fixed and animally ecstatic gaze of a child confronted with something new, whatever it be, whether a face or a landscape, gilding, colours, shimmering stuffs, or the magic of physical beauty assisted by the cosmetic art. A friend of mine once told me that when he was quite a small child, he used to be present when his father dressed in the mornings, and that it was with a mixture of amazement and delight that he used to study the muscles of his arms, the gradual transitions of pink and yellow in his skin, and the bluish network of his veins. The picture of external life was already filling him with awe and taking hold of his brain. He was already being obsessed and possessed by form. Predestination was already showing the tip of its nose. His sentence was sealed. Need I add that today that child is a well-known painter?

I asked you a moment ago to think of Monsieur G. as an eternal convalescent. To complete your idea, consider him also as a man-child, as a man who is never for a moment without the

genius of childhood – a genius for which no aspect of life has become *stale*.

I have told you that I was reluctant to describe him as an artist pure and simple, and indeed that he declined this title with a modesty touched with aristocratic reserve. I might perhaps call him a dandy, and I should have several good reasons for that; for the word 'dandy' implies a quintessence of character and a subtle understanding of the entire moral mechanism of this world; with another part of his nature, however, the dandy aspires to insensitivity, and it is in this that Monsieur G., dominated as he is by an insatiable passion – for seeing and feeling – parts company decisively with dandyism. '*Amabam amare*,' said St Augustine. 'I am passionately in love with passion,' Monsieur G. might well echo. The dandy is blasé, or pretends to be so, for reasons of policy and caste. Monsieur G. has a horror of blasé people. He is a master of that only too difficult art – sensitive spirits will understand me – of being sincere without being absurd. I would bestow upon him the title of philosopher, to which he has more than one right, if his excessive love of visible, tangible things, condensed to their plastic state, did not arouse in him a certain repugnance for the things that form the impalpable kingdom of the metaphysician. Let us be content therefore to consider him as a pure pictorial moralist, like La Bruyère.

The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world – such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a *prince* who everywhere rejoices in his incognito. The lover of life makes the whole world his family, just like the lover of the fair sex who builds up his family from all the beautiful women that he has ever found, or that are – or are not – to be found; or the lover of pictures who lives in a magical society of dreams painted on canvas. Thus the lover of

universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. Or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life. He is an 'I' with an insatiable appetite for the 'non-I', at every instant rendering and explaining it in pictures more living than life itself, which is always unstable and fugitive. 'Any man,' he said one day, in the course of one of those conversations which he illumines with burning glance and evocative gesture,¹⁴ 'any man who is not crushed by one of those griefs whose nature is too real not to monopolize all his capacities, and who can yet be *bored in the heart of the multitude*, is a blockhead! a blockhead! and I despise him!'

When Monsieur G. wakes up and opens his eyes to see the boisterous sun beating a tattoo upon his windowpane, he reproaches himself remorsefully and regretfully: 'What a peremptory order! what a bugle-blast of life! Already several hours of light – everywhere – lost by my sleep! How many *illuminated* things might I have seen and have missed seeing!' So out he goes and watches the river of life flow past him in all its splendour and majesty. He marvels at the eternal beauty and the amazing harmony of life in the capital cities, a harmony so providentially maintained amid the turmoil of human freedom. He gazes upon the landscapes of the great city – landscapes of stone, caressed by the mist or buffeted by the sun. He delights in fine carriages and proud horses, the dazzling smartness of the grooms, the expertness of the footmen, the sinuous gait of the women, the beauty of the children, happy to be alive and nicely dressed – in a word, he delights in universal life. If a fashion or the cut of a garment has been slightly modified, if bows and curls have been supplanted by cockades, if *bavolets* have been enlarged and *chignons* have dropped a fraction towards the nape of the neck, if waists have been raised and skirts have become fuller, be very sure that his eagle eye will already have spotted it from however great a distance. A regiment passes, on its way, as it may be, to the ends of the earth, tossing into the air of the boulevards its trumpet-calls as winged and stirring as hope; and in an instant Monsieur G. will

already have seen, examined and analysed the bearing and external aspect of that company. Glittering equipment, music, bold determined glances, heavy, solemn moustaches – he absorbs it all pell-mell; and in a few moments the resulting 'poem' will be virtually composed. See how his soul lives with the soul of that regiment, marching like a single animal, a proud image of joy in obedience!

But now it is evening. It is that strange, equivocal hour when the curtains of heaven are drawn and cities light up. The gas-light makes a stain upon the crimson of the sunset. Honest men and rogues, sane men and mad, are all saying to themselves, 'The end of another day!' The thoughts of all, whether good men or knaves, turn to pleasure, and each one hastens to the place of his choice to drink the cup of oblivion. Monsieur G. will be the last to linger wherever there can be a glow of light, an echo of poetry, a quiver of life or a chord of music; wherever a passion can *pose* before him, wherever natural man and conventional man display themselves in a strange beauty, wherever the sun lights up the swift joys of the *depraved animal*!¹⁵ 'A fine way to fill one's day, to be sure,' remarks a certain reader whom we all know so well. 'Which one of us has not every bit enough genius to fill it in the same way?' But no! Few men are gifted with the capacity of seeing; there are fewer still who possess the power of expression. So now, at a time when others are asleep, Monsieur G. is bending over his table, darting on to a sheet of paper the same glance that a moment ago he was directing towards external things, skirmishing with his pencil, his pen, his brush, splashing his glass of water up to the ceiling, wiping his pen on his shirt, in a ferment of violent activity, as though afraid that the image might escape him, cantankerous though alone, elbowing himself on. And the external world is reborn upon his paper, natural and more than natural, beautiful and more than beautiful, strange and endowed with an impulsive life like the soul of its creator. The phantasmagoria has been distilled from nature. All the raw materials with which the memory has loaded itself are put in order, ranged and harmonized, and undergo that forced idealization which is the result of a childlike perceptiveness – that is to say, a perceptiveness acute and magical by reason of its innocence!

IV Modernity

And so away he goes, hurrying, searching. But searching for what? Be very sure that this man, such as I have depicted him – this solitary, gifted with an active imagination, ceaselessly journeying across the great human desert – has an aim loftier than that of a mere *flâneur*, an aim more general, something other than the fugitive pleasure of circumstance. He is looking for that quality which you must allow me to call 'modernity': for I know of no better word to express the idea I have in mind. He makes it his business to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory. Casting an eye over our exhibitions of modern pictures, we are struck by a general tendency among artists to dress all their subjects in the garments of the past. Almost all of them make use of the costumes and furnishings of the Renaissance, just as David employed the costumes and furnishings of Rome. There is however this difference, that David, by choosing subjects which were specifically Greek or Roman, had no alternative but to dress them in antique garb, whereas the painters of today, though choosing subjects of a general nature and applicable to all ages, nevertheless persist in rigging them out in the costumes of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance or the Orient.¹⁶ This is clearly symptomatic of a great degree of laziness; for it is much easier to decide outright that everything about the garb of an age is absolutely ugly than to devote oneself to the task of distilling from it the mysterious element of beauty that it may contain, however slight or minimal that element may be. By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable. Every old master has had his own modernity; the great majority of fine portraits that have come down to us from former generations are clothed in the costume of their own period. They are perfectly harmonious, because everything – from costume and coiffure down to gesture, glance and smile (for each age has a deportment, a glance and a smile of its own) – everything, I say, combines to form a completely viable whole. This transitory, fugitive element, whose metamorphoses are so rapid, must on no account be despised or dispensed with. By neglecting it, you

cannot fail to tumble into the abyss of an abstract and indeterminate beauty, like that of the first woman before the fall of man. If for the necessary and inevitable costume of the age you substitute another, you will be guilty of a mistranslation only to be excused in the case of a masquerade prescribed by fashion. (Thus, the goddesses, nymphs and sultanas of the eighteenth century are still convincing portraits, *morally speaking*.)

It is doubtless an excellent thing to study the old masters in order to learn how to paint; but it can be no more than a waste of labour if your aim is to understand the special nature of present-day beauty. The draperies of Rubens or Veronese will in no way teach you how to depict *moire antique*, *satin à la reine* or any other fabric of modern manufacture, which we see supported and hung over crinoline or starched muslin petticoat. In texture and weave these are quite different from the fabrics of ancient Venice or those worn at the court of Catherine. Furthermore the cut of skirt and bodice is by no means similar; the pleats are arranged according to a new system. Finally the gesture and the bearing of the woman of today give to her dress a life and a special character which are not those of the woman of the past. In short, for any 'modernity' to be worthy of one day taking its place as 'antiquity', it is necessary for the mysterious beauty which human life accidentally puts into it to be distilled from it. And it is to this task that Monsieur G. particularly addresses himself.

I have remarked that every age had its own gait, glance and gesture. The easiest way to verify this proposition would be to betake oneself to some vast portrait-gallery, such as the one at Versailles. But it has an even wider application. Within that unity which we call a Nation, the various professions and classes and the passing centuries all introduce variety, not only in manners and gesture, but even in the actual form of the face. Certain types of nose, mouth and brow will be found to dominate the scene for a period whose extent I have no intention of attempting to determine here, but which could certainly be subjected to a form of calculation. Considerations of this kind are not sufficiently familiar to our portrait painters; the great failing of M. Ingres, in particular, is that he seeks to impose upon every type of sitter a more or less complete, by which I mean a

more or less despotic, form of perfection, borrowed from the repertory of classical ideas.

In a matter of this kind it would be easy, and indeed legitimate, to argue *a priori*. The perpetual correlation between what is called the 'soul' and what is called the 'body' explains quite clearly how everything that is 'material', or in other words an emanation of the 'spiritual', mirrors, and will always mirror, the spiritual reality from which it derives. If a painstaking, scrupulous, but feebly imaginative artist has to paint a courtesan of today and takes his 'inspiration' (that is the accepted word) from a courtesan by Titian or Raphael, it is only too likely that he will produce a work which is false, ambiguous and obscure. From the study of a masterpiece of that time and type he will learn nothing of the bearing, the glance, the smile or the living 'style' of one of those creatures whom the dictionary of fashion has successively classified under the coarse or playful titles of 'doxies', 'kept women', *lorettes*, or *biches*.

The same criticism may be strictly applied to the study of the military man and the dandy, and even to that of animals, whether horses or dogs; in short, of everything that goes to make up the external life of this age. Woe to him who studies the antique for anything else but pure art, logic and general method! By steeping himself too thoroughly in it, he will lose all memory of the present; he will renounce the rights and privileges offered by circumstance – for almost all our originality comes from the seal which Time imprints on our sensations. I need hardly tell you that I could easily support my assertions with reference to many objects other than women. What would you say, for example, of a marine painter (I am deliberately going to extremes) who, having to depict the sober and elegant beauty of a modern vessel, were to tire out his eyes by studying the overcharged, involved forms and the monumental poop of a galleon, or the complicated rigging of the sixteenth century? Again, what would you think if you had commissioned an artist to paint the portrait of a thoroughbred, famed in the annals of the turf, and he then proceeded to confine his researches to the Museums and contented himself with a study of the horse in the galleries of the past, in Van Dyck, Borgognone or Van der Meulen?

Under the direction of nature and the tyranny of circum-

stance, Monsieur G. has pursued an altogether different path. He began by being an observer of life, and only later set himself the task of acquiring the means of expressing it. This has resulted in a thrilling originality in which any remaining vestiges of barbarousness or *naïveté* appear only as new proofs of his faithfulness to the impression received, or as a flattering compliment paid to truth. For most of us, and particularly for men of affairs, for whom nature has no existence save by reference to utility, the fantastic reality of life has become singularly diluted. Monsieur G. never ceases to drink it in; his eyes and his memory are full of it.

V Mnemonic Art

The word 'barbarousness', which may seem to have slipped rather too often from my pen, might perhaps lead some few people to suppose that we are here concerned with defective drawings, only to be transformed into perfect things with the aid of the spectator's imagination. This would be to misunderstand me. What I mean is an inevitable, synthetic, childlike barbarousness, which is often still to be discerned in a perfected art, such as that of Mexico, Egypt or Nineveh, and which comes from a need to see things broadly and to consider them above all in their total effect. It is by no means out of place here to remind my readers that all those painters whose vision is synthesizing and abbreviative have been accused of barbarousness – M. Corot, for example, whose initial concern is always to trace the principal lines of a landscape – its bony structure, its physiognomy, so to speak. Likewise Monsieur G. brings an instinctive emphasis to his marking of the salient or luminous points of an object (which may be salient or luminous from the *dramatic* point of view) or of its principal characteristics, sometimes even with a degree of exaggeration which aids the human memory; and thus, under the spur of so forceful a prompting, the spectator's imagination receives a clear-cut image of the impression produced by the external world upon the mind of Monsieur G. The spectator becomes the translator, so to speak, of a translation which is always clear and thrilling.

There is one circumstance which adds much to the living force of this *legendary* translation of external life. I refer to Monsieur G's method of draughtsmanship. He draws from memory and not from the model, except in those cases – the Crimean War is one of them – when it may be urgently necessary to take immediate, hasty notes, and to fix the principal lines of a subject. As a matter of fact, all good and true draughtsmen draw from the image imprinted on their brains, and not from nature. To the objection that there are admirable sketches of the latter type by Raphael, Watteau and many others, I would reply that these are notes – very scrupulous notes, to be sure, but mere notes, none the less. When a true artist has come to the point of the final execution of his work, the model would be more of an embarrassment than a help to him. It even happens that men such as Daumier and Monsieur G., for long accustomed to exercising their memory and storing it with images, find that the physical presence of the model and its multiplicity of details disconcerts and as it were paralyses their principal faculty.

In this way a struggle is launched between the will to see all and forget nothing and the faculty of memory, which has formed the habit of a lively absorption of general colour and of silhouette, the arabesque of contour. An artist with a perfect sense of form but one accustomed to relying above all on his memory and his imagination will find himself at the mercy of a riot of details all clamouring for justice with the fury of a mob in love with absolute equality. All justice is trampled under foot; all harmony sacrificed and destroyed; many a trifle assumes vast proportions; many a triviality usurps the attention. The more our artist turns an impartial eye on detail, the greater is the state of anarchy. Whether he be long-sighted or short-sighted, all hierarchy and all subordination vanishes. This is an accident often conspicuous in the works of one of our most fashionable painters¹⁷ – a painter, by the way, whose faults are so well attuned to the faults of the masses that they have singularly assisted his popularity. The same analogy may be observed in the art of the actor, that art so mysterious and so profound, which today has fallen into such a slough of decadence. M. Frédérick Lemaître¹⁸ builds up a role with the breadth and fullness of genius. However studded with luminous details may be his playing of a part, it

always remains synthetic and sculptural. M. Bouffé on the other hand creates his roles with the minute precision of a myopic and a bureaucrat. With him everything flashes forth but nothing tells, nothing demands a lodging in the memory.

Thus two elements are to be discerned in Monsieur G.'s execution: the first, an intense effort of memory that evokes and calls back to life – a memory that says to everything, 'Arise, Lazarus'; the second, a fire, an intoxication of the pencil or the brush, amounting almost to a frenzy. It is the fear of not going fast enough, of letting the phantom escape before the synthesis has been extracted and pinned down; it is that terrible fear which takes possession of all great artists and gives them such a passionate desire to become masters of every means of expression so that the orders of the brain may never be perverted by the hesitations of the hand and that finally execution, ideal execution, may become as unconscious and spontaneous as is digestion for a healthy man after dinner. Monsieur G. starts with a few slight indications in pencil, which hardly do more than mark the position which objects are to occupy in space. The principal planes are then sketched in tinted wash, vaguely and lightly coloured masses to start with, but taken up again later and successively charged with a greater intensity of colour. At the last minute the contour of the objects is once and for all outlined in ink. Without having seen them, it would be impossible to imagine the astonishing effects he can obtain by this method which is so simple that it is almost elementary. It possesses one outstanding virtue, which is that, at no matter what stage in its execution, each drawing has a sufficiently 'finished' look; call it a 'study' if you will, but you will have to admit that it is a perfect study. The values are all entirely harmonious, and if the artist should decide to take them further, they will continue to march in step towards the desired degree of completion. He works in this way on twenty drawings at a time, with an impatience and a delight that are a joy to watch – and amusing even for him. The sketches pile up, one on top of the other – in their tens, hundreds, thousands. Every now and then he will run through them and examine them, and then select a few in order to carry them a stage further, to intensify the shadows and gradually to heighten the lights.

He attaches an enormous importance to his backgrounds, which, whether slight or vigorous, are always appropriate in nature and quality to the figures. Tonal scale and general harmony are all strictly observed, with a genius which springs from instinct rather than from study. For Monsieur G. possesses by nature the colourist's mysterious talent, a true gift that may be developed by study, but which study by itself is, I think, incapable of creating. To put the whole thing in a nutshell, this extraordinary artist is able to express at once the attitude and the gesture of living beings, whether solemn or grotesque, and their luminous *explosion* in space.

stop here

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Notes

All notes, or parts of notes, included between an asterisk and the initials 'C.B.' are Baudelaire's own. To some of these the editor has added a further note after the initials.

Abbreviations used in the Notes

Delteil	Loys Delteil, <i>Honoré Daumier</i> (in the series 'Le peintre-graveur illustré'), 10 vols. (Paris, 1925-30)
Gilman	Margaret Gilman, <i>Baudelaire the Critic</i> (New York, 1943)
Illustr.	<i>L'Illustration. Journal universel</i>
Newman	Ernest Newman, <i>Richard Wagner</i> , 3 vols. (London, 1933-47)
Robaut	Alfred Robaut, <i>L'Oeuvre complet d'Eugène Delacroix</i> (Paris, 1885)

Chapter I The Painter of Modern Life

- 1 Early in 1859 Baudelaire was writing to his friend and publisher Poulet-Malassis, to thank him for sending him fashion-plates.
- 2 An alternative form of the word 'châle'. Cashmere shawls became fashionable in France somewhat later than in England.
- 3 See the remarks at the end of the *Salon of 1845* and the section of the *Salon of 1846* entitled 'On the Heroism of Modern Life'.
- 4 Crépet refers to *De l'Amour*, ch. xvii; see also the footnote in ch. 110 of the *Histoire de la Peinture en Italie*: 'La beauté est l'expression d'une certaine manière habituelle de chercher le bonheur.'
- 5 e.g. in the article on 'Critical Method' on the occasion of the *Exposition Universelle* of 1855.
- 6 See p. 183.
- 7 Constantin Guys (1802-92).
- 8 The reference has not been traced.
- 9 Baudelaire must be mistaken here. Guys was already working for the *Illustrated London News* as early as 1843, and it is hardly likely that he would have been so employed if he had been quite without experience.

10 *The Illustrated London News*.

11 For an elaboration of this idea, and a note on the exceptions, see the *Salon of 1859*.

12 A story by Edgar Allan Poe, included among his *Tales* (1845), and translated by Baudelaire in the *Nouvelles Histoires Extraordinaires*.

13 An idea taken up and developed by Baudelaire in *Les Paradis artificiels* ('Le Génie Enfant').

14 'The following passage from the Goncourts' Journal (23 April 1858) gives an interesting account of Guys at about the same time:

'We came back from Gavarni's with Guys, the draughtsman of the *Illustrated London*.

'A little man with an animated face, a grey moustache, looking like an old soldier; hobbling along, constantly hitching up his sleeves on his bony arms with a sharp slap of the hand, diffuse, exuberant with parentheses, zigzagging from idea to idea, going off at tangents and getting lost, but retrieving himself and regaining your attention with a metaphor from the gutter, a word from the vocabulary of the German philosophers, a technical term from art or industry, and always holding you under the thrall of his highly-coloured, almost *visible* utterance. He evoked a thousand memories on that walk, throwing into the conversation handfuls of ironical observations, sketches, landscapes, cities riddled with cannon-balls, blood-soaked, gutted, and ambulances with rats beginning to gnaw at the wounded.

'Then on the other side, rather like in an album in which you find a quotation from Balzac on the back of a design by Decamps, there issued from the mouth of this extraordinary fellow social silhouettes, reflections on the French and the English races, all new, not one that had grown mouldy in a book, two-minute satires, one-word pamphlets, a comparative philosophy of the national genius of the peoples.

'Now we were at the taking of Janina, a river of blood with dogs splashing about in it, flowing between the legs of the young Guys ...

'Now it was Dembinski, wearing a blue shirt, his last shirt, tossing a coin, his last coin, on to a green table and nonchalantly forcing the betting up to 40,000 francs.

'And now it was an English castle, with immemorial oaks, a hunt, three *toilettes* a day and a ball every evening, a royal life led, conducted and paid for by a gentleman called Simpson or Tompson [*sic*], whose twenty-year-old daughter travels to the Mediterranean to inspect her father's eighteen ships of which not one is less than two thousand tons, 'a fleet such as Egypt never had', says Guys. Then he compared us to the English – us! – and cries: 'A Frenchman who does nothing, who is in London quietly to spend money – an unheard-of thing! The French travel in order to get over an unhappy love-affair or a gambling-loss, or

perhaps to sell textiles, but to see a Frenchman in London riding in a carriage, a Frenchman who is neither an actor nor an ambassador, a Frenchman with a woman at his side who might be his mother or his sister, and not a whore, an actress or a dressmaker – no, that could never be!

15 The expression derives from Rousseau; see also Brierre de Boismont (*De l'Ennui*): 'L'homme qui pense est un animal dépravé.'

16 These ideas are developed in the sixth section of the *Salon of 1859*.

17 Certainly Meissonier is intended.

18 Baudelaire had already put on record his admiration for Frédéric Lemaître (1800–76), one of the great French actors of the Romantic generation, in the *Salon of 1846*. H.-D.-M. Bouffé (1800–88) was a well-known comic actor.

19 *ILN*, 9 June 1855.

20 *ILN*, 4 March 1854.

21 *ILN*, 24 June 1854.

22 Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.

23 *ILN*, 7 April 1855.

24 Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.

25 *ILN*, 29 July 1854.

26 *ILN*, 20 May 1854.

27 Examples are to be found in *ILN*, 1 April 1848.

28 See the chapter 'Voyages et pensées militaires' in Paul de Molènes, *Histoires Sentimentales et Militaires* (1854), and also the same author's *Commentaires d'un Soldat* ('L'hiver devant Sébastopol') (1860).

29 Baudelaire had sharply criticized Charlet in 'Some French Caricaturists' (see pp. 168ff.), and had himself been criticized by Delacroix for doing so. Crépét suggests that the present passage may be a gesture of making amends.

30 See *Les Natchez*.

31 Baudelaire had a particular admiration for the work of Astolphe de Custine (1790–1857), and planned to include him, along with Chateaubriand, Paul de Molènes and Barbey d'Aurevilly, in his *Famille des Dandies* (announced in 1860, but never completed).

32 Crépét reminds us of Champfleury's anecdote of Baudelaire's ordering a dozen replicas when he was pleased with a new suit – at the

THE
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OTHER ESSAYS

Charles Baudelaire

*Translated and edited by
Jonathan Mayne*



Edouard Manet, *Portrait of Charles Baudelaire*

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