

THE ARTISTIC AND LITERARY TRANSFORMATION OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY PARIS

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An old man sits for a portrait. He is an aristocrat wearing fine fabric. Upon closer inspection, however, the viewer sees that his jacket is worn, his body soft and his face cracked. This is a portrait of an old man clinging to better times. This is Honoré de Balzac's image of Old Goriot, the protagonist of his 1835 novel.¹ One of Goriot's eyes fixates on the viewer while the other looks beyond. His is a blank stare. This portrait represents Paris's nineteenth century transformation. Transformed from old to new, the capital city was modernized and thrown into capitalism, triggering extreme cultural consequences. Goriot's portrait reminds the viewer that traditional notions of social status, art and class identity did not take kindly to such radical change. Nineteenth-century Paris was a city of ephemeral and chaotic movement, constant transformation and naked exploitation. Through the characters in Balzac's *Old Goriot*, Walter Benjamin's *The Writer of Modern Life*,² and T.J. Clark's analysis of impressionism, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*,³ we gain insight into the physical transformation of Paris and the resulting anxieties about materialism, commercialism, and modernity. Nineteenth-century capitalism affected the city's social character, class structure, and its relationship to nature. This transformation did not always result in a beautifully painted tableau.

¹ Honoré de Balzac, *Old Goriot*, trans. Marion Ayton Crawford (Penguin Books: London, 1951).

² Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

³ T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

After the overthrow of the Second Republic in 1852, Napoleon III proclaimed Paris a capital of modernity. Among other changes to French society, the Second Empire gave the capital city a new face.⁴ Appointed to modernize Paris, the Baron Haussmann, a city prefect, deconstructed the medieval streets and replaced them with avenues that remain the quintessential image of Paris: immaculate balconies overlooking perfectly-groomed French gardens. Beginning around 1859, Haussmann set about transforming Napoleon III's Paris to reflect the new Empire -- one of progress. This rapid and expansive transformation was characterized by commercialization and urbanism. The old, congested city was opened anew. Paris went from a city of feudal industries to one of *grandes maisons* and factories. Haussmann's developments not only transformed the city physically, but they also changed how Parisians lived in their environment. Paris was no longer a maze of dirty streets and dark alleyways; it became a bustling, burgeoning metropolis where its citizens moved about quickly, passing through iron and glass structures alongside shoppers and workers.⁵

Yet while Haussman had dismantled a "narrow, unhealthy, insufficient" city, he had also erased the character of a city that had been "picturesque, varied, charming, full of memories."⁶ Many said that Haussmann had "killed the street and the *quartier*."⁷ The transformations he wrought were to such an extent that "there was no more multiformity in Paris, no more surprise, no more *Paris inconnu*."⁸ But he had also created expansive open spaces, vast boulevards, and opulent opera houses. Haussmann had created great sweeping vistas, "with

⁴ The Second Empire included the period from 1851-2 to 1870.

⁵ Mindful of the legacy of the 1848 Revolution, Napoleon III also sought to use architecture to suppress further dissent. As Benjamin wrote: "the streets of Paris had been enlarged to permit ideas to circulate, and, above all, regiments to pass." It was "the equivalent of saying that Paris has been strategically embellished." Gustave Claudin, *Paris nouveau jugé flâneur* (Paris: Dentu, 1868), cited in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press: 1999), 129-30.

⁶ Victorien Sardou, "Maison neuve," in *Théâtre complet de Victorien Sardou*, 9, 274-75, cited in Gérard-Noël Lameyre, *Haussmann, "Préfet de Paris"* (Paris: Flammarion, 1958), 281-82.

⁷ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 43.

⁸ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 43.

monuments at climax. All these qualities helped to make the new Paris a uniquely enticing spectacle, a visual and sensual feast.”⁹ In this new city, the emerging Parisian bourgeoisie found places to display themselves and to participate in the fantastic spectacle of modernism that flourished throughout the mid- to late-nineteenth century.

Paris’s transformation under Napoleon III, and the Second Empire’s relationship to social change, the arts, and social geography is well documented, and includes analyses from the Goncourt brothers, Mallarmé, and contemporary historians known as *dix neuvièmistes*.¹⁰ It is the three authors treated here, however – Balzac, Benjamin, and Clark – who best represent, through their unique and creative analyses of Haussmanization and France’s Second Empire, the anxieties of modernism. They were fine and detailed observers of Paris’s transformation. Balzac’s scientific and masterful account of the Second Empire aptly reflects this changing French society. *Old Goriot* (from Balzac’s multi-volume *La Comédie humaine*) provides a detailed explanation of the demise of the old aristocracy and of the new structure and identity of Paris. It has been said that *Old Goriot*’s beginning reveals Balzac’s “genius for description”:

No novel ever had its setting more exactly visualized. In page after page of minute particularity he builds up the boarding-house in all its concreteness, and then brings living, breathing personalities on the scene, and in his exposition shows us what has brought these people here, what their pasts have been, or may have been, what their hope, or lack of hope for the future, and what their relations are with each other.¹¹

⁹ Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (Penguin Group: New York, 1988), 151.

¹⁰ See Stéphane Mallarmé, “The Impressionists and Edouard Manet,” *The Art Monthly Review* (London, 30 September 1876); Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, *Journal: Mémoires de la vie littéraire* (Paris: Fasquelle and Flammarion, 1959); Louis Chevalier, *Working Classes and Dangerous Classes: Paris in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Frank Jellinek (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973); Anthony Vidler, “The Scenes of the Street: Transformations in Ideal and Reality, 1750-1871,” in *On Streets*, ed. Stanford Anderson, 29-111 (Boston, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978); Jeanne Gaillard, *Paris, la ville: 1852-1870* (Paris, 1975); David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

¹¹ Marion Ayton Crawford, introduction to *Old Goriot*, by Honoré de Balzac

It was Baudelaire (1821-1867) who turned the decay of the aristocracy and the rise of the bourgeoisie into lyrical poetry. In *The Writer of Modern Life*, Walter Benjamin reveals how effectively Baudelaire used poetry to inject value back into capitalist society. Though Benjamin himself was not a product of mid-nineteenth century Paris (he was writing about Baudelaire on the eve of the Second World War), his analysis of the poet “made Baudelaire a complex object,” a writer we must “comprehend before we can formulate any responsible cultural politics of modernity.” Benjamin’s essays characterized this poetry as “terrifyingly *symptomatic* of Baudelaire’s era—and ours.”¹² To be sure:

[Baudelaire] accepted modern man in his entirety, with his weaknesses, his aspirations and his despair. He had thus been able to give beauty to sights that did not possess beauty in themselves, not by making them romantically picturesque, but by bringing to light the portion of the human soul hidden in them; he had thus revealed the sad and often tragic heart of the modern city. That was why he haunted and would always haunt, the minds of modern men, and move them when other artists left them cold.¹³

Mixing artistic and historical analysis to criticize Haussmanization, art historian T.J. Clark describes Paris’s transformation of the 1860s and 1870s in terms of class. Clark is concerned with the reflection of the changing, material society and he finds these changes best represented in paintings. For Clark, art reflected a changing social reality. “[W]hat matters,” he writes, “is whether aesthetic orders have anything vital to tell us about bourgeois society....”¹⁴ Together, Clark, Balzac and Baudelaire, these observers and critics of Hausmannian reform, reveal the contested nature of cultural and social life in

(Penguin Books: London, 1951), 9, 10.

¹² Michael W. Jennings, introduction to *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, by Walter Benjamin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2.

¹³ Quoted by Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, 132, from paraphrase in *L’etandard*, 4 September 1867.

¹⁴ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, xxvi.

nineteenth-century Paris.

The Parisian order was broken down, as Benjamin describes, with “spades, pickaxes, crowbars, and the like. What destruction was caused by even these crude tools!”¹⁵ In Napoleon’s modern Empire, prosperity was measured through commercial advancements. “Take any good Frenchman,” Baudelaire wrote, “and ask him what he understands by “progress.” He will answer that it is steam, electricity and gas.”¹⁶ The traditional aristocratic world could not survive this fast-paced, modern Paris. Balzac’s *Old Goriot* contains characters that represent the futility of clinging to the old aristocratic order -- including Madame de Beauséant, who prided herself on possessing qualities of dignified simplicity and genuine grace. Beauséant’s dramatic departure from the capital city was indicative of this shift away from the supremacy of the aristocratic hierarchical order. Rastignac, the eager young law student, compared her to a fallen empire: “[Y]oung Roman women applauded the gladiator who could smile at the moment of death. It seemed as if society had arrayed itself to bid farewell to one of its sovereigns.”¹⁷

It was instead recently moneyed bourgeoisie who thrived in this new environment. The result was a drastic altering of the city’s social character. These bourgeoisie could obtain whatever they desired. From the arcades, to les Halles, to the impossibly steep rents of city centre apartments, Paris was a dizzying world of material desires. In *Old Goriot*, Rastignac admired this spectacle of material goods. As a spectator, he roamed through the streets all day, and found his way easily (while frequently missing class). When he decided to actively give himself to the city, he felt that “the young man who can jingle a few fleeting gold coins in his pocket savours the full flavour of his pleasures,” and “the whole of Paris is his.”¹⁸

Baudelaire observed with great concern the city’s transformation into a bourgeois commercial world. Everything, he lamented, had become commodified: the market, the exhibition, and the panoramas. Society had evolved to match the capitalist

¹⁵ Benjamin, *The Writer of the Modern Life*, 114.

¹⁶ Baudelaire, quoted in Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, 139.

¹⁷ Balzac, *Old Goriot*, 273-4.

¹⁸ Balzac, *Old Goriot*, 119.

development that took shape on the Parisian streets. Baudelaire's poetry reflects a Paris that was full of "a population of automatons, who trouble our senses by their too visible and palpable extraneity."¹⁹ The city was a place to "consume the sediment of rancour which has accumulated [...] false ideas which triumph there."²⁰ Baudelaire declared that Paris had passed away morally as well as materially. As Benjamin writes in *The Writer of Modern Life*, Baudelaire's poetry conveyed the feeling that the people of Paris shared a "mourning for what was and lack of hope for what is to come."²¹ Industrial capitalism had invaded Parisian society, transforming it into a city of phantasmagoria, one in which an onslaught of stimulation took over the streets.²²

The fantastic displays of bourgeois wealth permeated society, and evidence of this could be seen in the art and literature created through this period. Clark analyzes this "society of leisure" through paintings such as Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Les Parapluies* and Claude Monet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, which show bourgeois men and women lounging at a picnic or caught in the rain, showing off the latest Parisian fashions.²³ But this was not a culture of fine tastes; rather, Clark describes it as one of "ostentation, not luxury; frippery, not fashion; consumption, not trade."²⁴ The social events that the young law student Rastignac attended in Balzac's novel, and the men and women that strolled through the open streets (in paintings such as Claude Monet's *Le Boulevard des Capucins*) show how eager Parisians were to participate in the spectacle of appearances. The carriage passengers that trotted along the road delighted in the modern city, while its inhabitants thrived in the "sensations produced by Hasheesh":

That mass of gleaming streets which lead to the Théâtre Français, to the Tuileries, to the Concorde and Champs-Élysées, each one of which brings you a voice of the great Paris festival, calling and attracting you on seven sides, like the

¹⁹ Charles Baudelaire, "Exposition Universelle de 1855," in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Y-G Le Dantec and C. Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), 963.

²⁰ Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, 58.

²¹ Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, 111.

²² Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, 111.

²³ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 9, 14.

²⁴ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 47.

stately entrances of seven enchanted palaces, and kindling in your brain and veins the madness of pleasure.²⁵

In this world of pleasures, everything could be consumed. Rastingac noted the “certain vulgarity of taste in [...] voluptuous luxury” of bourgeois homes that lacked the “softness” and “freshness” of the aristocracy’s.²⁶ The absurdity of bourgeois fashion to which Balzac referred is further developed through Clark’s consideration of Manet’s *Argenteuil, les canotiers*. The young woman in the painting sports a ridiculous hat that neither shades her from the sun nor complements her appearance.²⁷ As Manet’s painting demonstrates, it was not the practicality of objects that was important in this modernized Paris -- it was their appearance and their spectacle. Clark suggests: “The people in the picture are *posing*.... This is a picture of pleasure.” Manet was painting “the look of a new form of life [...]. The woman looks out circumspectly from a place that belongs to people like her. [...] How good, how modern, how right and proper.”²⁸

Clark develops this idea further through his analysis of another of Manet’s paintings, *Un bar aux Folies-Bergère*, painted in 1883. Here, the face of the barmaid is flat and expressionless. She looks like the rest, “hair just hiding the eyebrows and leaving the ears free, the cheeks pale with powder, the lips not overdone this season, the pearls the right size. Fashion is a good and necessary disguise.”²⁹ As Clark points out, “it is hard to be sure of anything else about the barmaid, in particular what class she might belong to”³⁰ Above all, the barmaid’s appearance represents ambiguity of class, “a pantomime of false rich and false poor, in which anyone could pretend to be anything if he or she had money for clothes.”³¹ But for Clark and other observers, the luxury of bourgeois Paris was simply a façade for the real anxieties stemming from modern society: the uncertainties of class and the instability of capitalism, which “by its very nature does not affix and stabilize status in the way of feudalism, say; it

²⁵ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 76.

²⁶ Balzac, *Old Goriot*, 81, 169.

²⁷ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 252.

²⁸ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 170-3.

²⁹ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 253.

³⁰ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 47.

³¹ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 47.

does not require its identities to be absolute....”³² The barmaid of Manet’s painting is simply posing, for all bourgeoisie in Paris were simply pretending.

Manet’s blank woman suggests that as modern Paris was increasingly defined by a capitalist economic order, the unique character of its people was lost. Paris’s streets were dominated by crowds of people bustling about. While the city grew, relationships between citizens deteriorated. On the street corner, or on the train, the mirror-like glance -- the blankness and anonymity conjured in Manet’s painting -- became the understood social norm. “To express oneself,” Clark argues, “would be to have one’s class be legible.”³³ In public places, people barely touched one another, and if they did they would recoil. In street scenes like Edgar Degas’s *Place de la Concorde*, the scene is cold and unfamiliar.³⁴ While the street is full, the family does not interact with one another. They are consumed with what is beyond the frame of the painting. One child admires the bourgeois man who stands at their right, but there is no interaction, no communication, only blank gazes. Before Baudelaire or Benjamin, Friedrich Engels made note of this new form of interaction in London, a city consumed with industrial capitalism. Engels highlighted capitalism’s detrimental effects on societal interactions:

The very turmoil of the streets has something repulsive about it. [...] The hundreds of thousands of people from every class and rank crowding past each other—are they not all human beings with the same qualities and powers? [...] And still they crowd by one another as though they had nothing in common, nothing to do with one another, and their only agreement is the tacit one that each keep to his own side of the pavement, so as not to delay the opposing stream of the crowd. [...] The brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each within his private concerns, becomes the more repellent and offensive the more these individuals are crowded together in a limited space.³⁵

The petite bourgeoisie of Paris, the businessmen, the

³² Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 258.

³³ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 253.

³⁴ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 75.

³⁵ Friedrich Engels, *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England* (Leipzig, 1848), cited in Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, 88-89.

frequenters of the salons and the *Folies-Bergère* found their place in the anonymous and growing *foule*. Clark remarks that “they appeared in many ways to have no class to speak of” and that they “were the *shifters* of class society.”³⁶ Ultimately, this desire to portray a luxurious lifestyle, and the resultant anonymity, masked the insecurity of the rising middle class.

The ambiguity and uncertainty that characterized modern and industrial Paris was reflected also in impressionist paintings. In Raffaëlli’s *La Butte des chiffonniers*, for example, a woman stands hunched over a desolate landscape.³⁷ Likewise, in Norbert Goeneutte’s *La Distribution de la soupe aux pauvres à la porte du restaurant Brébant*, poverty mingles with the luxurious landscape of Haussmannized streets.³⁸ Smoke stacks and factories appear in the background of numerous images. The overall impression is of a city in a sort of haze, a constant fog. As Balzac wrote, “Paris was wrapped in one of the dense fogs that envelop it sometimes and make it so dark that the most precise and punctual people are led astray.”³⁹ Artists such as Renoir, in his 1875 *Les Grands Boulevards*, blur colours in such a way, Clark describes, that “the play of paint would absorb the factories and weekend villas with scarcely a ripple.”⁴⁰ In the same way that modern Paris allowed the bourgeoisie to ascend socially, the fog and blur of colours masked the fallacies of modern society.

When this fog of ambiguity became too much, and when the expansive boulevards, the crowds, and the poverty was unbearable, the bourgeoisie ventured out of the industrialized centre for weekend trips -- to take in a bit of fresh air. Travelling via train, they soon realized, however, that the railway did not bring them to green pastures, but to more poverty. The bourgeois, so concerned with aesthetic desires, encountered the underbelly of Paris. Unfortunately, “there was no nature [...] where there were Parisians.”⁴¹ Nature had been replaced by the *faubourgs* of modern Paris, as created by Haussmann. The landscape on the fringes of the city had changed, from forest to industrial factories

³⁶ Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, 258.

³⁷ Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, 27.

³⁸ Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, 73.

³⁹ Balzac, *Old Goriot*, 62.

⁴⁰ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 72, 180.

⁴¹ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 152.

and neighbourhoods. This transformation reflected much more than simply the growth of industry. As Clark notes, the *faubourgs* were populated with “*other* bourgeois, too many of them, pretending not to be industrious.”⁴² The crowds that had flooded Paris’s streets did the same in the former countryside. Clark captures this clearly in his description of Argenteuil (one of Paris’s expanding environs) as “a bank which is crowded with shipyards, spectators, offices with boats-for-hire; to a suitable place for a steamboat race, or the launching of a new yacht, or the national rowing championships.”⁴³ It was apparent that there was no nature in a bourgeois culture which sought to industrialize and transform the “modest” and “picturesque.”⁴⁴

Even in parks, perfectly manicured by Haussmann, or the forest, the bourgeoisie could not enjoy nature without putting on an air of spectacle for the observer. In Manet’s *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, the scene is awkward and uncomfortable. The two men are dressed in fine attire and risk getting dirty from the ground. They seem to completely ignore the naked woman next to them who looks out of place within the forest. She stares down the viewer, and once again (much like the barmaid) her gaze is indecipherable. This scene does not reflect traditional ideas of nature and its tranquility. Instead, the bourgeoisie have simply been transplanted for a moment into another locale. The luxurious foods and fine attire do not fit into the forest and no one seems aware or interested in the woman washing clothes in the river in the background. Manet’s subjects are so intent on their material image that it was difficult for them to marvel at anything that was not a spectacle of modernity.

At the close of Balzac’s *Old Goriot*, Rastignac gazes at Paris from the cemetery where Goriot has just been buried. For the young law student, and for the reader, Goriot’s passing, and the twinkling lights of Paris, represent the city’s transformation. As Rastignac contemplates the morality of this new modern world, Paris seems to take a new shape before the reader’s eyes. Rastignac represents the contested shift from old to new. Though resistant to society’s tides of change -- “it’s war between us now!” he declares -- it is perhaps inevitable that Rastignac will

⁴² Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 154.

⁴³ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 177.

⁴⁴ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 175.

become part of the transformation. As Balzac concluded: “by way of throwing down the gauntlet to Society, Rastignac went to dine.”⁴⁵ Ultimately, Rastignac succumbed to the commercial world of modern Paris, and the city lost its distinct form. For readers, it becomes difficult to grasp, a deep ocean for some, a forest to be cut down for others. Perhaps this is why fog covers so many images of Paris; it has things to hide, for modernity has not been gentle with France’s capital. The era of modernity and change transformed the city’s social and cultural character. In the past as in the present, Paris will change before your eyes -- but undoubtedly, a dense fog will permeate the sky.

⁴⁵ Balzac, *Old Goriot*, 304.