THE PEOPLE IN ART

By “art” in this essay I shall mean only the visual arts, for though there have always been popular dances and other festivals, such manifestations of feelings about the People can hardly be given in a book. Literature has an essay to itself; and whatever mention there may be of music will be given separately.

Insofar as the People are identified with the working class they hold an ambiguous position in the Bible. In the first chapter of Genesis Adam has nothing to do beyond enjoying the pleasures of Eden, the company of Eve, and, of course, observing the commandment not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. In the second chapter we are told that he was put in the Garden to tend it—surely nothing too arduous. But the Fathers were puzzled about Adam’s life before the Fall. They had in fact little to say about it in the beginning, though later they were to expatiate on the evils which were nonexistent at that time. Whatever the details, the pre-lapsarian condition corresponded to the State of Nature in philosophy and to the Golden Age or the Saturnia regna in mythology. On the one hand, it was a purely hedonistic state; on the other, it involved some work, but work of a very delightful kind.

In the essay on “The People in Literature” I have shown, I hope, that very little was said about the urban artisan until recent times. And that little was said in ridicule, in condemnation of his behavior, in attempts to keep him in his place. He was but an atom of the mob. But by the thirteenth century and the formation of the gilds, the skilled artisan took on a kind of social power which had not been seen since the rise of the Plebeians in Rome.

1. See George Boas, Primitivism . . . in the Middle Ages, the essays on “The Original Condition of Man.”
For now Western Europe was becoming a proto-industrial community, and the organization of the gilds created a sociopolitical class which was later to become the bourgeoisie. The differences between the modern middle-class man and the medieval artisan cannot be denied, but the members of the gilds had precisely that middle position between, let us say, the nobility and the serf that the bourgeoisie has between the rich entrepreneur and the proletariat. The People as they figured in art were more likely to be rural workers than artisans, though here too there were exceptions.

Machiavelli, writing about the influence of Christianity in the Discorsi, tries to show that modern religion does not favor freedom. In contrast to paganism, Christianity, he says, has set up as the greatest good humility, abjectness, and contempt for human things; the other [paganism] put it in grandeur of mind, strength of body, and in all the other things apt to make men exceeding vigorous. Though our religion asks that you have fortitude within you, it prefers that you be adapted to suffering rather than to doing anything vigorous. This way of living, then, has made the world weak and turned it over as prey to wicked men, who can in security control it, since the generality of men, in order to go to Heaven, think more about enduring their injuries than about avenging them.

No more than a word is needed to see Machiavelli’s anticipation of Gobineau and Nietzsche. Whatever may have been the intention of the Church, the outcome of her practices agreed with Machiavelli’s diagnosis. Though it has often been said that the Church condemned slavery, abbeys held slaves and nothing effective was done to uproot slavery as a system.

As for freedom of person, according to which a man might enter the trade or profession he liked and educate himself as he would, that was not only difficult but, in England after 1388, impossible, for by royal statute all after the age of twelve should continue in the same state of bondage or serfage, and the House of Commons “even petitioned against sending of villeins’ sons to

school." 3 But, as Coulton says, that was too odious to be enforced.

The man who is not free but subject to the will and caprice of a master, whether he is technically a slave or simply a villein, is not likely to acquire the respect of his superiors. One might pity such a person but one would not hold him up to admiration; the marks of inferiority would be upon him, and in art they would be exaggerated to make him either ludicrous or ugly. Now it was never the program of the Church to divide men into a large number of the powerless and a small number of the powerful, but that has been the usual situation both before and after the Redemption. It is also true that beginning with Saint Paul the Church has urged her members to accept the government God has given them, except—and the exception is essential to the teaching—when that government orders them to violate the laws of religion. 4 Hence the Church did everything it could to cooperate with the State in putting down popular rebellions. Consequently, whoever was in power was likely to be assisted by the Church, and he knew enough to assist her in return. Hence when we see at Chartres for instance, the windows donated by a gild, we have no evidence that any group of artisans was held in esteem because of their labor or their art. The gild-masters were just as much potentates as today's industrial entrepreneurs or labor-union leaders. They did not rank so high in the social hierarchy, but they had power. It is interesting to see how a movement like Lollardry began at the end of the fourteenth century by including members of the House of Commons and did not develop its proletarian character until the fifteenth century, by the middle of which it became the faith of tradesmen and artisans, with here and there

3. G. G. Coulton, Medieval Panorama, p. 81.

4. Though this is a commonplace, it may be as well to refer to Romans 13. The best introduction to the Church's position on obedience to authority is The Church Speaks to the Modern World, edited and with an introduction by Etienne Gilson (pp. 11–12), and the whole of the encyclical, Diuturnum (1881).
a few priests, merchants, and professional men. But by the early sixteenth century “all save a few belonged to the common people—weavers, wheelwrights, smiths, carpenters, tailors, and other tradesmen.” 5

In short, the rise of the proletariat was delayed until modern times, and power was retained in the hands of owners of real property. When one finds that Parliament ruled that no one under the degree of freeholders should keep a dog or that villeins should not send their sons to school, one begins to think it absurd to maintain that the People had much voice in any political decisions. 6

Does what I have just said conflict with the fact that every trade or art had its patron saint? Can one argue that because a type of labor was patronized by a special saint, it must also have enjoyed terrestrial esteem? That seems unlikely. The archers had four patrons, Saints George, Gilles, Sebastian, and Ursula, but this side of Paradise they took the same chances as barbers who could appeal only to Cosmas and Damian, or washerwomen who were protected by Blanchard, Marguerite, and Veronica. The cooks were almost overpatronized, for six saints watched over them, whereas gold-beaters could look only to one, Saint Eloi. Maybe it was thought that economic groups with celestial advocates needed none on earth and, conversely, that men who had power on earth needed no heavenly patrons except their particular guardian angels. The Thrones, Dominations, and Powers looked out for potentates, and that may have given them special prestige, if any was needed. But once one had gained rank in the nobility, one had only one’s personal patron to appeal to. In any event there is no evidence that the prestige of one’s patron saint conferred

5. Quoted from A. G. Dickens, The English Reformation, pp. 24–30. It will be recalled that the petite noblesse played an important role in the early days of the French Revolution. The mob took over later.
any prestige on one’s trade. Saint Veronica certainly stands high in the rank of saints, but she shed little glory on washerwomen.

If one now looks to early Christian legend for themes which might be utilized by painters for the glorification of the common people, one comes upon only two: the Annunciation to the Shepherds together with their Adoration of the Infant Jesus, and Saint Joseph as Carpenter. I have not been able to find early illustrations of the latter theme, which one might imagine to be the more important. In fact, Saint Joseph shared the patronage of carpenters and builders with a number of other and lesser saints: Blaise, Julian the Hospitaller, Mattias, Wolfgang, even Anne and Colette, so that there was no compelling reason to accentuate his calling as something noble. He was, moreover, reduced in rank during the Middle Ages as the Blessed Virgin was elevated. His role in the Mysteries is often comic. Réau, who goes into some detail about his iconographical fate, quotes a stanza by Eustache Deschamps which pretty well shows how low his fortunes fell at one time:

En Egypte s’en est allé,
Tout lassé, et troussé
D’une cotte et d’un baril.
Vicil, usé,
C’est Joseph le rassoté.7

It was apparently not until the fifteenth century that Joseph began to take on greater stature. And the first church in Rome dedicated to him, S. Giuseppe dei Falegnani, was dated as late as 1522. Yet among the Apocrypha is an Arabic History of Joseph

the Carpenter, which might have been used to enhance the prestige not only of the virgineus sponsus Virginis ("the virgin spouse of the Virgin") but also of the carpenter's art which he was said to have practiced to the day of his death. Quite the contrary took place, however. To the average man of the Middle Ages, fond of satire and indeed of buffoonery, an old man married to a girl of fourteen, a man moreover voluntarily chaste, a person who seemed to be simply a supernumerary in the great events in which he vaguely figured, was inevitably absurd. Carpenters continued to be of low rank in spite of Saint Joseph.

Of even less importance was the occupation of four of the Apostles. Though fishermen figured in fairly early art—scenes depicting the miraculous draught of fishes, for example—there was no special sanctity attached to fishing itself. The fish, there is no need to point out, was another matter. As a symbol of Christ it requires no more than passing mention. Much might have been made of it, but fishing as an occupation had no special status in art. Fishermen did get into poetry, if not into painting, in the piscatory eclogue; but I have spoken of this in an earlier essay. The odd feature of the piscatory eclogue is that, unlike the pastoral, it did not glorify its subjects. Sannazaro seems to have been the first to bring the genre to perfection, though scenes of piscatorial life had been introduced into literature much earlier. In Sannazaro lines from Vergil's eclogues were taken over bodily and modified only to the extent that the sea is not the land. But all this dates from the Italian Renaissance, not from the Middle Ages.  

9. See Henry Marion Hall, Idylls of Fishermen: A History of the Literary Species, pp. 45 ff. This study traces the fortunes of the genre through the eighteenth century and shows how a hard and painful occupation turned into a gentleman's sport. But whereas the Shepherd was always something pretty, the Fisherman became an English Gentleman, fond of the rural life and of the outdoors. The last of the "fisher idylls" treated by Dr. Hall is Thomas Scott's "The Anglers—Eight Dialogues in Verse." "The purpose of the
The one outstanding honorable peasant calling was that of the shepherd. Shepherds were in a special category. They figured largely in both Testaments, and their occupation furnished metaphors in terms of which ecclesiastical organization was built. The priest became a pastor; the faithful became a flock; the head of the Church was ordered to "feed My sheep"; Christ became the Lamb of God, an object of adoration *qui tollit peccata mundi*; and the Savior is represented from very early times as the Good Shepherd. In the Third Gospel the angels announce the Nativity to shepherds, and the shepherds present themselves before the manger to adore the Christ Child. Here they balance the Three Kings (literally Magi), thus showing, I imagine, that both the high and the low join in acknowledging Him. And if the Kings bring Him precious gifts, the Shepherds give Him a lamb, a crook, or a pipe. They are sometimes accompanied by a rustic musician playing bagpipe or flute. The *Annonce aux Pastoureaux* is illustrated at least as early as the tenth century (Codex Egberti in Trier) and the Adoration as early as the twelfth (Capital of St. Pierre de Chauvigny).  

There is no longer any way of discovering just why shepherds, instead of sowers and reapers, or carpenters and weavers, were introduced into religious legend, but it may derive from their importance in the lives of the early Israelites. They were undoubtedly a pastoral and nomadic people; the three Patriarchs were shepherds. And when the Old Testament came to be thought of pieces," he says (p. 184) "... is to emulate the glories of *The Compleat Angler*." I have not attempted to read these idylls myself, but judging from the sections quoted by Dr. Hall, they would be the delight of lovers or didactic poetry.

10. Réau (*Iconographie de l'Art Chrétien*, Vol. 2, p. 234) in discussing this says: "L'art byzantin n'avait illustré que le thème de l'Annonce aux Bergers et jusqu'au XV° siècle, sauf de très rares exceptions, l'Occident s'en tiendra là. C'est seulement à partir de cette époque qu'on voit les trois pâtres s'agenouiller devant l'Enfant pour lui offrir l'agneau, la houlette et le flageolet et que les artistes créent, sur le modèle de l'Adoration des Mages, le thème de l'Adoration des Bergers."
as a prefiguration of the New, the eminence of the shepherds may have been raised in man's imagination to the status of a sacred symbol. As early as Philo Judaeus, the Bible had become allegory as well as history. To interpret every text in the Book as symbolic was customary almost from the very beginning of Christian exegesis. Yet in Mark, which is usually considered to be the earliest of the Gospels, nothing whatsoever is made of the Shepherds. Maybe—though this is purely conjectural—the same sentiment that inspired the pastorals and idylls of Theocritus and Vergil had some influence in setting the Goatherd and Shepherd as a type apart from all other working men. There is nothing especially beautiful in herding sheep, nothing outstandingly noble. But one who has never engaged in this task might romanticize it: its loneliness, the outdoor life under benevolent skies, sleeping in the open air, playing a rustic flute on a flowered hillside, all this may have played a part in forming the pastoral spirit among the Pagans. At any rate, by the first century that spirit was well formed. The hardships of a shepherd's life never entered the picture. It is likely that all writers of pastorals were urban dwellers whose boredom with bricks, stones, cement, crowds, markets, tumult, and quarreling drove them to imagine a more congenial regimen. Neither Theocritus nor Vergil was a rustic, nor were any of the authors of Renaissance or modern pastorals. It would be absurd to read into Spenser's Shepherd's Calendar, with its sharp criticism of contemporary issues and movements, any idealization of its author's pastoral life.  

This bucolic tradition then was simply a literary convention

11. In another Shepherd's Calender, Le Grant Kalendrier et Compost des Bergiers, first published in Troyes some time during the fifteenth or possibly early sixteenth century, and reprinted in Paris in 1924, there is a chapter De l'Honneur et estat de bergerie which lists all the Ancients, Kings of Israel, and prophets—and adds even Cyrus—who were shepherds. By the time this was issued sheep herding was no longer the main occupation of the People, and it is clear from the matter printed in the Almanach that it was addressed to the general reader, whoever he might be.
by the time the Gospels were written. It indicates, as I have suggested, no appreciation of the real shepherd’s life. The medieval shepherd was a serf and could escape ignominy only by entering the religious community. That, however, did not prevent anyone higher in the social scale from thinking of pastors, the Lamb of God, and accompanying tropes without reference to their literal significance. In short, as far as Romanesque and Gothic art were concerned, the Shepherd was a religious symbol and had neither social nor political reference. Similar remarks are in order about scenes of working life, such as the labors of the months. Cultivating the vine, sowing wheat, cutting the meadows, harvesting, threshing, the vintage, such themes are found in Books of Hours and in part woven into tapestries. The monthly labors are accompanied by monthly sports on some calendars and we are shown ladies and gentlemen hawking or busy at other diversions according to the season. The work, as was to be expected, is being done by peasants; the sports and other pleasures are carried on by the upper classes. But then, even in our humanitarian day, it would hardly be likely to find a farmer depicted yachting or a mechanic playing polo, though both might in reality enjoy such pleasures.

The pastoral theme was continued well down into the eighteenth century in painting as well as in literature. Just as nostalgia for the simple life was expressed in poems that were in no sense serious attempts to depict the lives of shepherds and shepherdesses, so it was expressed in songs—the bergerettes—and in paintings. These paintings were imaginary and charming fantasies and it would be foolish to take them seriously. But Le Hameau, the little farm in the Parc de Versailles, was also a fantasy, and Marie-Antoinette when she played at being a dairy-maid had no thought, one supposes, that she was doing anything other than play. What is interesting about all this is not the desire to simplify life and to seek some way of escaping from courtly ceremonial and what

has been called the artificiality of the drawing room, but rather the image by which the happier time was symbolized. Why the pastoral life, rather than the life of the small shopkeeper or artisan? Why not turn, as William Morris did, to an imaginary Middle Ages with its goldsmiths, scribes, illuminators, and other craftsmen? The momentum of custom may explain this better than any other cause, but it is questionable whether it is a sufficient cause. For the fact remains that the custom itself goes back at least to Theocritus and Vergil, and, though the latter may have copied the former, the former attracted him or he would not have copied. Men have always liked masquerades, it is true, but they could have masqueraded as something other than shepherds.13

The People in Painting

It may now be well to mention a few works of visual art in which the People are represented. One of the most interesting is the twelfth century Hortus deliciarum of Herrad von Landsberg, Abbess of Hohenberg (d. 1195).14 Here one has drawings of the reaper, the miller, and the plowman; scenes of builders mixing mortar, squaring stones, carrying mortar, together with military.

13. Honesty compels me to point out that sometimes the occupation of shepherd is not admirable. One finds that the noble Griseldis is reduced to the level of shepherdess, as Nicollete, though in reality a princess, is also a shepherdess. One also finds, as Grace Frank points out in The Medieval French Drama, that shepherds sometimes provide comic relief, as in L’Incarnation et la Nativité. And in Le Jeu de Robin et de Marion “the speech of these peasants is coarse.” Robin is a peasant miles gloriōsus, and the play is both bergerie and pastourelle (Medieval French Drama, p. 233). Mrs. Frank also says that “in the religious and serious plays . . . realistic shepherds abound” (p. 234, n. 1). There are similar conflicts in any period: we have romances of chivalry and Don Quixote; the novels of Ouida contemporary with those of Henry James.

14. See Dahlmann-Waitz, Quellenkunde, no. 5723. The original illustrations of the Hortus were burned, but facsimiles have been reproduced in a modern publication in Strasbourg (1901?) by the Editions Oberlin.
events, scenes of princely life, religious rites such as baptism, incidents from the New Testament, and allegories such as the Wheel of Fortune. In fifteenth-century tapestries one comes upon woodcutters (Musée des Arts Décoratifs) and hunters of boar and bear (Victoria and Albert Museum); in the sixteenth century there are vintage scenes (Cluny), shepherds (Gobelins), and typical pastoral in the Noble Pastoral of the Louvre. Scenes of rural life in tapestries are of no more nor less significance than those found in the miniatures of the Limbourgs. They serve a decorative and picturesque purpose and make no comment on joy or sorrow. In Etienne Chevalier's Book of Hours there is a Nativity in which three unidealized shepherds are pictured accompanied by a bagpiper. One may guess, but no more, that the artist's realism was deliberate, but whether it had any religious significance is impossible to guess. Was it, for instance, a reminder to Chevalier of the vanity of worldly goods, of the universality of the Redemption, of the necessity of all ranks to adore the incarnate God? The significance of visual symbols frequently, indeed always, varies with the eye that sees them. But one thing is certain. No one took the shepherds of the pastorals seriously; most people until the time of Bruegel thought of real peasants as clumsy louts.

**Bruegel (ca. 1525–68?)**

With Bruegel, however, there comes a definite change in point of view. I obviously cannot take up each painter who followed the

15. These are all reproduced in Roger-Armand Weigert, French Tapestry, trans. Donald and Monique King.
16. Easily found in Paul Wescher, Jean Fouquet and His Time, Plate 3.
17. Cf., for example, Dürer's drawing *Three Peasants*, Jorg Brey's October, and Urs Graf's *Peasant Couple Dancing*, nos. 26, 119, and 145, respectively, in the catalogue of the exhibition *Dürer and His Time*, circulated by the Smithsonian Institution, 1965–66. These drawings date from the sixteenth century. See also in Franzep Württembeyer's Mannerism, "Portraits of People of the Lower Classes," p. 212.
sixteenth century and shall therefore be satisfied with those who seem to me to be influential in changing the public’s mind. Though no one is sure of the exact date of Bruegel’s birth, no one denies that he lived during the second half of the sixteenth century, at least a generation later than Dürer. He did most of his work in Flanders during a period which was one of the unhappiest in the history of that troubled region. The Netherlands revolted against Philip II of Spain in 1568, and by 1581 it had declared the independence of the seven provinces under William the Silent. The Duke of Alba, who had been sent there with a large force, having as his mission the extermination of heresy, proceeded to check religious deviation by the most extreme measures. But he also exasperated the orthodox by imposing on the country the Spanish alcabala, a tax of five per cent on all sales. The inhabitants had meanwhile fitted out a fleet and defeated the fleet of their Spanish rulers which gave them mastery of North Holland. By 1573 the Duke of Alba was recalled, but he left behind him the memory of 18,000 persons whom, he boasted, he had executed. Anyone who has read Motley’s Rise of the Dutch Republic will recall scenes of invasion, of devastation, of the capture of cities, of treachery and revenge, which haunt one for years, the siege of Saint Quentin being one of the most terrible. This is the background against which Bruegel’s work must be viewed. The nightmares of Bosch and his school are a prelude to Bruegel’s paintings, which are a sadder but calmer commentary on the state of his mutilated country. The conflict was not merely between two nations, but between religious creeds and practices as well. This brought it down to the level of a civil war.

At the same time, this period saw the activity of men like Stevenius, Mercator, and Ortellius; it was then that Janssen either invented or developed the compound microscope; a time when Orlando di Lasso, Philippe de Monte, Cipriano de Rore, were composing. Hence alongside of the destructive forces men were able to exert constructive forces, and science and the arts seemed
capable of resisting anarchy. When one remembers that this was the time of Titian, Veronese, and Tintoretto; of Palestrina, the two Gabrielli, and Peri; and finally, for there is no need to overload our text, of Shakespeare and Marlowe, one is amazed at such a collection of geniuses. When one adds the names of the great scientists to those already listed, one has the feeling that warfare, devastation, bigotry, and tyranny are powerless to crush the creative spirit. Who knows what might have been accomplished if peace and harmony had prevailed?

The late Ludwig Münz maintains that one of the most potent influences on Bruegel was the geographer Ortellius. In his book *Bruegel, the Drawings*, Münz points out (p. 11) that though the widely sweeping landscape had been initiated by Patinier in the twenties, a new development had occurred by 1550, which led to the production of panoramas for manuals of geography. To make such drawings obviously requires keen powers of observation and a willingness to accept subservience to Nature as a guiding principle. The age was one in which in Italy as well as in the Low Countries the natural sciences were as lively as the arts. The relations between the two fields are worth a moment’s consideration.

For the new science prided itself on controlled observation rather than on deduction, and the new movement in painting also prided itself on what was later to be called naturalism. One no longer knows in what direction the influence ran, whether it was from the arts to the sciences or the reverse. In any event, if an artist sets out to paint what he thinks is Nature, then he will have to choose what is natural in some sense of that word and reject what is unnatural. It is a commonplace that the tradition had been to identify the natural with that least modified by man. Thus the rural landscape is supposed to be more natural than the urban; forests more natural than such gardens as those of the Villa d’Este or Versailles; and peasants more natural than members of the upper classes. Instinct or intuition is more natural than learning.

or reason, and, if one can find persons in whom instinct predominates, then one can devote one’s powers of expression and interpretation to them.

However weak this may be as an argument, it is one that has been maintained throughout Western history. It is a form of cultural primitivism which has sometimes lauded the child and the animal as exemplars. Bruegel illustrates this point of view to perfection and both his landscapes and his larger compositions point to the country and the peasant as subjects of greatest interest to the artist. Others must have shared his interest, for peasants are not usually patrons of artists. In view of this it is understandable that Bruegel should have used the local rural scene in his religious paintings. To represent the Slaughter of the Innocents as taking place in a Flemish village might seem ignorance on the part of a sixteenth-century painter. But to emphasize the contemporaneity of biblical events is also to insist on their timelessness. If we crucify Christ every day, so we sacrifice Isaac daily, stone the Woman taken in Adultery, and try to comfort Job. And in this case Herod’s soldiers are dressed like Spaniards and there undoubtedly lies behind the painting an attack on the Occupation.19 Even in such paintings as The Fall of Icarus, The Battle of Lent and Carnival, The Triumph of Death, or The Carrying of the Cross, the setting is Flanders. Any one of these, except The Road to Calvary, could have been painted with characters taken from the upper classes, but just as Caravaggio was to transform his biblical personages into Italian peasants or paupers, so Bruegel seems to have thought of all themes as best embodied in peasant life. The Proverbs or even The Children’s Games could have been just as well represented with little royal personages. Any theme of general human applicability must be illustrated with some kind of human beings. Social class will be apparent in any

19. This painting now exists only in a copy in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. See Charles de Tolnay, Pierre Bruegel l’Ancien, Vol. 2, Plate 89.
choice, for the costumes and backgrounds will inevitably be associated with social status. One hardly needs the title Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse to know that the woman depicted was not a washerwoman. That Bruegel chose peasants with all their grossness of figure and heaviness of posture would seem to mean only that he chose them as most truly representative of universal human problems.

Such a statement can be only speculative, for the one way we have of knowing what an artist intends is by looking at his pictures. Nor have we any certain way of knowing what his public saw in his pictures. Moreover, in Bruegel’s case we have no diaries or magazine interviews or treatises on painting or manifestos associated with him. All we know is what we see; and what we see in, for example, his drawings of the Vices or Virtues is their rural background with windmills, waterwheels, sheds, cottages, little streams, country animals, wine barrels, and so on. But there are significant exceptions. The personages who incarnate Avarice, Lust, Pride, Envy, and Sloth are ladies clothed not as peasants but as members of the leisure class. Lust is of course naked, and I should prefer not to judge to what class a naked woman belongs, though this one is not the bulky peasant type who appear in the other drawings. She is slim, with elegant rippling hair. It is hard to believe that this was not intentional on Bruegel’s part. No proof was needed then nor is any needed now that a peasant could be just as avaricious, lustful, envious, and so on, as a duke. Amusingly enough, when it was a question of doing a series on the Virtues, he turned from realism to allegory: Charity being a woman with a pelican on her head, Hope a woman standing on an anchor in a stormy sea with a sickle in one hand and a spade in the other. Just as a blindfolded female with sword and scales stands for Justice, so the other virtues are depicted in greater or less fidelity to traditional iconography. Whereas the Vices could be embodied in the upper classes, the Virtues are embodied only in emblems. But in both series of drawings, the settings are rural
and the victims of the Vices are peasants or fantastic beasts. Thus just as the Fall of Icarus takes place in Flanders, so does all morality. The general is in this way made concrete. The universal is shrunken to a narrowly localized event or group of events. Hence the outcome is definition by demonstration. It comes about as if one were to say, “You ask what was the Slaughter of the Innocents, the Conversion of St. Paul, Prudence, Avarice? This is it.” Such a procedure, which rejects all but the most recent elements of tradition, is a rejection of abstract ethics. Bruegel’s paintings resemble the exempla used in sermons. But they are relatively new exempla. “Relatively,” because a good bit of the material in them comes from Bosch.

Münz points out (Bruegel, the Drawings, p. 29) how Bruegel stands in what he calls the tradition of the Stoic humanists, who... strove to see the world clearly, without for one moment letting their criticism be limited by a dogma. They all see with open eyes that there is no paradise on earth, and recognize the world for what it is, with all its mistakes. They see the world as something that man must experience, they feel that a deeper faith must exist, which stands higher than any of the dogmatically entrenched Christian creeds. Thus in order not to lose their inner freedom in these times of religious and social conflict, they find a means of escape in stoicism, in which, as one can not always have good luck, misfortune is often almost sought after as something good, as a means of purification; and the value of the individual ego in retirement from the world is recognized.

This clearly is an interpretation of the total work of Bruegel, not derived from anything left by way of verbal testimony. That what Münz calls stoic humanism was a widely held philosophy of life in the sixteenth century need not be disputed. But when it is a question of finding a philosophy in a picture or series of pictures, the problem is not one of verbal but of visual exegesis. The ancient stoic did indeed withdraw from involvement in the world’s work. He wished to free himself from all external bonds. But it would be difficult to find such detachment in Bruegel. In fact, what would reliable evidence of detachment be? Possibly
devoting one's talents to still lifes, if one were talking of the nineteenth century, and abstractions, if one were talking of our own times. A painter like Delaroche was more detached from the social problems of the nineteenth century than Courbet was, and yet, if one were to judge from subject matter alone, knowing nothing of the ideals of each, one would be hard put to it to decide. Of course, neither was a stoic in any usual sense of that word. As soon as a painter expresses his ideas and emotions via recognizable visual objects, accurately drawn from nature, he is forced to look upon the world as if its visual aspect "mattered." He cannot maintain that the look of things is of no importance. To take that point of view is to become a painter so "abstract" that one will put upon one's canvas only geometric shapes, lines, masses, and possibly indications of movement. But that was not Bruegel's way. How could he possibly have drawn the pictures which are called Lern-und Lesebilder if he was at all detached from human concerns? Of what importance is it to a stoic whether others learn anything whatsoever so long as he himself has learned?

The relevance of Bruegel's paintings to our theme comes out in the figures he chose to teach his lessons. He was not teaching the heavy peasants he drew, but those who were exerting power over them. And yet there have been those who thought this man was a comic painter.20 It seems strange to think that anyone could see humor in The Blind Leading the Blind in Naples, in The Magpie on the Gibbet in Darmstadt, or in the two paintings of the hay and the corn harvest, or, so far as my personal judgment goes, in The Wedding Breakfast. Far from being comic, such

20. For instance, the author of the eleven-line article on Bruegel in the Encyclopaedia Britannica (11th ed.). As a sample of his judgment, I quote the following: "The subjects of his pictures are chiefly humorous figures like those of D. Teniers; and if he wants the delicate touch and silvery clearness of that master, he has abundant spirit and comic power." A fairer estimate of the same date is that of Karl Woermann in his Geschichte der Kunst aller Zeiten und Völker (Vol. 3, pp. 172–73), where Bruegel is said to be in many respects the great artist of the Low Countries in the sixteenth century.
paintings now seem to be bathed in an atmosphere of melancholy suffused with charity. What they seemed to Bruegel's contemporaries is another story. But the fact that some critics saw them as comic shows how recent is our sympathy for the poor and exploited. If I am right in thinking of Bruegel's peasants as surrogates for the People as a whole, then the painter felt nothing but pity for us all.

Caravaggio (1573–1610)

What Bruegel was doing in the Low Countries was being done in an entirely different manner in Italy by Michelangelo Caravaggio. The manner was different, since Caravaggio's People were not simple peasants. They were card-sharers, fortune tellers, inhabitants of the Roman slums, in short, urban low life for the most part. And because he reduced the social status of saints and martyrs, his works, even when commissioned by cardinals to be installed as altar pieces, were sometimes refused. Several of his paintings caused trouble. The constant charge was that his figures were indecorous. Saint Matthew and the Angel was rejected "on the ground that it was not proper, nor like a saint, sitting there with his legs crossed, and his feet rudely exposed to the public." As Hinks puts it, Caravaggio's "pictures were not edifying: far from inviting us to aspire towards the Communion of

22. Cardinal Bellori, as quoted in Roger Hinks, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (p. 102). For Bellori's ideas on what a painting should be, the most easily procured source in English is Elizabeth Gilmore Holt, Literary Sources of Art History (pp. 320 ff.). But Walter Friedländer in his Caravaggio Studies has shown—at least to my satisfaction—that "the democratization of saints like Matthew on the part of Lombard artists probably was rooted in a general religious disposition to return to the supposed simplicity of the early Christian apostles." So also in regard to the dirty feet of the kneeling peasants in the Madonna di Loreto, Friedländer points out that this
Saints, he brought the Saints down to our everyday life, and showed us the Magdalene as a common girl drying her hair, St. Matthew as a little workman surprised to find himself writing beautiful Hebrew letters in a large empty book, and the Blessed Virgin as a victim of an accident in Trastevere” (p. 87). One might argue whether or not this practice is edifying. Friedländer has pointed out the similarity between this and the teaching of Saint Philip Neri who was a contemporary of the painter. And as for the realistic detail of the paintings, that was precisely in line with what Saint Ignatius Loyola had preached in his Spiritual Exercises.

It is indubitable that Caravaggio was fascinated by horror. He painted at least three canvases in which men are decapitated—a Judith, a Salome, and a David and Goliath, one sacrifice of Isaac, and a Medusa, all of which are about as repulsive as he could make them. And what is more interesting, psychologically speaking, the heads of Holofernes and of Goliath, and perhaps of John the Baptist as well, are said to be self-portraits. If this is true, then it looks as if he had also seen himself as a horrified witness of the martyrdom of Saint Matthew as well as of the crucifixion of Saint Peter, for the same head appears in them all. It is also possible that his head was in the lost painting of the Betrayal, as Judas, for the same features are in the four of them. The question of why he should have so despised himself can no longer be answered. But a censorious critic might point to his numerous paintings of naked boys, as well as to his scandalous career as tavern brawler, duelist, ruffian, and murderer. Certainly a critic like Bellori would maintain that the man had reason not to be self-satisfied. But today, in spite of his unsavory character—indeed perhaps because of it—he has become more sympathetic.

had been anticipated in Antonio Campi’s Nativity in San Paolo (1580). Plates 51–53 in his volume show that Flemish painters before Caravaggio had painted “loose company,” money changers, drunkards, lecherous old men, and whores.
For in our time the man who rejects society, who is a rebel against law and custom, is admired for his independent spirit; and the pederast is no longer driven to suicide. Because of our greater tolerance, we are not blinded to the beauty of Caravaggio's paintings or to what he has to say of himself.

For we too can ask the question he appears to have asked: What would these scenes look like if they happened today? This, we have assumed, was also Bruegel's question. There are dozens of Renaissance paintings of the themes Caravaggio was called upon to illustrate. But in no other Judith and Holofernes, for example, does Judith clutch her victim by the back hair, tug his head to one side, and slice well into it, while her aged companion, a wrinkled crone holding the bag in which the severed head is to be carried, looks on as any contemporary Roman hag might have looked on. If the call to Saint Matthew is witnessed by the same boys who were painted in The Card Sharers and La Zingara, that is probably because Caravaggio thought them to be the type which would have frequented publicans. In fact, one of them seems to be a witness to the martyrdom of the saint, though well in the background. Again, the figures with old clothes and soiled feet who kneel before the Virgin in the Madonna of Loretto certainly add to the pathos of the scene, just as the complete nakedness of the young Jesus in the Madonna dei Palafrenieri strengthens the impact of what is depicted. One of those ingeniously suspended cache-sexes which were in vogue at the time might have protected the decency of the Son of God, but it would also have been absurd. It is to be expected that in a time of unbridled lubricity purity of thought must be preserved at all costs.

When one meditates over the paintings of the Italian Renaissance, showing the patriarchs and martyrs, the saints and prophets, richly clothed, wearing jeweled crowns, of immaculate grooming, and of beautiful corporeal appearance, one wonders what was going on in the minds of the painters. Were they simply painting beautiful pictures or illustrating the Bible and the Golden
Legend? If the former, there is no question of their success. If the latter, then the word “illustrate” must be interpreted etymologically. But whatever their motivation, artists of the next generation seemed to have suffered a change of heart. For not only Caravaggio, but before him both Tintoretto and Bassano, brought the supernatural into Nature. I refer, as one possible cause of this, to the innovations in natural science. In an article published in 1938, the late Professor John Tull Baker spoke of “naturalistic explanation” as the belief that “what happens around us can . . . be made clear to us in terms found within these happenings. It is not necessary for us to look beyond.” 23 But to look for naturalistic explanations of what are inherently supernatural events is to reject, whether one knows it or not, the intervention of God in human history. The very heart of both Judaism and Christianity is anti-historical. To give a naturalistic account of the Creation, the Sacrifice of Isaac, the Giving of the Law, the Incarnation, Vicarious Atonement, the Virgin Birth, the miracles, the Resurrection, assuming this to be possible, is to be rational, no doubt, but also to be neither Jew nor Christian. But there is another side to the question. As I suggested in writing of Bruegel, such dogmas reflect the timelessness of moral and theological principles. To a man like Caravaggio, as to any thoughtful person, sacrifice, martyrdom, repentance, are as much of today as of biblical times. Each has a double location: in a historical series and in an ideological pattern. The Crucifixion may be both a historical event and also a symbol of every man’s denial of God. That the only way to express the latter is to say it “in the language of the People” might be disputed, but that the People participate in religious history should not be disputed. In both literature and painting they have usually been relegated to the background. They might adore the Infant Jesus as shepherds, but they were also the Roman

23. In Courbet and the Naturalistic Movement, ed. George Boas, p. 36. My friend, Dr. E. H. Gombrich, also reminds me that the influence of Savonarola should not be underestimated.
soldiers who tortured Christ on the road to Calvary. Whatever happened, as it was given to us in art, happened only to the Best People. In England at the time of Caravaggio’s activity, the greatest dramatic poets were staging scenes more horrible, if possible, than any depicted by Caravaggio. The murder of the Duchess of Malfi and of Desdemona are more of a nightmare than anything in the “indecorous” pictures of Caravaggio. But Webster and Shakespeare kept such events in a nobler milieu.

Hinks points out that just as the Reformers translated the Bible into the vernacular, so Caravaggio “transposed the personages of sacred legend into the terms of ordinary experience” (p. 88). This is true enough. But it might be added that this rips the veil of mystery off sacred legend. When this is done, what happens to awe and reverence? For purposes of religious discipline it may be better to keep the arcana veiled. If, after all, the death of the Blessed Virgin is simply the death of anyone’s wife or daughter, would it not be more prudent to substitute for death the magic of a corporeal assumption?

In spite of this apparent “leveling” of the most exalted human experience, something approaching the beatific vision, there was a tradition in Christianity dating back to the thirteenth century at least, which would justify at a minimum an attenuated naturalism. I refer to the Franciscan doctrine that the first step on the road to God is the sight of His handiwork in the beauty of Nature.24 This appeared in a primitive form in the writings of Saint Francis of Assisi, and later it became the center of natural theology. One of the most famous examples of this is in Montaigne’s Apology for Raimond Sebonde. But up to this point, Nature referred to extra-human nature. Mankind had always been thought of as something added to the natural order. The natural order had been created for the use of man; he was therefore no integral part of it. One could fit him into it with rural folk, on the ground that they are more natural than urban dwellers, and then go on to

24. In St. Bonaventura’s Itinerarium mentis in Deum.
including all men among animate beings, beings like beasts and vegetables. At this point the usual distinctions between higher and lower orders are eliminated. A cat may then look at a king and the king may count himself lucky if a cat pays any attention to him whatsoever.

Louis Le Nain (1593–1648)

Louis Le Nain fits into the pattern we are sketching at this point. But to interpret his work is mainly a lyrical enterprise. For whereas Bruegel stands in a tradition that is well known and painted amid scenes of devastation which are reflected in his work, Le Nain stands apart, as far as anyone knows, from all political and social turmoil and, except for one or two paintings of religious themes, does not seem to take sides in the battles that were dividing Christendom. One of three brothers, all of whom were painters, his work was not distinguished from that of his associates until 1929 when Paul Jamot was able to identify the canvases which were his.25 He was thus, to all intents and purposes, neglected by art historians until our own century, and though several of his paintings were in important collections, those collections were not open to the public.26 All three brothers were known and were members of the Académie royale des Beaux-Arts, but

25. In Les Le Nain. Jamot had as early as 1922 published “Etudes sur les frères Le Nain” in the Gazette des Beaux-Arts. In 1862 Champfleury had written about the brothers in Les Peintres de la Réalité sous Louis XIV, les frères Le Nain, on which Sainte-Beuve had commented in his essay on Champfleury in Nouveaux Lundis, Vol. 4. But the individual works of the three brothers had not been differentiated.

26. La Forge was in the collection of the Duc de Choiseul, then in that of the Prince de Conti, and finally in that of Louis XVI. The Visite à la Grand’mère was bought by the Baron de Crozat in 1772 for Catherine II of Russia. Other paintings had been commissioned by and hung in churches. See the catalogue of the 1934 Le Nain exhibition at the Petit Palais drawn up by Mlle Germaine Batnaud. But the history of the greater number of the paintings is still obscure.
since Louis died on May 23, 1648, and had entered the Academy on March 1 of the same year, he did not have much influence as an academician. The fact is that as the Roi Soleil rose to greater and greater effulgence, naturalistic painting sank below the horizon.

Now when one looks at the dates of Le Nain’s birth and death and reflects that, though he was born in Laon, he did his work in Paris, those canvases of his which represent peasant life seem more and more puzzling. His younger contemporaries, Adrian van Ostade (1610–87) and Brouwer (1608–40), and his older contemporary, David Teniers (1582–1649), were all given to painting peasants, but their peasants were the rollicking, drinking, dancing peasants who were later to form the opening choruses of comic operas. Le Nain’s peasants have a noticeable dignity and sobriety. They are seated in groups, often looking straight out of the canvas as if the spectator had surprised them at their simple meals or during a brief moment of rest. They are the peasants of whom La Bruyère was to write, “They spare other men the toil of sowing, plowing, and reaping in order to live, and they thus do not deserve to lack the bread which they have grown.” 27 In short, Louis Le Nain’s People are neither the peasants of Bruegel nor the urban ruffians of Caravaggio. The former have taken on symbolic meaning and the latter, paradoxically enough, have become saints and martyrs. Le Nain’s peasants are simply themselves and carry no allegorical charge. They are a challenge to the spectator who can view them as he would view a part of the natural landscape, a group of trees or rocks. And it may well be this that gives them the dignity which their admirers have seen in them. They are, it should be observed, always at a standstill. Even in La Forge,

the smith has dropped his tools. All action has ceased, has been frozen at a given moment. They thus become an invitation to look and meditate, not to laugh or to paste a moral sentiment upon a spectacle. Small wonder that Félibien found Le Nain’s style peu noble. Félibien was no more capable than Sir Josuah Reynolds of appreciating that kind of nobility that requires no applied ornament to label it as such. Le Nain was, as far as I have been able to discover, the first painter to see beneath the rags and squalor what has sententiously been called the dignity of man.

Paul Jamot has objected to an interpretation of these paintings which is close to that given in this essay—that “the work of the Le Nain brothers is a protest against the harsh treatment of the landlord and the poverty of the peasant.” If that were the case, he says, who would be there to hear the protest? The peasants had neither the money to buy paintings nor any interest in them. The bourgeoisie was satisfied with things as they were, and the nobility was far from indulging in that form of liberalism which was later to wreck their society.

I doubt very much that such paintings were a protest in any literal sense. I see no way of injecting into the minds of painters whose biographies are almost entirely obscure any intentions whatsoever. But it can hardly be denied, and certainly is not denied by Jamot, that Louis Le Nain’s peasants have a kind of inherent nobility and that they are neither ridiculed nor prettified. Jamot himself admits in that part of his book given over to Louis Le Nain (p. 32) that he was a man animated with a new spirit

29. “L’Oeuvre des Le Nain proteste contre la dureté du seigneur et la misère du paysan.”
30. “Auprès de qui un peintre pouvait-il en espérer du succès? Les paysans qu’il est supposé défendre n’avaient ni écus ni regards pour la peinture, la bourgeoisie était satisfaite et la noblesse était loin encore de ce dilettantisme libéral qui, un siècle et demi plus tard, applaudissait aux entreprises des démolisseurs de la société établie et prenait tant de plaisir à être battu qu’il fournissait lui-même les verges.”
which nothing foretold either in the works of his brothers or in that of his time and country. It is precisely in Le Nain’s sober presentation of his peasants that this new spirit consists, a spirit that is found neither in the paintings of his Flemish and Dutch contemporaries nor in the poets of this period.

The early seventeenth century saw other painters who were interested in the poorer classes. Velázquez (1599–1660) and Murillo (1618–82), with the former’s Forge of Vulcan, to take but one example, may have kept alive the notion that the People were of some aesthetic interest if of no other. So with Murillo’s numerous paintings of street urchins. There was neither social satire nor moral comment in these canvases, and indeed Murillo’s youngsters seem happy enough, soliciting neither pity nor relief. They will grow up to resemble Lazarillo and Sancho Panza. For more acid comment on society one must turn to Jacques Callot (1592–1635), whose prints of the miseries of war were not to be equaled until Goya published his Desastros. The period was one in which war was a horrible actuality. The Wars of Religion in France had no sooner subsided than the Thirty Years War began. Its generalized slaughter and devastation carried the religious disputes into the political arena, and while the generals earned medals, the People reaped death. Few centuries have witnessed more of human callousness, for along with the cruelty, deceit, and large-scale mendacity were magnificence and unrivalled splendor. It is to the unending credit of artists like Louis Le Nain and Callot that they saw the rot beneath the surface. And yet their patrons were princes and dukes, the very men most responsible for the evils portrayed. One wonders whether these patrons ever looked at the works of art they paid for.

The eighteenth century was one in which the People figure in amusing scenes on the piazzes of Venice, in the streets of Paris,

31. “Un homme animé d’un esprit nouveau que rien n’annonçait, ni dans les productions de ses propres frères ni dans celles de son temps et de son pays.”
the taverns of London, and at the races, in the rough and tumble life below the strata of the salons. Such paintings are seldom serious, though they conceal serious implications. The sketches of Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo are charming and so are the oils of Longhi, but they are hardly a direct comment on life, as the moralities of Hogarth are. One has to wait for the nineteenth century before another Bruegel or Le Nain appears. Such an artist was Daumier.

_Daumier_ (1808–79)

It is a falsification of historical causation to assign credit for popular movements to any one man, but as far as the nineteenth century is concerned, major credit must be given to Daumier for making the People, at least in France, sympathetic. Though his lithographs and paintings did not resemble the world of those artists whom we have been writing about, they were similar to them in the dignity with which they depicted the poor. Daumier was surely one of the important cultural forces of his time. He probably did more than any other artist in France—I am not speaking of poets or novelists—of Hugo or Lamartine—to change men's minds. With an uncanny insight into those hidden powers that control society, he was able to ridicule ideas whose destruction was essential if a new social order was ever to be built. As examples one can take his caricatures of lawyers, of the classical drama, of neoclassical art, of the Bourgeois Monarchy, and of the triumphant middle class in general. One might almost say that he had discovered the middle class with all its timidity, ignorance, self-satisfaction. He seemed to understand that in a constitutional monarchy the bar would take the place of the army. Whereas under the _Ancien Régime_ it was the soldier who was in control and whose virtues were the ideal, under a regime where statute took the place of a personal monarch, the man who could untangle the intricacies of the law would rule society. The chicanery and
double-dealing of the sophist would become bit by bit the ideals of the citizen. There are about seventy caricatures of lawyers in Daumier's work, and not one seeks to portray the profession of the law as other than contemptible. He saw the citizen as the victim of both the legalist and the King-General. And whereas the revolution of 1789 had dethroned Louis XVI, a pitiful warrior, those of the 18th Brumaire, of 1814, of 1830, and of 1848 had replaced one evil with another. In Daumier's eyes logical manipulation had replaced bravery. Men who live in countries with written constitutions know with what legerdemain the intention of their authors can be transformed to "fit the times."

The association of neoclassicism with the Ancien Régime was only a historical accident. But its association with the Terror and with Napoleon was as logical as any rationalization of art can be. For the men of the Terror seemed to believe that they were reviving the Roman Republic, just as Napoleon thought he was reviving the Empire. All that was revived or could be revived were the trappings of the periods in question, classical names for children (Achille, Jules, Emile), and for institutions (the Senate, for instance), costume, subject matter for pictures and poems, details of furniture and architectural design. The Arc de Triomphe de l'Etoile did not turn Napoleon into Augustus Caesar, nor did election to the Senate turn its members into Roman patricians. David's nudes did not look like Romans, and Canova's Napoleon was merely ridiculous and not Augustan at all. It was Daumier who saw the absurdity of such stupid pretense and who understood that making French eighteenth-century academicism grotesque was to direct taste toward more reasonable themes. Hence in his series on the public swimming baths he showed what the naked human body actually looked like.

He was at his most cruel in his caricatures of Louis-Philippe

32. For a quite different interpretation of this aspect of Daumier, see the authoritative book by Raymond Escholier on this artist, p. 8.
33. I refer to the nude Napoleon in the courtyard of the Brera in Milan.
and the statesmen of the Bourgeois Monarchy. Some of these lithographs are mere caricatures in the same way that graffiti on walls might be, with oversized heads and wizened legs. But in such drawings as the Rue Transnonain he achieved a kind of pathos which was on a level with tragedy. He took his position as artist seriously; he was not working to delight or to titillate the taste of the dilettanti but to comment on life in the society of which he was a spectator. And his comment was far from being uniformly hostile. His drawings of the Third-Class Carriages, of the Third-Class Waiting Room, of the Washerwomen, the Beggars, the Street Singers, were direct and very simple presentations of the endurance of poverty and of hard work. While he tried to destroy respect for the regime under which he was living, he also tried to arouse some pity for those who bore the burdens of that regime. His lithographs were not programs. They fixed moments in history about which the spectator could make up his own mind. Though the legends under his caricatures are often very funny, they could be dispensed with in the majority of cases and the residue would be just as funny. Of course it is true that his sheer artistic talent was very rare. Only a Hokusai, perhaps a Picasso, could vivify a line as he could. His sense of bodily expression was unequaled. The gestures of his figures ceased being those of the academic manuals which in the long run were choreographic attitudes ritualized over the years. His were instantaneous glimpses of emotion caught alive and preserved in all their vitality. But such skill is based upon an uncanny power of observation. Daumier, we are told by those who have studied his career in detail, never drew from a model after his student days, but always relied on his visual memory. To observe so closely and remember so faithfully demands a sympathy, indeed an affection, for what one is looking at. And it is fair to say that though his caricatures of officials are acid, those of Les Parisiens aux Champs, or the Five Senses, are softened with good humor. The irony of his career is that it terminated in blindness. But he had given
to the French public about four thousand drawings that were the creation of a social class low in prestige but essential to a democratic government. He did not foresee its future and, in fact, one of his most moving drawings is of The Future lying muffled and blindfolded.

Daumier, like Caravaggio, was interested above all in urban people. But when one is discussing French painting of the nineteenth century, one cannot forget that by 1850 the French had for sixty years been living through social turmoil, occurring mainly in their cities, turmoil which embraced the hopes and catastrophes of the Revolution, the Terror, the Consulate, the Empire, the First Restoration, the Hundred Days, the second reign of Louis XVIII and the advent of Charles X, the July Revolution of 1830, the Bourgeois Monarchy, and the Revolution of 1848. Out of all this emerged nothing more satisfactory than the Second Empire and the fake Renaissance of Louis Napoleon. The arts of those sixty years show the effects of such a situation, for at one extreme there were those who sought a refuge from reality in neoclassicism and the beau idéal, and at the other, the various types of romantic fantasy, some men fleeing into the Middle Ages, some idolizing Shakespeare, Ossian, Byron, Scott. It was a period when each kind of art issued a manifesto which it hoped would justify its existence in the eyes of the public. Thus a tradition was initiated which has lasted into our own times when it is taken for granted that no picture or poem can be understood until explained. The painter and the poet became alienated from the rest of society, demanded privileges which mankind in general refused to grant, and, as if to glory in their alienation, adopted vestimentary eccentricities to mark them off from the bourgeoisie.

Jean-François Millet (1814–75)

The penetrating vision of Daumier saw through these follies and, as I have tried to suggest, enabled men to see for themselves
the regnant absurdities. His contemporary, the French Jean-François Millet, was born a peasant, was miserable in town, and found what happiness he had—and it was not very much—only in the country. In his case we are lucky to have available a number of letters which he wrote to his intimate friend, Alfred Sensier, and which were published in part in 1881. These letters give us an idea of his purpose in art as well as an insight into his character. Hence what follows is not wholly conjecture.

The paintings and some of the drawings of Millet are so well known that they need no description. Though harshly criticized as ugly and brutal, indeed as repulsive, by the art critics of the time, paintings like The Gleaners, The Angelus, The Sower, The Man with the Hoe, became so popular, especially in the United States, that reproductions of them hung in numerous homes and school rooms and were used on calendars. Only Guido Reni’s Aurora, the Sistine Madonna, and Holman Hunt’s Light of the World have captured the taste of the general public to the same extent.

Millet’s are not pretty or sentimental pictures, but stark representations of a painful existence lived at the mercy of wind, cold, excessive heat, drought—an existence that is an uninterrupted battle. When Millet painted a shepherdess, she had no resemblance to the shepherdesses of the pastorals or of the bergerettes; she was a peasant, coarsely dressed and shod in sabots, as much an integral part of the landscape as the earth on which she stood. When he painted a farmhand resting on his mattock, the man was gaunt, exhausted, sweating, and as unlike the reapers of Léopold Robert as Jeanne d’Arc was unlike Agnès Sorel. “Millet’s shepherd,” says Sensier, “is not a vulgar peasant cast in the image of the ploughman or the field hand. He is enigmatic, a mysterious being living alone. His sole companions are his dog and his flock. . . . In the winter he wanders over the damp earth seeking the slightest signs of vegetation. Come spring, he brings aid to the

34. Alfred Sensier, La Vie et l’Oeuvre de J.-F. Millet, edited by Paul Mantz.
ewes at lambing time. He is their caretaker. He is the flock's friend, the friend and the doctor. He watches the stars, he probes the skies, and he predicts the weather." 35 Whether one agrees with all that Sensier says or not, Millet's peasants were unlike those of tradition. As Paul Brandt, whose studies of the working class in art are authoritative, puts it,

What had the peasant become if we disregard the ever-typical pictures of the months [the labors of the months], until his appearance in art? A drunken, quarrelsome clown among the Dutch, a perfumed Celadon among the French—never taken seriously as his dignity and sacred position gave him the right, struggling with clods for his beloved bread, at work. Even with the struggle of the fourth estate against the third, which had secured the lion's share of the booty of the Revolution, the artists had seen this only as an occasion to depict him as a "suffering agrarian" and to arouse pity for him—they did not seek him in his work.36

This tradition of the clumsy lout as the typical peasant was, according to Brandt, entirely changed by Millet's Winnower. But realism of Millet's sort, unlike Courbet's, was based on no political doctrine whatsoever, though it seemed to some of his critics to be

35. "Le berger n'est pas un campagnard fait à l'image des laboureurs ou des autres travailleurs des champs; c'est un personnage énigmatique, un être mystérieux; il vit seul, il n'a pour compagne que son chien et son troupeau. . . . L'hiver, il va sur la terre encore humide à la découverte des moindres végétations. Au printemps, il aide les mères brebis dans la venue des agneaux. Il les soigne, il est le guide, l'ami, le médecin du troupeau. De plus, c'est un contemplateur; il examine les astres, il sonde les cieux et prédit le temps" (p. 167).

a visual expression of an undefined sort of socialism. Quite the contrary was true. Millet was too innocent or too ignorant to know what socialism was. He was a simple peasant himself, whose religious ideas were all gathered from the Vulgate and whose literary taste was formed by reading Vergil. As for politics, he knew nothing of them. His moral standards were those of the Decalogue and he was totally uninterested in moral casuistry. In keeping with this one is not surprised to find him saying, “Boucher did not paint nudes, but rather little sluts without any clothes. His was not the lavish exhibition of Titian’s women, proud of their beauty to the point of making a show of it, to the point of showing themselves in their nudity, so sure were they of their power.” Boucher’s women, he thought, were “artificial,” Titian’s “natural,” and that settled the matter. But when he came to ask himself what natural human life was, he answered in the words of Genesis 3:19: “In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” Life to him was expiation for a primordial sin; and the most that one could hope for was calm and silence.

37. He had been drilled in Latin as a boy by his parish priest, Father Jean Lebrisseau. See Sensier, _La Vie et l’Oeuvre_, p. 26.

38. “Boucher ne faisait pas des femmes nues, mais des petites créatures déshabillées: ce n’était pas les plantureuses exhibitions de Titien, fières de leur beauté jusqu’à en faire parade, jusqu’à se montrer nues tant elles étaient sûres de leur puissance.” Ibid., p. 55.

39. See a letter to Sensier (ibid., p. 157): “Work is my motto, for man is doomed to labor. ‘Thou shalt live by the sweat of thy brow.’” (“Mon programme, c’est le travail, car tout homme est voué à la peine du corps. ‘Tu vivras à la sueur de ton front.’ ”) Again (ibid., p. 130): “The human aspect is what interests me most in art, and if I were able to do what I wish, or at least attempt it, I would only carry out the result of impressions made upon me either by landscapes or figures. Never is it the gay aspect which I notice. I do not know where to find it and have never seen it. The happiest things I know are tranquility and silence.” (“C’est le côté humain qui me touche le plus en art, et si je pouvais faire ce que je voudrais, ou tout au moins le tenter, je ne ferais rien qui ne fût le résultat d’une impression reçue par
The critics of his time would not or could not see things in this light. *Le Semeur*, they said (Sensier, p. 156), expressed a curse upon the condition of the rich, since the man was depicted casting his seeds toward the heavens in anger. There could be no other way to sow seeds by hand than to cast them upwards so that they could be widely scattered; and the anger in question was supplied by the critics; but to depict suffering humanity, even if the suffering was no more than inferred, was held to be a protest. Similarly the critics of Courbet saw him as a socialist even before he came under the influence of Proudhon. As a matter of fact, Millet’s peasants are far from being in a state of agony. *The Gleaners* and the couple in *The Angelus* are dignified and, if anything, resigned to their lot. They are symbols of pain only if one has already presupposed that to work is disagreeable. But since official art did presuppose that and wanted pictures, if they represented anything, to represent the pleasures of the leisure class, painters like Millet were doomed from the outset to be rejected as troublemakers. But the trouble the troublemakers make is to point to things which the arbiters of taste had rather not see. To see sawyers, woodcutters, charcoal burners, quarry workers, stone breakers, road menders, and the like would be disagreeable only if one preferred not to admit one’s dependence on the proletariat. The dependence is to be sure reciprocal, but the middle classes get greater returns for what they invest in labor than the laborers do for what they invest in production. This was the basis of the proposed reforms of St. Simon, Fourier, Proudhon, and to some extent of Marx. When an economist announces that labor is not a commodity or that property is theft, he is not noting any facts whatsoever. For labor has been bought and sold at prices.

fluctuating in the labor market just as wheat or cotton are bought and sold at fluctuating prices. And property is theft only if you assume, with Saint Ambrose, that God intended all things to be owned in common. But this assumption could hardly be substantiated. To confuse economic with moral ends is, like all confusion, misleading. The *laisser faire* school of economics guided the thought of early nineteenth-century economists, for it was based on what was supposed to be the scientific thesis of general determinism. Hence the correct attitude to take was at most to give a penny to the beggar at the risk (a) of pauperizing him and (b) of making a foolish, because futile, gesture. Peasants were peasants because there had to be all sorts of people in the human panorama. They either did not suffer, being less sensitive to privation than ladies and gentlemen, or, if they did suffer, that was also part of Nature’s plan. Meredith’s army of unalterable law was an appropriate symbol for this philosophy, though it was already obsolete by the time Meredith invented it. The only excuse for trying to ameliorate the lot of the peasant or laborer was that to do so was pleasant.

Millet’s initiative was carried on by Van Gogh, a great admirer of his who frequently copied his works. Later, in the United States, one finds the same tendency to use the workman, the farmer, the beggar, in general the man who is down and out or simply poor, as a serious subject of painting in members of the Ashcan School. What serious intentions lay behind this and how much was just due to a desire for novelty or a new picturesqueness is a matter of argument. It is impossible to tell whether a painting of a man in rags is an expression of any social idea or simply a painting with ideological reference. Murillo’s street urchins are similarly ambiguous. Was he trying to attract the attention of the rich to the poverty of their fellows or was he noting an element of visual interest that had not been emphasized before? The “meaning” of a pictorial subject is often supplied by the spectator. Though Millet disallowed any doctrine in his paintings, yet it is hard to
disagree with Arnold Hauser when he says, “Millet paints the apotheosis of physical work and makes the peasant the hero of a new epic.” And he continues by saying, “It is unmistakably clear that the choice of motifs is here conditioned more by political than by artistic considerations.” In the cases of Daumier and Courbet, who are combined by Hauser with Millet, there is little doubt. But in Millet’s case the distinction between an artistic and a political motif is less clear. For it would never have occurred to Millet to paint something without social reference, even though he would not have been willing to phrase the reference in philosophic terms. In short, the fusion between subject matter or motif and artistry was complete. So in Van Gogh, we find from his letters that the very colors he used were chosen for their moral symbolism, not for their harmonious visual relationships. But that was part of his art. He was not merely making a beautiful pattern of colors and shapes but an ethical symbol embodied in colors. Few persons looking at Van Gogh’s paintings think of this symbolism, but he thought of it, unless he was a greater hypocrite than one has any reason to believe.

As the nineteenth century moved on, a growing interest in popular life is noticeable, an interest that runs parallel to the development of naturalism (or realism) in the novel and on the stage. In the United States one has only to think of William Sidney Mount, Eastman Johnson, even Winslow Homer, to see this, of the Currier and Ives prints, of the Rogers groups. Later we come upon the Ashcan School. In Europe the names of the sculptor Meunier, of Käthe Kollwitz, of the young Picasso, come to mind, names that no longer stand for a special technique of drawing or painting, but for a warmer sympathy with the unfortunate, the exploited. Homely scenes, sometimes simple middle-class interiors (in Vuillard, for instance) take the place of elegance, splendor, mythology, or sensuality.

This is perhaps more clearly seen in the United States than in Europe and more in the North than in the South. Northerners, in general, were not descended from landed proprietors and had few pretensions to be *grands seigneurs*. Their culture was a village culture, not a plantation culture, and the cobbler, the carpenter, the farmhand, the woodcutter, voted in town meeting along with the squire and the minister. As the rural background receded and the city took its place in the lives of northern Americans, it was perhaps inevitable, or at least explicable, that a nostalgia for the farm should take over. Such a nostalgia today is obvious in the fad for Early American decoration, furniture, prints, and pewter, regardless of their intrinsic value. It is truistic to say that one cannot be nostalgic for what one has never experienced, but many a man has substituted dreams of grandeur for longing for his youth. The grandeur which the average American, if he comes from the North, seems to want is the grandeur of the man who has risen from the soil by his own efforts. The liberality of those men who have realized their dream checks one’s tendency to attribute their careers exclusively to the love of possessions. It is more likely that they have been motivated by the desire to meet a challenge, to “succeed.”