

ABSTRACT

AMLEY, HOLLIS MARIE. *The Evolution of Criticism on Jean-François Millet*. (Under the direction of Keith Luria.)

The nineteenth-century French painter Jean-François Millet's social context, compositional style, and rustic subject matter invite a wide variety of interpretations of his art. To his biographer and contemporary Alfred Sensier, the rustic canvases were the work of a stoic "peasant painter," removed from the political controversies of his day. To the Marxist art historian T. J. Clark, on the other hand, Millet's paintings interacted with and challenged the dominant values and institutions of the Second Republic. To the social art historian Robert Herbert, the paintings reveal the artist's response to urban-industrial change and his Parisian exodus. In presenting these three formative readings of Millet's canvases, this thesis demonstrates how each particular writer's vantage point in history affected both his methodology and vision of the artist's identity. The criticism on Millet shows not merely a series of antithetical, isolated opinions, but a kind of evolution, one that has gradually come to include both the artist and the society in which he worked.

THE EVOLUTION OF CRITICISM ON JEAN-FRANÇOIS MILLET

by

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Introduction

“Come, poor laborer, sow your seed, throw out to the soil your fistfuls of grain! The soil is fertile and will bear fruit, but next year as this, you will be poor and you will work by the sweat of your brow, because men have so well arranged things that work is a malediction, the work which will be the only real pleasure of intelligent beings in a regenerated society [...]. He is the modern *Demos*.”

F. Sabatier-Ungher, “Salon de 1851,” *La Democratie Pacifique*.¹

“I reject with my whole soul the democratic side, as it is understood by the clubs, and which some have desired to attribute to me. I only have wished people to think of the man who gains his bread by the sweat of his brow. Let that be said, for I have never dreamed of being a pleader in any cause. I am a peasant—a peasant.”

Jean-François Millet, a letter to Alfred Sensier (23 April, 1867),
in *Jean-François Millet: Peasant and Painter*, 189.

“The Sower” cursed the rich, they said, because he flung his grain with anger toward the sky. Every one talked of the artist’s work, and tried to make it a weapon. But Millet did not consider himself so important or so revolutionary. No subversive idea troubled his brain. Socialistic doctrines he would not listen to; the little that came to his ears, he said, was not clear.”

Albert Sensier, *Jean-François Millet: Peasant and Painter*, 111.

“[Millet’s] peasant was the farmer of the *Georgics*, but also ‘the proletarian of 1860,’ or the peasant in the *banlieue* in the spring of 1849.”

T. J. Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 1973, 98.

“The reputation of an artist frequently interferes with a fresh look at his art, and Millet has suffered from this more than most painters of the 19th century. His reputation is in part a fabrication of the generation following his death in 1875. From the totality of his oeuvre, so highly controversial in his own lifetime, collectors and critics selected those works that would tend to present him as they wished to see him: father of a numerous family, a simple peasant painting other peasants, an artist whose moralizing attitudes seemed to suit bourgeois values of the later 19th century.”

Robert Herbert, *Jean François-Millet*, 1976, 9.

As is evident from these statements quoted above, the readings of Jean-François Millet (1814-1875) range in scope from seeing him as a socialist trouble-maker and a revolutionary artist of 1848 to a romantic peasant-painter or a fatalistic naturalist. Central to these interpretations is the evaluation of the peasant within his paintings, who is the primary subject of his oeuvre. Does the viewer perceive his toiler as a rustic in a bucolic, Virgilian world, as an oppressed laborer of the mid-nineteenth century, or as a cursed

¹ Quoted in Robert Herbert, “Millet Reconsidered,” *Museum Studies* 1 (1962): 33-4.

Adam? The public's vacillating understanding of his art began in 1850 with *The Sower* and continues to the present day. In fact, after his death, the prevalent reading of his paintings as conventional genre pieces depicting an inherently noble peasant vastly differed from the opinions held in Millet's day, when conservative critics associated him with the progressive Realist movement, scoffed at his technical style as crude, and feared his peasants to be brutes. The controversy over his art concerned both the image of the peasant and Millet's depiction of him. Through the large scale of his canvases and his application of techniques from the French academic tradition, Millet elevated the common rural activities of sowing, shearing, and gleaning to the status of history painting. Thus, depending upon one's reading of Millet's laborers, the perspectives of his artistic intent diverge: journalistic or idealistic, political or romantic, primitive or modern, naïve or subversive.

My purpose is not to contribute further to this debate by adding another interpretation of his art. Instead, by presenting three formative readings of Millet's canvases held by Albert Sensier, T. J. Clark, and Robert Herbert, I will demonstrate how each writer's particular vantage point in history affected both his academic methodology and vision of the artist's identity. I have selected these three authors because their critical writings are the texts to which all other scholars and apologists appeal. Their respective interpretations of the artist have had, in my opinion, the most lasting effect on Millet's reputation. Sensier, Clark, and Herbert each claim to rescue the artist's reputation from either hostile criticism or gross sentimentalism, yet, in the case of the analyses of Sensier and Clark, Millet seems more often to be the victim of the two writers' own preoccupations, conservative republicanism and Marxism, respectively, rather than their beneficiary. Even

so, each of these studies of Millet has contributed vital information regarding his biography, career, and the socio-economic climate in which he painted, thus establishing a broad context in which to understand his perplexing art.

In the three chapters that follow, I will discuss each scholar's respective reading of Millet and, in turn, examine the intentions and context in which each scholar studied the artist. Chapter One introduces the reader to Millet through the voice of his friend and biographer, Albert Sensier, whose memoir of Millet was published posthumously in 1881 by Paul Mantz. In the preface, Sensier declares his authorial intent:

We therefore publish a life of Millet from his own words and testimony. There is nothing to hide. Everything is healthy, pure, and instructive... We have not judged our friend, but we have attempted to defend him from attacks, and to show him as he seemed to us during the thirty years of our friendship.²

The “attacks” to which Sensier refers are the hostile reviews and accusations that Millet was a socialist. Throughout his book, Sensier invokes the artist's childhood in Normandy, which becomes the basis for understanding his scenes of peasants, establishing an identity for Millet as first a peasant, then a painter. Thus, this understanding of his canvases suggests that the pastoral images were autobiographical rather than political.

Yet while Sensier affiliates the artist with the “healthy, pure, and instructive” world of his biography, Millet's naïve persona is problematic. I argue that Sensier constructed a romantic, even mythological, depiction of Millet, which both participated in the nineteenth-century discourse of biographical art history and was influenced by the prevailing Parisian bourgeois myth of the countryside to which Sensier, a conservative civil servant, subscribed. Thus, by portraying Millet as a civic ideal and stoic “peasant

² Alfred Sensier, *Jean-Francois Millet: Peasant and Painter*, trans. Helena De Kay (Boston: James R. Osgood and Co., 1881), x.

painter,” the biography effectively depoliticized Millet’s canvases of rustic laborers, which some conservative critics considered to be politically subversive. While this sentimental portrait of Millet as a “peasant painter” distanced him from the previous political controversy during the 1850s and 1860s, it also distorted his image as an artist and the readings of his canvases. In response to Sensier’s account of Millet as a moral painter, T. J. Clark and Robert Herbert have offered their own subsequent rereadings of his art.

Chapter Two describes the Marxist reading of Millet by the British art historian T. J. Clark (1943-). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Marxist, as well as feminist, art historians challenged the assumptions, ideas, and values of classical art history. The “new” art historians, as they have sometimes been called, criticized the discipline’s old-fashioned and “sterile” stylistic analysis and “elitist” practice of connoisseurship, the restricted scope of its subject matter and canon of Great Artists, and its neglect of the social context surrounding the works of art, artist, and public.³ In an essay entitled “The Conditions of Artistic Creation,” Clark discusses the traditional principles of art history, their influence on the perspective of inquiry, and their subsequent effect on the understanding of an artwork. His argument proposed a new method of artistic inquiry in the context of his historical materialist perspective, which he called the “social history of art.” He maintains:

[the social history of art] is the place where the questions have to be asked, and where they cannot be asked in the old way...the old questions of art history were structured around certain beliefs, certain unquestioned presuppositions: the notion of the Artist, of the artist as “creator” of the work, the notion of a pre-existent feeling—for form, for space, of the world as God’s or the gods’ creation—which the work was there to

³ John Hutton, “Left of Center, Against the Grain: T. J. Clark and the Social History of Art,” *Radical History Review*, 38 (1987): 60-1.

“express”. These beliefs *eroded* the subject; they turned questions into answers; they ruled out of court, for instance, any history of the conditions of artistic production... We need *facts*—about patronage, about art dealing, about the status of the artist, the structure of artistic production—but we need to know what questions to ask of the material.”⁴

To access the “facts,” such as patronage, art dealing, and the artist’s status, Clark implores art historians to inquire about the way in which an artwork was made (materials, traditions), the reasons behind an artwork’s creation, and the type of public which the producer envisioned would view the artwork.

Clark’s reading of Millet’s politically *effective* art in *The Absolute Bourgeois* (1973) and its companion, *Image of the People*, a study of Gustav Courbet, served as case studies of Clark’s proposed “new” art history. In both books, he contended that Marxist art history should seek to understand art within the context of human social development, such as economic, cultural and political history, rather than as a self-contained entity and a product of a genius. Clark argues that social historians of art should examine specific historical moments, such as the period between 1848 and 1851, so as to study in detail the conditions surrounding art production. According to Clark, during this particular time of the Second Republic, art and politics “could not escape each other,” thus art had a dynamic ability to *effect* history through its ability to negate critically the prevailing ideology.⁵ By claiming that Millet’s canvases interacted with and actively challenged the dominant values and institutions of mid-nineteenth-century France, Clark politicized the artist’s paintings. In fact, Sensier’s depolitization had been reversed.

Yet despite his claims in the 1970’s, by 1981 Clark suggests in the preface of *Image of the People* that he had begun to modify his arguments. He explained that both works had

⁴ T. J. Clark, “The Conditions of Artistic Creation,” *Times Literary Supplement* (24 May 1974): 561.

⁵ T. J. Clark, *Image of the People* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 9.

been researched in Paris from 1966 to 1967 and mostly written in the winter of 1969-1970, during what he describes as “ignominious but unavoidable retreat from the political events of the previous six years.”⁶ He does not further mention the events in either book, but his brief reference to the period and place indicates that his books, which examine the revolutionary artists of mid-nineteenth-century France, are not at all detached from the political and social radicalism of the 1960s, in particular the “moment of 1968.”⁷ May 1968 led neither to a post-capitalistic nor a socialist future, and the unsuccessful activism caused Clark to write in 1981 that his examination of mid-nineteenth-century art had been “unashamedly—or at least unapologetically—academic.”⁸ Accordingly, in his study, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (1999), Clark bids adieu to the notion that art can revolutionize society, yet he still claims in his 1999 preface of *The Absolute Bourgeois* that “art at certain moments can be political.”⁹ Thus, while Clark altered his theoretical perspective, his methodology of the social history of art still seeks to examine the specific kind of effect the work of art had on its public’s beliefs and behaviors. And as it does so, its process examines the interwoven artistic, political, social, and intellectual elements which constitute the context of the artwork. Due to his formative influence on Marxist art history and his methodological contribution to art history in general, it is necessary to discuss Clark’s reading of Millet’s depiction of work,

⁶ T. J. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 5.

⁷ In May 1968, disgruntled students in many Parisian universities went on strike after confrontations with university administrators and the police. When the de Gaulle administration tried to suppress the student demonstration, a general strike followed, which involved more students and some ten million French workers. De Gaulle dissolved the National Assembly and scheduled new parliamentary elections for 23 June 1968. While the rebellion threatened to overthrow the regime, it subsided by June, with the workers returning to their jobs and the conservative Gaullist party emerging even stronger than before after the elections. *A History of the Modern World*, ed. R.R. Palmer and Joel Colton, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Co., 1984), 912-13.

⁸ Clark, *Image of the People* (1981), 6.

⁹ In *The Absolute Bourgeois*, Clark claims that this sentiment had “put some readers’ backs up” (7).

which lends to insightful and original readings of his paintings and the contemporary reaction to them.

Finally, the third chapter examines another social historian of art, Robert Herbert, who offers a naturalist reading of Millet. Like Clark, he is committed to the work of historical scholarship and empirically analyzes the material conditions in which a work of art was produced. Yet while he considers the reading of a picture to be a setting of conflict as the audience, both present and future, wrestles over the significance and meaning of a work, he disagrees with Clark's claim that that art can transform society. He explains that rather than to "begin with major social crises and then seek the art that reveals them," he aimed to "restore the flesh of real painters and their culture to the bones of style and form."¹⁰ Thus, his evaluation of Millet begins with his drawings, which he considers to be a marginalized, or even neglected portion of the artist's oeuvre, an oversight that has contributed to the misreadings of Millet as a sentimental "peasant painter." In addition to his careful description and examination of Millet's subject matter and style, Herbert includes demographic statistics from the period of the Second Republic and Second Empire in his analysis of Millet's social context. These statistics serve to substantiate his interpretation of the artist's response to the urban-industrial change and Parisian exodus.

Yet while Herbert is recognized as an eminent writer on mid-nineteenth-century French cultural production, little is written about the scholar himself. One reason is that his research and arguments, while well-founded, are far less controversial than Clark's. Furthermore, though academics praise his descriptions of Millet's paintings and drawings, his accounts are somewhat conventional. For example, a significant portion of his

¹⁰ Robert Herbert, *Millet to Leger: Essays in Social Art History* (New Haven: Yale University Press), vii.

analysis of Millet focuses on the artist's melancholy temperament and fatalism. While Clark briefly mentions this fatalism in Millet's paintings and the violent reaction it could precipitate, Herbert discusses it within the context of Millet's personality. Consequently, Herbert's analysis, which tends to focus on the painter's psyche, ironically assumes an almost romantic quality similar to Sensier's, whom he criticizes.

Each of these writers refers to the tumultuous period of the Second Republic and Second Empire to the degree in which he believed it affected the painter. These events from 1848 to 1852 are summarized as follows. In February 22-24, 1848, the public's agitation with the July Monarchy over political scandals, electoral corruption, and the economic crisis, toppled the regime of Louis Philippe. Rather than establishing a constitutional monarchy under Louis Philippe's grandson (the *comte de Paris*), the republican leaders proclaimed the Second Republic (or "it was declared to be 'desired'"¹¹) and set up a provisional government, which consisted of eleven men. Among the eleven leaders, seven were "political" republicans, who were non-socialist liberals and content with the result of the revolution, the republic, and universal male suffrage. The other four men, the most notable being Louis Blanc, were "social" republicans, also known as the democratic-socialists, who desired broader social and economic change that would benefit the working class, such as the creation of National Workshops. Due to their minority status in the provisional government, the "social" republicans were only able to push through a modified version of the program of National Workshops, which provided unemployment relief, while Louis Blanc's ideas for a Ministry of Work to oversee the "social workshops" was rejected.

¹¹ Maurice Augulon, *The Republican Experiment 1848-1852* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 27.

On 23 April 1848, the Constituent Assembly was elected by universal male suffrage and replaced the Provisional Government. The massive turnout (84%) demonstrated that France supported the liberal republican agenda, rather than the socialists or the monarchical reaction. On 4 May the representatives gathered for their first session, and the assembly's new executive commission of five men included only "political" republicans. It is significant to note that one of the new representatives was Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte. In *The Republican Experiment*, Maurice Agulhon writes, "[Bonaparte] was as alien to the extreme right as he was to the extreme left, but was, like them, a sign of the anxiety felt by a public seeking new alternatives."¹² The "anxiety" to which Agulhon refers primarily regarded the capitalist bourgeoisie's initial concern with universal male suffrage and the potential effect of "the People's" (or the worker's and the peasant's) political voice. The republican bourgeois politicians anxiously recognized that the vote in the provinces would determine France to be a republic or a socialist nation. In the 23 April elections the right triumphed as the peasants voted conservatively and in accord with their masters and the republic.

The Socialist delegates had anticipated these results, and had negotiated the postponement of the elections from 9 April to 23 April in order to "educate" the peasants politically. The agreed-upon change of date, however, was insignificant and actually favored the Republican delegates because the new elections fell on Easter Sunday. Consequently, peasants voted immediately after attending Mass with their conservative

¹² Agulhon, *The Republican Experiment*, 54.

parish priest (or in some cases were led by their priest to the ballot).¹³ Agulhon summarizes the April elections thus: “France as a whole voted in conformity with the majority positioning the provisional government: for a liberal Republic but not for social revolution or for monarchical reaction.”¹⁴

While the April elections allayed the bourgeoisie’s fears of the peasant vote, the continuing economic depression increased the unemployment rate, making it impossible for the National Workshops to accommodate the numbers of needy people. In addition, the predominantly republican Constituent Assembly of May 1848 to December 1851 grew more hostile towards socialist ideas and dissolved the workshops on 22 June. In response, Parisian workers’ immediately rioted, in an event known as the June days. Despite the upheaval, Republican delegates held fast to their three ideals, which were order, property, and economic liberty (or capitalism).¹⁵ The Minister of War, General Cavaignac, ruthlessly suppressed the insurrection, and a few days later officially became the leader of the executive branch. Under Cavaignac’s ministry, the Constituent Assembly became increasingly conservative. Legislation curtailed the liberty of the press and political clubs, while accusations and arrests dismissed socialists from the assembly, including Louis Blanc.¹⁶

Then in December 1848, the election for the first president of the Second Republic shocked both the republicans and socialists of France. Rather than voting for the conservative republican candidate General Cavaignac, the rural provinces overwhelmingly

¹³ In response to Proudhon’s explanation of the elections, which was that the peasant voted “on an empty stomach,” Clark states, “Not quite. The peasant at least went to the vote with the communion wafer in his belly, straight from his Easter Mass” (*Absolute Bourgeois*, 12).

¹⁴ Agulhon, *The Republican Experiment*, 46.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 32-3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 57-60.

elected Louis Napoleon (neither the candidate of the Republicans nor the Socialists). At the time, both the conservative bourgeois (the “Party of Order”) and the Democratic-Socialists considered the vote as a sign of peasant “political illiteracy,” meaning that the peasants voted for Louis Napoleon based on name recognition alone.¹⁷ In *The Class Struggles in France* (1848), Karl Marx asserts:

10 December 1848 was the day of the peasant insurrection. Only from this day does the February of the French peasants date. The symbol that expressed their entry into the revolutionary movement, clumsily cunning, knavishly naïve, doltishly sublime, a calculated superstition, a pathetic burlesque, a cleverly stupid anachronism, a world-historic piece of buffoonery, and an undecipherable hieroglyphic for the understanding of the civilized—this symbol bore the unmistakable physiognomy of the class that represents barbarism within civilization... Napoleon was to the peasants not a person but a programme. With banners, with beat of drums and blare of trumpets, they marched to the polling booths shouting: *plus d’impôts, à bas les riches, à bas la république, vive l’Empereur!* No more taxes, down with the rich, down with the republic, long live the emperor! Behind the emperor was hidden the peasant war. The republic that they voted down was the republic of the rich.¹⁸

For the left, the democratic-socialists, the election was a call to “educate” the countryside. But, for the right, the conservative bourgeois, whose republic had been “voted down” by the peasants, the December results signaled a need to contain the countryside and to preserve their free enterprise.¹⁹ In *The Absolute Bourgeois*, Clark explains:

There was plenty of fuel for revolution in the countryside: land hunger and land shortage, usury and hopeless peasant debt, disputes over common land and forest rights, falling prices, evictions, litigation in which the rich man won. It was a question not of finding issues but of suggesting solutions, in terms the peasant would understand; of finding ways to erode the old structures of deference and control, calling on old resentments and memories of the great Revolution, organizing in secret, devising a politics that was Parisian no longer.²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid., 73.

¹⁸ Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles of France*, in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford University Press, 1977), 293.

¹⁹ Agulhon, *The Republican Experiment*, 69-73.

²⁰ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 15.

From 1849 to 1852, both the Left and the Right sought to control the peasant vote in time for the next election in 1852 for the National Assembly and the president. The Party of Order and Bonaparte accepted each other so as to protect the existing capitalist society. To prevent revolution in the countryside or among the urban workers, the conservative electors implemented reactionary censorship laws, suppressed political clubs, reestablished religion in the education curriculum (the Falloux law), and reformed the electoral laws so as to eliminate one third of the poorest voters from the electorate. While he did not challenge the legislation, Bonaparte shrewdly distanced himself from it.²¹

By 1851, the conservatives were resolutely divided between two monarchist factions, and Bonaparte knew that either set would vote for his antisocialist agenda, rather than ally with its opponent. To win over the radicals, Bonaparte offered to restore universal suffrage, posing as a leader sensitive to the social problems. In May 1851, he delivered a speech at Dijon, stating:

France neither wishes for a return to the old order of things, in no matter what form that may be disguised, nor for ventures into dangerous and impractical utopianism. It is because I am the most natural enemy of both these alternatives that France has given me its confidence...Indeed if my government has not been able to bring about all the improvements it had in mind, that must be blamed on the devious conduct of the various factions. For three years...I have always had the support of the Assembly when it has been a question of combating disorder by repressive measures. But, whenever I have wanted to do good and improve conditions for the people, the Assembly has denied me its support.²²

Suggesting to be the only true and reliant friend of the common man in the devious and corrupt world of public life, Bonaparte set the stage for his coup d'état on 2 December 1851. In the south and south-east, where socialists had been most effective in the

²¹ Roger Price, *The French Second Empire: An Anatomy of Political Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 20-1.

²² Quoted in Price, *The French Second Empire*, 26.

countryside, there were peasant uprisings; however, the army crushed the rural and urban revolts, and on 20 December 1851, the voters elected Louis Napoleon to act as president for a ten-year term. In 1852, Napoleon declared himself to be the emperor of the French, calling himself Napoleon III.²³ As the Second Empire began, the threat of the countryside waned, and Millet continued to paint peasants.

²³ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 15.

Chapter One: The Peasant Painter

Traditionally, scholars have used the phrase “peasant painter” to describe the artist Jean François Millet. While the identification initially acknowledged Millet’s rural heritage and his rustic subject matter, by the 1850’s and 1860’s, with the onset of social upheaval in France, Millet’s peasant roots and paintings led to hostile reviews, charging that his canvases were pessimistic depictions of the countryside and politically subversive. Yet by the 1880’s, the negative commentary ceased. Critics instead lauded Millet’s agrarian scenes and the “peasant painter” for his insightful representation of the stoical suffering of the peasant, and at auctions patrons bought his major paintings for fifteen to twenty thousand francs. After his death in 1875, a retrospective exhibit was held in his honor in 1887 at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, and in 1889 the Exposition universelle, which displayed a large portion of his canvases, secured his celebrated status.¹

Between the critical attacks and accolades, however, Millet’s subject matter and technique had varied little, causing one to wonder how Millet’s reputation changed from that of a Socialist trouble-maker at the French Salon to an internationally acclaimed artist and civic model. The posthumous reassessment of Millet and his *oeuvre* can be directly traced to Alfred Sensier, Millet’s close friend and biographer. Sensier’s Salon criticism and his memoir of the artist entitled *Jean-François Millet: Peasant and Painter* (1881) effectively depoliticized Millet and established him as a moral idealist of peasant stoicism. Even more than a century later, Robert Herbert argues, Sensier’s reading of Millet is still the prevailing view:

Millet was presented to the public as a painter of sentimental peasant subjects, a

¹Neil McWilliam, “Mythologising Millet,” in *Barbizon: Malerei der Natur—Natur der Malerei*, ed. Herausgegeben von Andreas Burmester et al. (Munich: Klinkhardt and Biermann, 1999), 437.

devoted son of his aged and saintly mother and grandmother, a good father to his numerous progeny, a peasant who simply painted the life he was born to, and a pious man entirely devoted to the Bible, a sort of nineteenth-century Fra Angelico.²

Despite the pervasiveness of Millet's "peasant painter" persona, subsequent examinations of Millet's life and the discovery of inaccuracies in Sensier's account have led scholars to accuse him of writing a myth, rather than a biography. Invariably, all biographers, despite their intentions to be objective, respond to and, consequently, shape their subject based on conditioning experiences and preconceptions. Yet Sensier exceeded a biographer's typically subjective interpretation, such as the decisions of what details to include and exclude from the artist's career, and deliberately integrated false additions into the artist's life.³ In the end, these "errors" not only discredit Sensier's book, but also attest to a complex web of methodological, social, and economic influences which interacted with his biographical history. This chapter will demonstrate that Sensier's memoir employed the formula of nineteenth-century French artistic biography and participated in the discourse by mythologizing Millet as the "peasant painter" and establishing him as a part of the "new myth of modern French artists as free-spirited heroes."⁴ Furthermore, I will argue that Sensier's construction of Millet was particularly effective in securing a romanticized image of the artist as it affirmed conservative values of the nineteenth century bourgeois myth of the countryside, thus rescuing his reputation (and Sensier's investment) from the political and commercial consequences of the "Realist" label.

² Robert Herbert, "Millet Revisited," *The Burlington Magazine* 104 (1962): 295.

³ Etienne Moreau-Nélaton's three-volume study *Millet Raconté par lui-même* (1921) was the first work to assess Sensier's "errors."

⁴ Greg M. Thomas "Instituting Genius: The Formation of Biographical Art History in France," in *Art History and Its Institutions*, ed. Elizabeth Mansfield (New York: Routledge, 2002), 260.

Before examining the conventions of nineteenth-century biography, this chapter will explore the circumstances of Sensier's own life, which help to explain the motives behind his portrayal of Millet. Born in Paris in 1815, Sensier was the son of a notary, who was devoted to the Empire and also served as *Commissaire Général* during the July Monarchy. In 1848 Sensier entered government himself, serving in the Ministry of the Interior as *Secrétaire chef des bureaux des Musées nationaux*.⁵ Presumably, in this position of administrating the arts, he came to know Philippe-Auguste Jeanron, the new director of museums. Jeanron was also a leftist painter who had established the first nonjuried Salon on 29 February 1848. While this job suggests an attachment to republican values, Sensier's subsequent posts do not reflect support for any particular republican or imperial policies. In 1850 Sensier left the museums office and served as an attaché in the Office of Fine Arts (*Direction des Beaux-Arts*). Soon afterward, he became an attaché in the office of the minister of the interior, and then in July 1851, he was a clerk in the cabinet. In 1857 he shifted to the General Secretariat, where he acted as a deputy head clerk in a department concerned with the tenements of workers and then in a department that was a liaison between the government and charity groups. Finally, in May 1873 he became the chevalier of the Legion of Honor. On 7 January 1877 Sensier died.

During his years as a civil servant, Sensier was also a part-time art dealer and collector. The art critic Paul Mantz, who finished Sensier's posthumous biography of Millet, even describes Sensier's apartment by the time of his death as "a little museum."⁶ Sensier became particularly interested in modern landscape paintings, which led him to befriend a

⁵ Greg Thomas, *Art and Ecology in Nineteenth Century France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 106.

⁶ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, vi.

circle of artists of the Barbizon colony which included Theodore Rousseau, Charles Jacque, Constant Troyon, Narcisse Diaz, and, later, Millet. By advocating the “bohemian rusticity” of the Barbizon style, Sensier concurrently alienated himself from the Parisian Academy and the Salon of the Louvre, both of which championed a traditional approach to art that the Barbizon artists rejected.⁷ Sensier considered the Barbizon painters to be victims of the official jury, and wrote on their behalf both as a biographer and as a critic (his debut as a Salon critic was in 1865).⁸

In 1847 Troyon introduced Sensier to Millet. Sensier’s personal friendships with the Barbizon artists led him to a network of professional contacts, and by the late 1840s he had become the art agent for Millet and Rousseau. In his agreement with Millet, Sensier agreed to supply the artist with materials, and in return Millet gave him finished paintings to keep or to sell. Initially, Sensier promoted and sold Millet’s art to fellow civil servants and clerks; yet by the late 1860s, he staged exhibitions to market Millet’s work to wealthier publishers and industrialists.⁹ Although the price of Millet’s paintings had substantially increased by the late 1860s (actually beyond what Sensier could afford), Sensier claimed that the artist suffered from critical misinterpretation, and began writing his biography.¹⁰ He explained in the preface of his work that his intention was two-fold. First, he attempted to “defend [Millet] from attacks, and to show him as he seemed [to

⁷ Thomas, *Art and Ecology*, 157.

⁸ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, vii.

⁹ Christopher Parsons and Neil McWilliam, “Le Paysan de Paris”: Alfred Sensier and the Myth of Rural France, *Oxford Art Journal* 6 (1983): 38-9.

¹⁰ In addition to Millet’s biography (unfinished in 1877), Sensier also wrote one of Rousseau (1869-70) and of Georges Michel (1873).

fellow friends of Barbizon] during the thirty years of our friendship.”¹¹ Second, he sought to dismiss the notion that Millet was a revolutionary.

Sensier’s intention to protect the reputation and memory of Millet is a typical authorial declaration within the long lineage of biographical art history. The epitomizing work of this genre is Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1550), which explains in its preface:

The works which constitute the life and fame of artists decay one after the other by the ravages of time. Thus the artists themselves are unknown, as there was no one to write about them and could not be, so that this source of knowledge was not granted to posterity.¹²

By recording his biography, Sensier, like Vasari, not only ensured that the artist would be remembered, but also preserved the respective memory of his subject as he desired.

Furthermore, the narrative’s association of the art with the artist’s life insinuates that the biography itself contributes to the understanding of Millet’s work.

The methodology of biographical art history considers works of art in relation to the artist’s life, personality, and artistic intentions, and directly associates the artist to his art. The biography continued to be the primary art historical approach in the nineteenth century, and beginning in the 1840s, France began to memorialize recently deceased artists through biographies, which both brought attention to the artist’s life and French art. In his essay *Instituting Genius*, Greg Thomas argues that biographical art history in France not only venerated past artists, but also began to determine the future of French art. France, like Great Britain, Germany, and the United States, participated in the nineteenth-century trend of nation-building, but it created its national character through the

¹¹ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, x.

¹² <http://rubens.anu.edu.au/raider4/texts/vasari/vasari.preface.html>

establishment of a “pantheon of *individual* geniuses,” rather than creating a unified, state style.¹³ Thomas explains:

...biography became not only a formal methodology for the new discipline of art history, but also the dominant mode of narrating the nation’s contemporary art practice. Spurred on by romanticism, the French Revolution, and David’s imagery, the biographical model of individual genius and liberty evolved from a mode of history to a mode of criticism. The very same writers, publishers, and institutions that were creating art history began simultaneously to construct an art historical future, casting France as the successor to “Florence, casting Ingres and Delacroix as the successors of Raphael and Michelangelo. The change was critical; rather than reinterpreting facts left by Vasari and others, art writers were now establishing the historical record itself, stacking the deck of *future* art history in favor of the biographical model.¹⁴

Drawing upon romanticism and various aspects of modernity, such as individualism, increased bourgeois literacy, and nationalism, the biographer generated the artist’s reputation.¹⁵ Within the book, he acted as the memoirist, narrating the life of his subject in mythological terms, and then as the critic, explaining the significance behind a painting and its intimate connection to the artist. Thomas’s argument aptly applies to Sensier. No one questioned his personal knowledge of Millet due to their long friendship, and his dabbling in art-dealership, Salon reviewing, and landownership in Barbizon substantiated his role as a critical authority of Millet and silenced any potential doubt.

According to Thomas, the nineteenth-century French biographer followed a distinct formula of three principles that initiated the process of “stacking the deck of future art history.” The principle effect of the biographical method was that the artistic inspiration sprung from the artist himself, rather than from external circumstances, such as a revolution or an economic depression. This self-directed quality accentuated the artist’s

¹³ Thomas, “Instituting Genius,” 260 (italics added).

¹⁴ Ibid., 265-6.

¹⁵ Ibid., 262.

distinctive genius. The first principle of the biographical model was to relate the artist's *oeuvre* to his specific experiences, region, and personal temperament. In so doing, the biographer introduced a stylistic commonality among the painter's art and directly connected it to an originating author, thus asserting that the artist himself both conceived the idea for a painting and created it. Secondly, in the biographical model, the artist was both personally connected to the subject of his art and an autonomous entity, who was unhindered by historical circumstances. In other words, he had the ability to portray his environment sensitively and to remain unaffected by it. Thus, according to Thomas, the biography venerated the artist as a man of his times, yet it also distinguished him from them. The primary way in which the biographer achieved this effect was to mention historical background only scarcely during the narrative, and to root the meaning of an artwork in the artist's personal experiences. Finally, Thomas asserts that the biographical model included correspondence, anecdotes, and pictures (or self-portraits), which described the artist's appearance and documented his historical presence. By inserting personal praise and commentary within the narrative of specific episodes and anecdotal quotations from letters, the biographer achieved the paradox of positivistic facts and a romantic life story. Ultimately, according to Thomas, the artist emerged from the biography as a revered and, even, mythologized genius, whose artistic significance lay in his individual experience, not the environment in which he worked.¹⁶

Thomas's case study for the biographical model is the art historian Charles Blanc,¹⁷ the Director des Beaux-Arts of the Second Republic from 1848 to 1852 and the brother of the

¹⁶ Ibid., 264.

¹⁷ In *The Absolute Bourgeois*, Clark describes Charles Blanc: "He was pragmatic, almost conservative, in his theories of art; he was conventional in his tastes. After all, a tincture of Socialism and a liking for

socialist Louis Blanc. Blanc's rhetorical formula readily applies to Sensier's memoir of Millet.¹⁸ As early as the preface—a sort of sentimental biography in miniature—Sensier's memoir illustrates the three components of nineteenth-century biographical form. First, the preface introduces the reader to Millet's *oeuvre* by comparing it to the work of early nineteenth-century English landscape painter, John Constable. While Sensier proclaimed Constable to be “the great English painter...the renewer of modern landscape,” it is should be noted that the Salon critics were uneasy with Constable's stylistic innovations, and preferred, instead, his contemporaries who emulated Claude Lorrain's more conventional idyllic scenes. Through this analogy, Sensier identifies Millet's art as landscape, which was significant since many conservative Salon reviewers criticized his rustic art as having a political message. Furthermore he suggests that Millet's paintings, like Constable's, are undervalued. Thus, to preserve Millet's reputation from such critical misunderstanding and misjudgement, Sensier declares his biographical intent:

We have not judged our friend [Millet], but we have attempted to defend him from attacks, and to show him as he seemed to us during the thirty years of our friendship...People wished to consider him a revolutionary or a pedant. It is time such mistakes should cease.¹⁹

The comparison between Millet and Constable also enabled Sensier to relate himself to Constable's biographer, Charles Leslie, who shared a similarly close relationship with his own subject. Sensier claims that, just as Constable and Leslie shared letters, stories,

peasant painters were fashionable attitudes in the 1840s. And he never pushed things too far. Raphael was still the great example, and Ingres remained the greatest living painter...he defended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts; and the Prix de Rome still seemed to him a passport to artistic importance” (51).

¹⁸ In his essay, Thomas discusses the following works of Charles Blanc: *History of Painters of All Schools* (appeared between 1848 and 1876), *The Works of Rembrandt Reproduced by Photography* (printed in twenty installments beginning in 1853), *The Complete Work of Rembrandt* (two volumes published in 1859 and 1861, respectively), *The Artists of My Time* (1876), and his journal *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*.

¹⁹ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, x.

conversations, “fraternal affection,” and the “joys of the miller who became a landscape-painter, he and Millet had an intimate rapport.”²⁰ He writes:

We have neither the talent nor the knowledge of Charles Leslie, a learned and clever man, but we are scarcely less rich than he—our hands are full of letters and notes, and our mind is full of memories. For more than thirty years we lived Millet’s life, receiving his confidences and complaints, and knowing his innermost thoughts. We loved him; he knew our affection for him, and withheld no confidences from us.²¹

The biographer maintains his authoritative perspective on the artist by mentioning their prolific correspondence and affectionate relationship of thirty years. In the biographical model, Sensier supports his narrative with letters, anecdotes, and first-hand accounts.

Each fact further bolsters his privileged position as Millet’s loyal friend and authoritative memoirist. He states:

We therefore publish a life of Millet from his own words and testimony. There is nothing to hide. Everything is healthy, pure and instructive. We have copied the greater part of the documents from Millet’s own handwriting, accompanied by his conversations, our own explanations, and our own personal reflections.²²

In addition, Sensier documents personal details of the artist such as his “suffering and melancholy nature,” his “strong convictions,” and his integrity: “faithful and proud in his religion and his art.”²³ This commentary of Millet’s uncompromising character and heroic talent despite suffering, reconstructs the artist’s personality and his historical presence.

Perhaps in anticipation that a cynical reader might question the veracity of his memoir, Sensier declares:

His biography is so diversified, so different from our ordinary existence, that if we had chosen to change the names the book might have passed for a romance,—the situations are so moving, the resignation is so incredible, and the action so varied. And yet the recital we have to make is but a true and faithful picture. The reader will soon

²⁰ Ibid., ix.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., ix-x.

²³ Ibid., ix.

recognize this fact. We have invented nothing, imagined nothing.²⁴

Finally, Sensier unifies Millet's landscape *oeuvre* with the rusticity of his heritage, while also establishing the painter as an autonomous entity independent of his rural environment. To emphasize the rustic themes of Millet's art, Sensier again draws a parallel to past artistic figures, yet this time he contrasts the critical response of Millet with those of earlier pastoral writers, such as Montaigne, La Fontaine, La Bruyère, and Châteaubriand. He argues that while these authors had written about the "unfortunate man destined to win his bread by the sweat of his brow," they had not been censured like Millet for creating a "sublime and fierce portraiture of the fields, drawn from nature, with the indelible marks of his origin and suffering."²⁵ Sensier suggests that as the pastoral writers drew inspiration from their actual experience of the countryside, so also did Millet as he painted. He follows the biographical model by directly connecting Millet's art to his experiences, asserting that he is the inspired author of his compositional subject matter.

Sensier states:

Like these masters, Millet looked for beauty in the expression, and expression in the typical figure of the workman in the fields. He knew as well as any one where to find the beauty of Apollo, the regularity, delicacy, and distinction of civilized races. He was not ignorant of rules of selection; he had read the grammar of plastic art. He had seen, as well as others, the "handsome fellow" of his own village and the pretty girls of the country, but he sought to characterize with the whole force of his mind and all the memories of his heart, the painful and inexplicable condition of the human creature upon earth.²⁶

Furthermore, Sensier's reference to acclaimed rustic writers further validates Millet's fame as an artist, specifically, as a landscapist, while also instituting Sensier as the artist's steadfast advocate.

²⁴ Ibid., x.

²⁵ Ibid., x.

²⁶ Ibid., xi.

Yet in order to distinguish Millet from the peasants of “his own village” who inspired the artist, Sensier asserts that the artist’s formal training and specific observations do not fully explain his artistic style and compositional subject matter. Millet’s genius, according to the biographer, lies in his ability to portray the “memories of his heart,” and to depict universal human suffering. Sensier associates Millet’s suffering temperament with the peasants he painted, yet Millet is distinct from the rustic laborers in his power to transcend their specific toil and to portray the universal hardship of mankind.²⁷ Sensier states:

For Millet, the man of the soil represents the whole human family; the laborer gave him the clearest type of our toil and our suffering. The peasant is to him a living being who formulates, more strongly and clearly than any other man, the image, the symbolical figure of humanity.²⁸

In this passage, the biographer explains that while Millet painted actual peasants, he considered his rustic subject matter representatives of timeless human values, such as labor and anguish. Millet’s paintings, according to Sensier, idealize the plight of mankind, and, like the conventional artists, Millet depicted the universal in the particular, an interpretation which countered the historical specificity of his laborers. Consequently, Sensier dislodges the criticism that affiliated the painter with socialism by freeing Millet’s peasants from the social and political associations of the mid-nineteenth century, and Millet’s artistic scope distinguishes him as an autonomous genius.

Similarly to Thomas, Neil McWilliam, in his article “Mythologising Millet,” argues that the conventions of nineteenth-century artistic biography played a significant role in establishing the identity of an artist. The two essays compliment each other, as Thomas

²⁷ Ibid., ix.

²⁸ Ibid., xi.

emphasizes the formulaic principles of nineteenth-century biographical history and its effect on French art scholarship, while McWilliam is primarily interested in the role that the biography acted in securing an artist's reputation and the text's "edifying intent."²⁹ According to McWilliam, the author "worked to produce a subject whose public achievements were grounded in a moral personality imbued with the values of civic individualism."³⁰ He further contends, "Through such means, the exemplary individual became more than the pretext for a diverting narrative, attaining instead the status of ethical guide whose achievements might be matched through emulation of his salient virtues."³¹ Accordingly, the artist emerged from the biography not only as a genius, but also as an upright citizen, whose life served as a type of parable for others to study. McWilliam argues that Sensier's memoir of Millet serves as one of the most vivid examples of this transformative effect during the nineteenth century. He argues that Sensier's narrative effectively neutralized the political controversy surrounding Millet's art, while it also elevated the peasant painter to a moral paragon and, as Thomas noted above, a transcending genius.

By the 1870's, the critical assessment of Millet had shifted from that of a raw painter, who subversively portrayed the peasantry of 1848, to a venerated artist, who poignantly depicted the "cursed Adam." McWilliam writes, 'A man of his time who simultaneously stood out of time, Millet became the emblem of a class fantasy embodying the moral virtues of the "paysan eternal" and the self-possession of the model citizen.'³² He contends that Sensier's biography was fundamental to the moralizing of Millet by

²⁹ McWilliam, "Mythologising Millet," 437-8.

³⁰ Ibid., 438.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 444.

centering the artist's humble rustic origins, Christian heritage, awe of nature, and melancholic temperament on the theme of "peasant stoicism," thus analogizing the suffering of Millet's peasant subjects to Millet himself. McWilliam states, "Biography provided the foundations for such a process [of elaboration] as writers worked to establish a moral symmetry between the painter and his work."³³

Furthermore, Sensier's explanation of the difficulties Millet encountered during his artistic career punctuated and legitimized the artist's stoic resolve. For example, Sensier relates that in 1837 Millet left the city of Cherbourg to study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. While he did not finish the program, he continued to reside in the city as an unsuccessful portraitist. In June 1849, the economic depression and social upheaval forced him and his family to leave Paris, after which he chose to settle in the small village of Barbizon. Yet, rather than suggest that the urban period of Millet's life was a failure, Sensier discusses his elusive success as if it were predetermined and a measure of his authenticity as a peasant painter. Sensier describes the circumstances of Millet's life shortly before he and Charles Jacque left Paris:

The year 1849 was a difficult time for many painters. Millet, whom fortune was slow to smile upon, was not more happy than his friends; yet he found time and strength to paint a peasant-woman seated, which he sent to the Salon,--but in this epoch of political excitement it does not seem to have caused any great interest. Material life was a problem to be solved everyday.³⁴

When Sensier narrates Millet's first moments in Barbizon, he creates a dramatic contrast between Millet's experience in the city and the country. He writes:

From the time Millet went to Barbizon he became "the rustic," and gave to his pictures an elevation, a largeness, which have made him unique in our art,--one who speaks a language hitherto unheard. The echo of country life, its eclogues, its

³³ Ibid., 440.

³⁴ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, 78-81.

hard work, its anxiety, its misery, its peace, the emotions of the man bound to the soil,--all these he will know how to translate, and the inhabitant of the city will see that “the trivial can be made to serve the sublime,” and that something noble can be evolved from the commonest acts of life.³⁵

McWilliam argues that the contrast between Millet’s life in Paris and in Barbizon as told by Sensier achieves two effects. First, the artist’s awkwardness in the urban environment authenticates his personal and natural connection with his rural subject matter. Second, because he neither completes his formal education in Paris nor becomes artistically prolific until he reaches the countryside, Millet can be presented as a self-taught artist “uncontaminated by superficiality and convention.”³⁶ McWilliam states:

Within such a biographical model, Millet’s Paris years stand as a form of Purgatory in which the artist is tested by an alien world, with its attendant cultural and financial pressures...Barbizon, then, becomes a personal haven in which the unsullied nature of the forest and plain reinvigorates Millet’s nature and roots him once more in a primitive purity recalling his Normandy home.³⁷

As Sensier constructed Millet’s unsullied nature in Paris, he had one glaring inconsistency to reconcile within his biography, which was to explain Millet’s paintings and drawings of the female nude in the 1840’s. McWilliams writes, “The often erotic pseudo-rococo scenes produced during the 1840s sit awkwardly with the austere image generally cultivated by writers on the artist.”³⁸ Sensier could not financially justify the artist’s pursuit of this subject matter, since few of his prints sold and he had already accurately portrayed Millet’s poverty at this time in his career. Sensier’s strategy for handling the matter was two-fold. First, he claimed that like Michaelangelo, Millet’s approach to the nude figure was solely a study of form. Sensier explains:

³⁵ Ibid., 83.

³⁶ McWilliam, “Mythologising Millet,” 443.

³⁷ Ibid., 443.

³⁸ Ibid.

In his nude figures, his most amorous subjects, you never find an unwholesome intention. The picture of the “Children with the Wheelbarrow” seems a robust echo of Fragonard; a young peasant such as never existed, shoulders and breast bare, hair flying, and a face bright with the sun of May. In the hands of a painter of the eighteenth century it would be a suggestive study. With Millet it is only fine plastic art, touched by spring-time and youth. So with all his nude paintings. Millet had a sensuous organization and delighted in flesh; but he had an honest soul. In the midst of all our decadence he kept a pure heart.³⁹

In this passage, Sensier not only assures the reader of Millet’s piety and pure conscience, but he also further establishes the artist as an outsider, or an “Other,” in the industrial world. By claiming that while in Paris, Millet existed among “all *our* decadence” and yet he still “kept a pure heart”, Sensier establishes the artist as a type of Christ-figure.

Millet’s incorruptible spirit separates him from Sensier’s worldliness, as the author of Book of Hebrews claims Christ, the high priest, is distinct from mankind: “For we have not a high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; *but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.*”⁴⁰

In addition, to explain Millet’s “sudden change”⁴¹ in his subject matter from nudes to toiling peasants in the late 1840’s, Sensier tells an anecdote, which further accentuated Millet’s “pure heart.”⁴² According to the biographer, Millet overheard two men discussing one of his paintings entitled *The Bather* (1846). When one of the men asked who the artist was, the other responded, “a fellow called Millet, who paints only naked women.” Sensier further remarks:

These words cut him to the quick,--his dignity was touched. Coming home, he told his wife the story. “If you consent,” said he, “I will do no more of that sort of pictures. Living will be harder than ever, and you will suffer, but I will be free to do

³⁹ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, 72.

⁴⁰ Hebrews 4:15 (italics added).

⁴¹ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, 78.

⁴² T.J. Clark not only rejects Sensier’s anecdotal explanation, but also the idea that Millet’s subject matter changed suddenly. His argument is discussed in Chapter Two.

what I have long been thinking of.” Mme. Millet answered, “I am ready. Do as you will.” And from that time on, Millet, relieved in a sense from all servitude, entered resolutely into rustic art.⁴³

Whether or not this story was true, it strategically preserved Millet’s reputation, and later biographers, such as T.H. Bartlett and Julia Cartwright, relied on it as well.⁴⁴ The dialogue in Sensier’s script were not the words of a revolutionary, but of a pious man, who resolutely painted what he knew, peasants, even if it meant economic sacrifice.

McWilliam asserts:

The effect [of the conversation on Millet] is described as a powerful revelation, revitalizing the artist’s battered sense of purpose and restoring his links with nature...[Barbizon] reinvigorates Millet’s inner nature and roots him once more in a primitive purity recalling his Normandy home.⁴⁵

Taken as an allegory of universal suffering, Sensier’s memoir psychologically connected Millet to the laborers he painted, yet also removed the specific historical context of the artist’s subject matter. McWilliam’s argument poses not only Millet as an autonomous entity, but also his peasants, enabling them to transcend contemporary and controversial connotations so as to be considered “metaphors for man’s beleaguered existence in a post-lapsarian world.”⁴⁶ Thus, the biographical form enabled Sensier to expand the details of Millet’s life, to explain the artist’s personal union to his rural subject matter, and ultimately to renovate his reputation as a socialist revolutionary. As a result Millet became an “ethical guide”—an artist who had a “profound moral insight into the human condition as a whole.”⁴⁷

⁴³ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, 78.

⁴⁴ Both T. H. Bartlett’s *Barbizon and Jean-François Millet* (1890) and Julia Cartwright’s *Jean-François Millet: His Life and Letters* (1896) perpetuated Sensier’s efforts to depoliticize Millet’s rustic subject in their sentimental narratives of his life.

⁴⁵ McWilliam, “Mythologising Millet,” 443.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 439.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Yet, while Sensier's memoir presented Millet as an "ethical guide" and a stoic artist, it was not solely responsible for the critical shift of his art from Realist to Romantic. Rather, the biography's narrative of the peasant-painter endorsed a set of mid-nineteenth-century social values called the bourgeois rural myth, to which Sensier and the potential bourgeois patrons of Millet's art almost universally subscribed. Sensier established his memoir as a biographical history and authoritatively elaborated an image of Millet which assuaged bourgeois fears, including his own, that Millet's laborers were revolutionaries. Despite his vow in the preface to "defend [Millet] from attacks," his biographical intent becomes particularly questionable in light of his biographical fabrications of Millet's life. For example, considering that Sensier was both Millet's friend and professional liaison, it seems unlikely that he would mistake the date of Millet's second marriage by thirty years.⁴⁸ Sensier records the artist's wedding to Catherine Lemaire in 1845, when in actuality, they did not marry until 1875 (after their fourth child). Again, while Sensier touted Millet as a devoted son, homesick for his native village, the artist did not see his mother or grandmother after 1845 and only returned to his native Gréville in 1853 to attend his mother's burial.⁴⁹ And finally, Sensier described the artist as "faithful and proud in his religion and his art," yet he did not attend church in Barbizon.⁵⁰ Sensier's "errors" of Millet's biography are not limited to these four instances, but they represent the four values, which hold up the sentimental construct of Millet that Sensier intended to build.

⁴⁸ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, 66.

⁴⁹ Herbert, "Millet Revisited," 295.

⁵⁰ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, ix.

By inventing a marriage, Sensier retained Millet's peasant virtue. As a devoted son and nostalgic for his rural birthplace, Sensier both authenticated his family loyalty and his peasant heritage. And finally, by declaring Millet to be religious, Sensier quelled any doubts that he was not God-fearing. These four components, virtue, familial devotion, regional loyalty, and piety, were the fundamental components of the bourgeois rural myth of the nineteenth century. With anecdotes, invented dialogues, letters, and a chronological catalogue of Millet's art, Sensier constructed an image of the artist which not only sentimentally mythologized the artist, but inserted the artist into the sentimental imagination of the bourgeois myth.

Beginning in early nineteenth century, a myth of rural society developed and evolved among the French bourgeoisie. It was a romanticized perception of the countryside. Paris was an immigrant city, and by the mid-nineteenth century, it faced political, industrial, and demographic challenges. Consequently, the myth served two significant roles in the Parisian bourgeois society—it provided the bourgeoisie with social stability, while also assuring them of political security. The social role of the myth stabilized the identity of the Parisian bourgeoisie through the existence of the peasantry and the bourgeoisie's economic and geographic distinction from it. First, the myth stabilized bourgeois identity by distorting the social mobility process. While most Parisian bourgeois traced their heritage directly back to a rural province, T. J. Clark argues that their social advancement was complex.⁵¹ He suggests that the average bourgeois family experienced four stages of

⁵¹ In *Image of the People*, Clark discusses the rural myth of the bourgeois within the context of Gustav Courbet's 1851 Salon painting *The Burial at Ornans*. Clark argues that one of the reasons Courbet received such hostile criticism for the work was his representation of the rural funeral attendees, whose attire attested to a socially stratified countryside. Clark writes, "What Courbet did, in his 1851 exhibit, was explode the myth entire" (153).

social mobilization from the rural province to the urban setting. The first stage was peasant status. Clark calls the second stage the *rural* bourgeoisie. Having started as peasants, families joined the rural bourgeoisie when they accumulated some wealth. They then sent sons to the city. Once an immigrant son found apprentice work, he entered the third stage, the *urban* bourgeoisie. When the son found financial success, he entered the final stage, enabling his “installation as a bourgeois proper.”⁵² While his initiation into the bourgeoisie was legitimate, Clark argues, the status was tenuous and sometimes short-lived because it was dependent upon the caprice of capitalism. Consequently, he states, “The key to the myth is its elimination of the two middle terms of this process [the rural and urban bourgeoisie], the unstable categories—equal but as it were inverse—in which bourgeois identity is gradually and painfully assembled, gained and lost and gained again (to be lost a second time?).”⁵³

Clark remarks that the bourgeois never denied his peasant origins; he merely ignored the second and third stages. In other words, according to the myth, the evolution of the self-made bourgeois was described as “before he was bourgeois, and after he was peasant,” meaning, the newly established bourgeois had “lived for a mysterious time in limbo, between identities, something much less than human.”⁵⁴ Thus by removing the two middle stages, the unstable bourgeois status appeared secure because there was a concrete division established between the peasant world and the bourgeois world—a division that “has no history.”⁵⁵ In addition, by distinguishing between his humble and

⁵² Clark, *Image of the People*, 151.

⁵³ Clark, *Image of the People*, 151.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 152.

wealthier identities, the bourgeois also could claim the virtues of industriousness and prudence as parts of his evolutionary process.

Along with providing the Parisian bourgeois with a sense of social permanence, the myth also fostered a notion of political stability. The bourgeois myth-makers adopted a reactionary, aristocratic perception of the countryside, which assuaged their fears of rural conspiracy and peasant class-consciousness.⁵⁶ According to the myth, the peasant was different from the urban worker (the proletariat) in his societal temperament. Unlike the proletariat, whom the bourgeois associated with social angst and agitation, the peasant represented contentment and Rousseau's "noble savage." The notion of the satisfied peasant was comforting, but more importantly, it implied three characteristics of rural France. First, the bourgeois myth perceived the countryside as one economic class.

Clark explains:

For the myth, rural society is a unity, a one-class society in which peasant and master work in harmony. Rural society is, in other words, the antithesis of the community in which the bourgeois actually lived. It is a world in which social conflicts are magically resolved, in which the tensions and class divisions of the city are unknown.⁵⁷

Hence, the myth not only eliminated the *rural* bourgeois from one of the stages of social mobilization, but also from the countryside itself. The result was a stable socio-economic sphere, which lacked the competition and uncertainty of the capitalistic city.

Secondly, with the fantasy of the content rural society, the bourgeois was able to consider the peasant's immigration to the city as a volitional act. In other words, the social status of a person was the result of self-determination.⁵⁸ Moreover, the peasant not

⁵⁶ Christophe Charle, *A Social History of France in the 19th Century* (Oxford: Berg Publishing, 1991), 36.

⁵⁷ Clark, *Image of the People*, 151.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

only consciously willed to live and work in the countryside, he accepted it contentedly. One way the myth rationalized the peasant's resignation to the agrarian life was by suggesting that the peasant's intimacy with Nature enabled him to understand instinctively the concept of hierarchy and his place within the universe. This notion of fatalism was rooted in Biblical teaching, whereby the peasant saw himself as one who had inherited Adam's curse and the sufferings of labor.⁵⁹

Thirdly, the peasant's connection to Nature suggested distance from contemporary urbanization and materialism. Consequently, the myth cloaked the peasant in the Romantic virtues of piety, sincerity, simplicity, and loyalty. The myth morally compartmentalized the countryside and the city. The countryside represented an idyllic site; it was free of urban modernity and its accompanying corruption. It was also the setting of agrarian labor, or what the bourgeois considered "virtuous work."⁶⁰ Conversely, the city symbolized complexity, decadence, and temptation. The rural peasant became the "noble savage," while the urban proletariat represented the industrial brute.⁶¹

In the end, the myth created a non-threatening, asocial world with contented and primitive occupants. Myth-making was not new to the mid-nineteenth century, but this fabricated view of society evolved to become sensitive and relevant to the contemporary social threat. Robert Herbert explains:

Myths of primitivism, many of them still with us, have always derived their meanings from opposition to the city. They did not originate in the Romantic Era (indeed, they

⁵⁹ Parsons and McWilliam, "Le Paysan," 39-40.

⁶⁰ Robert Herbert, *Peasants and "Primitivism: French Prints from Millet to Gauguin,"* (South Hadley: Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, 1995), 12-13.

⁶¹ The eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau popularized the term "noble savage" by associating rural dwellers with a primitive innocence. Rousseau considered a peasant to be a "noble savage" because he was unspoiled and unencumbered by civilization; the peasant class was the social remnant which existed in the purity of Nature, rather than being fettered to the material progress of industrialism and urbanization.

were already prominent by the eighteenth century), nor were they limited to rural life in France since they referred also to ‘savages’ and children. Rather, it was in the 1830s and 1840s that they joined together to form the colored lens through which French artists viewed peasants.⁶²

The Parisian bourgeoisie held closely to the rustic myth because political radicalism and the consequences of industrialism threatened their way of life.

The revolutionary politics in 1848, which ushered in the Second Republic, also marked the beginning of universal male suffrage. The republican bourgeois politicians fearfully recognized that the countryside’s vote would determine whether France would be a republic or a socialist nation.⁶³ Yet the way in which each side reacted to the election results is fundamental to the rustic rural myth. For the left, the Democratic-Socialists, the election was a call to “educate” the countryside. But, for the right, the conservative republican bourgeois, whose agrarian myth had suffered a blow, the December results signaled a need to contain the peasant.⁶⁴ Clark describes the conservative reaction: “If the myth was under pressure, all the more reason to preserve it.”⁶⁵ Hence, the myth became more precious to the republican bourgeoisie and they searched for social evidence to substantiate it.

In addition to the political uncertainty of universal male suffrage, by 1850 the countryside revolts and demographic changes further increased the bourgeois fears of the peasants’ political potential and the stability of the republic. Herbert argues that the fearful, yet capitalistic bourgeoisie, experienced a paradoxical dilemma in regard to the urban-industrial changes. While the bourgeoisie naturally promoted industrialism, they

⁶² Herbert, *Peasants and “Primitivism,”* 12.

⁶³ For a historical synopsis of the Second Republic, see Introduction, 7-12.

⁶⁴ Augulon, *Republican Experiment*, 69-73.

⁶⁵ Clark, *Image of the People*, 153.

combated the subsequent and correlative shift of rural population toward Paris and the major cities and the social upheaval during the Second Republic and Second Empire.⁶⁶ He argues that the rural myth's dual-sphere world (the city and the country) and the presumed agrarian stability enabled the bourgeois "to cope with, or excuse, their actual devotion to 'progress,' to throw a cloak over its consequences, especially the spread of industrial squalor and the growth of an urban underclass."⁶⁷ Ultimately, the myth contained the peasantry geographically (to the rural provinces), socially (as the "cursed Adam"), politically (voting in alignment with the conservative republicans), economically (serving as the base of the social pyramid), and morally (as the virtuous "noble savage").

According to Thomas, Sensier was apolitical and merely an "establishment bureaucrat, whose artistic pleasures excluded politics."⁶⁸ Yet despite his ambivalent political convictions, his fabrications within Millet's biography and his additional critical writings clearly demonstrate that he and the conservative bourgeoisie shared a longing for a past agrarian golden age, a fantasy that ensured a natural order and socio-economic security within a tumultuous era. According to Sensier's rendition of Millet's life, the artist could inhabit the rural myth and join the peasants he painted. In *The Absolute Bourgeois*, T.J. Clark describes Sensier's view of Millet's rustic world as "Sensier's legend of Millet as peasant moralist,"⁶⁹ and upon examining the biographer's romantic writings, the

⁶⁶ In "Millet Reconsidered," Herbert provides statistics of emigration from the country to city. In 1790, the Department of the Seine (Paris and its surrounding area) had a population of 725,000, which by 1831 had increased to 735,000. Then from 1830 until 1860 with the advent of the agricultural and industrial revolutions, the population tripled (1,954,000). Due to the low birth rate, Herbert attributes the figure almost entirely to the heavy influx of rural peoples to Paris and its suburbs. Overall, from 1846 to 1866, the total rural population stayed the same size (about 26 million), but the urban population grew from 6,646,000 to 11,595,000. *Museum Studies* 1 (1962): 44.

⁶⁷ Herbert, *Peasants and "Primitivism,"* 12.

⁶⁸ Thomas, *Art and Ecology*, 107.

⁶⁹ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 76.

description is appropriate. The descriptive language of the peasant in his Salon criticism is particularly revealing. For example at the Salon of 1869, he writes:

We should see the peasantry not as a rebellious caste, but as the fulfillment of society's ancient laws. That is its resource and its inner strength. A mysterious laboratory in which future generations are prepared, where races reform and civilizations are renewed, they are the eternal element in society, continually reformed, rejuvenated and resisting the dissipation of the cities.⁷⁰

Sensier not only upholds the fundamental tenets of the rural myth, but also teaches them.

His use of the words "caste" and, later, "race," Sensier implies both a unified social grouping of peasants (that all peasants were economically homogeneous) along with Nature's predetermined hierarchy. Both words imply social stability, rather than mobility, enabling Sensier to present the peasant as fatalistic and content, and as one who should serve as a social role model.

Christopher Parsons and Neil McWilliam describe this particular quality of the peasant that Sensier admires as "innate Stoicism." They argue that Sensier's ideal perception of society was the feudal order, where the peasant stoically and contentedly served as the economic base, while also preserving the social tradition. In this structure, the peasant has a dual role of economically securing the present, while morally and traditionally serving as the liaison to the past. Parsons and McWilliam write, "The ingredients combined in Sensier's construct of rural life enabled him to present the peasantry as preserving the last remnants of a morally pre-ordained social hierarchy, which urbanization and its sophisticated values had called into questions...Significantly, it is the feudal order which

⁷⁰ Alfred Sensier, "Le Paysage et les Paysans", in *Revue Internationale de l'Art et de la Curiosité*, Vol. 1 (15 May 1869): 399, quoted in Parsons and McWilliam, "Le Paysan," 40.

emerges as a social paradigm to be set against the degeneration and moral alienation of the modern world...”⁷¹

Considering that Sensier was both a Parisian bourgeois and a civil servant, his affirmation of the rural myth was understandable. Yet, what seems incongruous on the surface was his personal and professional devotion to Millet’s art, something which became increasingly regarded as leftist social commentary by 1850. During the nineteenth century, the alliance between bourgeois patrons and rural art was firm; however, the artists typified the Academic style of Jules Breton, rather than the nonconformist technique of Millet. Herbert argues that central to the art of Breton and other ruralists⁷² was the presence of “innocence, childhood, and arcadia.” He claims:

Simplicity and virtue were attributes of the mythical countryside, thought to be untarnished by the negative aspects of modern industrial and urban transformation. While looking at images of shepherdesses or men herding cattle, city dwellers could think of their parents’ childhoods or their own.⁷³

Conversely, conservative and liberal critics considered Millet’s rural art a challenge to the “reality” of the agrarian myth. While Breton’s peasants picturesquely inhabited arcadia, Millet’s peasants vandalized it. In response to Millet’s 1859 Salon painting *Woman Pasturing Her Cow*, the conservative critic A. Houssaye wrote:

[Millet] does not love truth, rather he violates it. He does not take the radiance of nature, its fertile plenitude bathed in a halo of light, but chooses its most impoverished and degenerate aspects...he tones down colour, deadens the light, exaggerates

⁷¹ Parsons and McWilliam, “Le Paysan,” 40.

⁷²Under the July Monarchy, ruralism developed as a pictorial representation of agrarian mythology. Pioneer artists of this style were Armand Leleux and Pierre-Edmond-Alexandre Hédouin, who depicted specific details from their observations of regional custom within a rural idyll. Consequently, ruralists claimed to paint authentic scenes of peasant culture; however, couched in Academic aesthetic language, their canvases also reassured the urban audience. Leftist critics, such as the Fourierist Désiré Laverdant, censured their art as dishonest portrayals of human suffering and “natural disharmony.” Laverdant described the ruralists’ art as a “prettification of ugliness.” See Neil McWilliam, *Dreams of Happiness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 196-7.

⁷³ Herbert, *Peasants and “Primitivism,”* 13.

ugliness and commits treason against humanity.⁷⁴

Sensier attempted to clarify what could be interpreted as inconsistent (a conservative bourgeois working for a militant peasant). He continues:

Millet is not the only one in France who has spoken words of power concerning the unfortunate man destined to win his bread by the sweat of his brow...For Millet, the man of the soil represents the whole human family; the laborer gave him the clearest type of our toil and our suffering. The peasant is to him a living being who formulates, more strongly and clearly than any other man, the image, the symbolical figure of humanity.⁷⁵

This quote suggests that the fatalism of Millet's peasants epitomized Sensier's societal ideal more than Breton's did because Millet "accurately" depicted the base of the feudal pyramid with the stoic laborer. In another excerpt from the Salon of 1869, Sensier writes:

What a field of exploration is offered by primitive country life, what power there is for the artist in showing the action of the man of the soil—that natural creation of the life of the fields—on the landscape, in animating this being with his primitive brutality and instinctive emotions. Is the countryman today not the same as he was a thousand years ago, the same as he will always be, a man bent beneath the heat of the sun or in the icy fog, earning his bread 'by the sweat of his brow', and do not the eternal gestures of his unchanging task offer the possibility of a robust art generated by contemplation of the spectacle of creation and the life of its savage children.⁷⁶

Consequently, the aspects of Millet's paintings that the conservative critics derided—his exaggeration of human suffering, the savagery and brutality of his peasants, and his rough technique and *impasto*,⁷⁷ to name a few—were the very features that attracted Sensier.

For Sensier, the savagery of Millet's peasant was the indicator of timelessness and purity.

Unlike the urbanite, whose formulaic rationalism had created a mechanical society and a life devoid of spontaneity, the sensual, instinctive, primitive peasant had never evolved.

⁷⁴ A. Houssaye, "Salon de 1859" in *Le Monde Illustré* (4 June 1859): 359, quoted in Parsons and McWilliam, "Le Paysan," 42.

⁷⁵ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, x-xi.

⁷⁶ Alfred Sensier, "Le Paysage et les Paysans," quoted in Parsons and McWilliam, "Le Paysan," 40.

⁷⁷ Impasto is the thick application of paint, which retains the marks of the brush or other utensil used to apply the paint.

Millet's peasant was a counterbalance to the urbanite. His toiler, not Breton's, assured Sensier that despite the industrial, political, urban and moral revolutions, the countryside was immutable. After the Salon of 1851, where conservative critics accused Millet's *The Sower* of socialist intent, Sensier wrote:

But Millet did not consider himself so important or so revolutionary. No subversive idea troubled his brain. Socialistic doctrines he would not listen to; the little that came to his ears, he said, was not clear. He often said: "My programme is work. 'Thou shalt gain thy bread in the sweat of thy brow' was written centuries ago. Immutable destiny, which none may change! What every one ought to do is to find progress in his profession, to try ever to do better, to be strong and clever in his trade, and be greater than his neighbor in talent and conscientiousness in his work. That for me is the only path. The rest is dream or calculation."⁷⁸

The similarities between Sensier's thoughts in 1869 and Millet's in 1851, as Sensier presented them, are noteworthy. Both mention the same Biblical quote: "Thou shalt gain thy bread in the sweat of thy brow," God's curse on Adam.⁷⁹ The Old Testament reference, along with the phrases "unchanging task" and "immutable destiny," suggest fatalism and timelessness. Ultimately, Sensier's peasant-type and Millet's words not only suggest the eternity of man's burdened life, but also suggest agents that resist change. Sensier's peasant-type is constant and a preserver of tradition. Similarly, Millet suggests that progress and exploration should only be pursued as far as one's trade, an idea that opposes the socialist's call to change the structure of society.

While the parallel between these two quotes is convenient, it is uncertain whether Millet actually spoke these words. Sensier uses two methods to quote Millet in the biography. The most frequent, and more reliable, method was his reprinting of Millet's written correspondence to him. The other method, which typifies Sensier's romantic style,

⁷⁸ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, 111.

⁷⁹ Genesis 3:19.

employed “invented” dialogue. In the first chapter, for example, he describes a conversation between the young Millet and his father: “Taking a bit of grass, [Jean-Louis-Nicholas] would say to his son Francois: ‘See how fine! Look at that tree—how large and beautiful! It is as beautiful as a flower!...See! That house half-buried by the field is good; it seems to me that it ought to be drawn that way.’”⁸⁰ Using the latter and more informal method, Sensier cites Millet in the above quote concerning *The Sower*. Considering Sensier’s other fabrications of Millet’s life, it is not unreasonable to suggest that this quote denying Socialist affiliation was also imaginary. But if Millet’s paintings of fatalistic peasants appealed to both Sensier’s aesthetic taste and his idealism, one might wonder why he would need to fabricate any part of Millet’s life or thought. The primary reason was to substantiate and justify his opinions on the artist. Secondly, as both Millet’s art agent and a collector of his paintings, Sensier was motivated by his own business interests.

Immediately after the 1848 uprisings, hostile critics targeted Courbet’s controversial depictions of the countryside. And, in 1851, Millet’s *The Sower* precipitated rumors that he was a socialist, and conservative critics began to affiliate him with the “Realists.” The significant difference between “Realism” and ruralism was the depiction of labor. “Realism” depicted it as hardship, while ruralism, as stated earlier, “prettified” it. By 1857, Courbet was avoiding the critics’ hostility by painting landscape and hunting scenes, while Millet continued to paint fatalistic peasants, thus moving into the more critical spotlight. Aesthetically, Sensier did not seem bothered that the conservative critics pejoratively referred to Millet’s art as “Realism.” Commercially, on the other hand, he

⁸⁰ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, 20.

cared. Between 1860 and 1866, the prices of Millet's art had quadrupled, and Sensier attracted the attention of major industrialists and sold several canvases to affluent bourgeois patrons.⁸¹ Parsons and McWilliam argue that with this new buyer came a more conservative myth, along with higher financial stakes for Sensier. They explain:

Many of these new patrons were devoutly religious, with strongly paternalistic attitudes towards their business activities, and it was thus important to avoid alienating their support for the artist through the eruption of unseemly critical debate over his contributions to the Salon.⁸²

It is noteworthy that during Sensier's narration of this period in Millet's life, he writes, 'Someone proposed that [Millet] should do some religious pictures which could be photographed for sale. He thereupon drew the "Flight into Egypt" twice, full of mystery and rustic kindness...He also made a "Christ Rising from the Tomb."'”⁸³

To capitalize on the broadest art market during the Second Empire, Sensier's marketing strategy had to counter the criticism of Millet from both the left and right. Ironically, Sensier pacified them on the common element of Millet's depiction of the changeless peasant's suffering. In response to the right, Sensier sought to remove Millet from the classification of "Realist" by accentuating the timeless fatalism and suffering of the laborer, which coincided with the bourgeois rural myth. Meanwhile, Sensier's language appealed to leftist critics, who considered this quality as distinguishing Millet from the artificiality of the ruralists. To market Millet to both, Sensier entered the critical dialogue by becoming a Salon reviewer in 1865, under the pseudonym "Jean Ravenel." As a critic, Parsons and McWilliam argue, "Sensier was able to employ some of the rhetoric of liberals such as Castagnary, while depriving it of any revendicative overtones,

⁸¹ Parsons and McWilliam, "Le Paysan," 42-3.

⁸² Ibid., 43.

⁸³ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, 160.

and at the same time appeal to conservative opinion through his eulogisation of the continuing moral value of peasant stoicism.”⁸⁴

The timing of Sensier’s debut as a Salon reviewer was critical considering Millet had exhibited *A Man with a Hoe* in 1863, which had created an uproar. Sensier describes the reaction, “Apropos of this wretched peasant, whose tragic and sinister figure displeased the delicate and timid, a furious battle raged.”⁸⁵ While Sensier chose not to “reprint the bitter words,” he describes the event as a “struggle” for Millet and that he “took refuge in his studio.”⁸⁶ All but the critic Pelloquet⁸⁷ condemned Millet’s depiction of hardship, leaving Millet to write Sensier: “They say I’m a Saint-Simonist. It isn’t true. I don’t know what a “Saint-Simonist” is.”⁸⁸ Consequently, at the Salon of 1865 “Ravenel” writes:

When a painter takes me to the fields he should not defy good sense by searching out a handsome figure of Paris on vacation in the company of a beautiful Helen gathering the harvest. He should grip the spectator with quite the opposite impression and bring him face to face with real men and women of the soil, such as a rise up from the ground elevated by labour.⁸⁹

In this quote, Sensier not only validates Millet’s depiction of labor, offering it as the artistic standard, but also indirectly attacks the artificiality of Breton and the ruralist school still popular with bourgeois patrons. Parsons and McWilliam describe Sensier’s

⁸⁴ Parsons and McWilliam, “Le Paysan,” 43.

⁸⁵ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, 154.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁸⁷ Théodore Pelloquet, the editor of *L’Exposition*, wrote the following after viewing Millet’s *Man with a Hoe*: “I have read in a Belgian publication with regard to some exhibition or other that Millet is a *realist*. The partisans of realism, on the contrary, consider him a romantic or an academician, which to their eyes is the same thing. Actually he has nothing to do with either. He conscientiously seeks to discover in the spectacle of men and things of his time, the great laws that guided the masters, and he finds them. He applies them in his own way, which is his originality and strength—a very great originality and a very great strength which no one, at least in France, has possessed before him and no one at the present time has shown to the same degree.” Quoted in *Nineteenth Century Theories of Art*, ed. Joshua C. Taylor (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 342.

⁸⁸ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, 157.

⁸⁹ Alfred Sensier, “Salon de 1865,” in *L’Epoque* (28 June 1865), published under the pseudonym “Jean Ravenel,” quoted in Parsons and McWilliams, “Le Paysan,” 46.

Salon remarks as “postulating an alternative conservative myth of the countryside.”⁹⁰

Sensier’s version of the myth, which emphasized the timelessness and fatalism of the peasant, endorsed Millet’s art over Breton’s. At the Salon of 1866, “Ravenel” specifically praised Millet’s *End of the Hamlet of Gruchy II*:

[Millet] is not preoccupied by the elegant ways of civilizations lost in refinement. In and of himself, he is loyal and sincere like the coarsely beautiful gestures of our Celtic firstborn. He sees nature with a countryman’s eyes, like the sower familiar with the seasons or the sailor who knows the secret of the deep and can read the stars.⁹¹

Writing Millet’s biography in the 1870s was Sensier’s final effort to rescue the artist from either a socialist or “Realist” association, while ensuring both a sentimental perception of Millet and prospective bourgeois patrons for Sensier. The biographer’s rendition of Millet’s life was such a successful application of the bourgeois myth to the artist that, Herbert remarks, “Millet’s peasant became the embodiment of the very work ethic that underlay bourgeois aspirations of the nineteenth century... Unacceptably radical in 1850, this appreciation of Millet’s art became the standard bourgeois view twenty-five years later.”⁹² Throughout the book, Sensier consistently portrays Millet as the “peasant painter” with the same themes evidenced above by the biographer’s four fabrications: virtue, familial loyalty, regional identity, and religion.

Sensier introduces the reader to Millet through the artist’s family and birthplace, establishing his rural birthplace and peasant origins in Gruchy in Normandy. According to the biographer, there were three relatives who formatively influenced Millet. The first was his grandmother (also his godmother) who helped define his character. Louise Jumelin led the Millet family as a widow. Sensier describes her as wise, strong, and

⁹⁰ Parsons and McWilliam, “Le Paysan,” 43.

⁹¹ Ibid., 40.

⁹² Herbert, *Jean Francois-Millet*, 14.

deeply devoted to God and to her family. When Millet left for Cherbourg in 1833 to study with the portrait painter Bon Dumouchel, Sensier relates Millet's grandmother's farewell:

“Remember,” the grandmother repeated again and again, “remember the virtues of your ancestors; remember that at the [baptismal] font I promised for you that you should renounce the devil and all his works. I would rather see you dead, dear son, than a renegade, and faithless to the commands of God.”⁹³

Her son, Jean-Louis-Nicholas was Jean-Francois's father and second inspiration. He taught Millet to be alert to the subtle beauties of nature.⁹⁴ According to Sensier, Millet's third mentor was his great-uncle, Charles Millet. He had been a priest of the diocese of Avranches, but returned to Gruchy after refusing to take the oath to the Constitution during the Revolution of 1789, considering it to be hostile to the Pope. Each morning he would celebrate mass and then proceed to the fields to work. According to Sensier, this compassionate, religious man contributed to Millet's work ethic, honorable resolve, and education, teaching him also to read. Sensier distilled these three relatives from Millet's youth, and identified them as the primary influences on his temperament, eye, and mind.⁹⁵ Yet in his discussion of Millet's formative influences, Sensier neglects the artist's mother. His scant remarks on her include that she was from a wealthy farming family, that she was pious but “not given to the spiritual exaltation of the Jumelin family,” and that she died in 1853.⁹⁶ While Millet may have related little about his mother to Sensier, it was her family's wealth that likely prompted the biographer's reticence in discussing her. This economic information would not only affect Sensier's humble portrayal of Millet family,

⁹³ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, 45.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

but also suggest the existence of a *rural* bourgeois, and thereby undermines the artist's association with the bourgeois rural myth.

After his first chapter detailing Millet's peasant origins, Roman Catholic faith, and love for nature, Sensier dedicates the remainder of the text to his narrative commentary supplemented with excerpts from Millet's correspondence with him. Consistent with the bourgeois myth's primitivism and romanticism of the peasant, Sensier's writing also employs two tones: paternalistic and reverential. The paternalistic tone is particularly evident in Sensier's explanation of Millet's arrival in Paris and Delaroche's studio in 1837. According to Sensier, Millet initially lived in a household in Paris, which Sensier refers to as the house of "Monsieur L." Sensier relates that the husband was helpful to Millet, but the wife chided the artist for his "awkward ways and timidity," leading him to depart for other lodgings. Sensier summarizes the incident, "To tell the truth, Millet had not, the slightest understanding of this feminine character. It seems that, like Joseph, he met at the out-set of life a "Potiphar's wife.""⁹⁷

Sensier's paternalistic assessment portrays Millet as the naïve country simpleton, who needs a cultural translator to understand the ways of urban life, including its women.⁹⁸ Paternalism was fundamental to the bourgeois myth. By assuming the bourgeois role as the knowledgeable father, Sensier assigns Millet (the peasant) to the role of the innocent child. In this passage, Sensier also becomes an omniscient presence by relating the past events, from which he is absent, with specific dialogues between Millet and the members

⁹⁷ Ibid., 49.

⁹⁸ Sensier's reference to "Potiphar's wife" alludes to the Biblical story of Joseph found in Genesis 39. Joseph, who was the favorite son of Jacob, received a multi-colored coat from his father, leading his eleven brothers to envy him. Eventually, they sold him into slavery, where he served in the house of an Egyptian governor, Potiphar. On several occasions, Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph, however, he resisted her advances. On one such occasion, Joseph fled from her, but she caught his cloak, and used it as evidence that he had tried to rape her. Despite his innocence, Joseph was sentenced to prison.

of the “L.” family. Yet, indirectly, the myth romanticizes the peasant’s child-like innocence. The myth divides society into two spheres: the countryside and the city. The countryside represents the pre-industrial, natural world, untainted by the by-products of modernity. In his account of Millet’s urban initiation, Sensier implies both reverence and awe over Millet’s naïveté, and consequently, the artist becomes both inferior and idealized.

Sensier’s narrative of Millet’s early days in Paris continues with the artist’s experience in Paul Delaroche’s studio.⁹⁹ The biographer accentuates the artist’s peasant status, which, Sensier argued, immediately distinguished him from the other students. He writes:

In entering this new world, Millet imposed upon himself the strictest silence and circumspection. Like a true peasant, he let others approach him and answered little. They tried to make out this puzzling countryman. They apostrophized, joked, and teased him, but Millet answered nothing, or with his fists, threatened those who went too far, and as he was built like a Hercules, they let him alone, giving him the nickname of the “man of the woods.”¹⁰⁰

Sensier’s description of Millet’s social interaction presents a peculiar combination of a Christ-figure and a wild animal. Sensier suggests that while his colleagues jeered and tormented him, Millet was either resilient and stoic or enraged, retaliating by instinct not reason. This behavioral contrast not only highlights Millet’s alien status with the urban world, but also initiates Sensier’s argument that Millet felt dislocated and uninspired by the urban pace and artificial environment. According to him, Millet’s artistic career did

⁹⁹ According to Albert Boime, Delaroche’s studio was “the most effective atelier during the period of the July Monarchy” and, consequently, the most competitive. Boime explains that Delaroche, who was a student of Antoine Jean Gros, taught and produced many successful candidates for the Prix-de-Rome. In addition, when he was elected to the nineteenth-century Academy, he was the youngest man ever to receive membership. The Academy intentionally chose Delaroche so that his youth and artistic expertise could help temper the “Classic-Romantic dilemma.” *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 56-57.

¹⁰⁰ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, 53.

not thrive until he returned to the countryside and settled in Barbizon.¹⁰¹ A year later, the artist left the Parisian Academic system after he entered the Prix-de-Rome contest, but lost to an “inferior” submission. According to Sensier, Delaroche confessed, “I find your composition very good, but I must tell you that I especially want Roux appointed; but next year I will use all my influence for you.”¹⁰²

Sensier further implies Millet’s sense of displacement when he describes their first meeting in 1847 at the artist’s home in Paris. He writes that the artist greeted him with “silent kindness.”¹⁰³ According to the biographer, Millet remained timid until Sensier revealed his country roots and complimented his work. At that point, Millet explained his painting philosophy:

Every subject is good, only it must be rendered with strength and clearness. In art, there must be a governing thought expressed eloquently. We must have it in ourselves, and stamp it upon others, just as a medal is stamped. Art is not a pleasure-trip; it is a fight,—a mill that grinds. I am not a philosopher. I don’t want to stop pain, or find a formula which will make me indifferent or a stoic. Pain is, perhaps, that which makes the artist express himself most distinctly.¹⁰⁴

As recorded by Sensier, Millet’s artistic philosophy is reminiscent of his earlier quote in which he fatalistically described work as “immutable destiny” and conscientiousness as his “only path.”¹⁰⁵ Sensier shrouds his description of Millet’s next two years in a spirit of restlessness, dislocation, and distraction. Rather than suggesting that the revolutionary events of 1848 were to blame, Sensier implies it was Millet’s resistance to his own

¹⁰¹ In a letter to Sensier, Millet draws on mythology to explain his inspiration: “Strength departs without constant relation with nature, and as example the fable of Antaeus could be used, whose powers diminished when his foot did not touch the ground, and, on the contrary, took new vigor every time he touched it... Show that, for the same reason,—the abandoning of nature,—art becomes more and more weakened” (180).

¹⁰² Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, 56.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

“immutable destiny” of living in the countryside. Almost as an after-thought, Sensier states, “Then came the insurrection of June. Millet, again overtaken by poverty, was painting a midwife’s sign when the first guns were fired. The midwife carried off her sign, and left the artist thirty francs as pay.”¹⁰⁶ Three paragraphs pass before Sensier relates, almost casually, Millet’s participation in the February Revolution. He writes, “Like every other Parisian, Millet was armed with a gun during the Revolution, and had to take his place in the defense of the Assembly and the taking of the barricades of the Rochechouart quarter, where he saw the chief of the insurgents fall.”¹⁰⁷ Other than as social duty, Sensier provides no other motive for the peasant painter to have fought. Again, this correlates with Thomas’s explanation of the nineteenth-century biographical model:

The [artist], meanwhile, appears as a coherent and distinct individual whose coherent and distinct work derives from individual experience and genius, free of environmental influences...the historical background...is utterly absent in the biography. Instead, [the author] repeats the principal features of most nineteenth-century French artist biographies...he ties artistic quality to spiritual greatness.¹⁰⁸

Millet’s “spiritual greatness” is unveiled at the climactic moment of Millet’s biography, which is not a Salon exhibition or even a particular canvas, but his return to the countryside, that wellspring, at least according to Sensier, of his creativity. In 1849 Millet and his family, along with an artist friend, Charles Jacque, moved to Barbizon. Sensier describes the artists’ arrival:

The majesty of the old woods, the virginity of the rocks and underbrush, the broken boulders and green pastures, intoxicated them with beauty and odors. They could not think of leaving such enchantment. Millet found his dream lying before him. He touched his own sphere; he felt the blood of his family in his veins; he became again a peasant.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 77.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Thomas, “Instituting Genius,” 264.

Sensier's language, including "old woods" and "virginity of the rocks," connotes his perception of the timelessness and eternity of the countryside. The phrases "own sphere" and "blood of his family," however, connote both the dual-world perception of the myth (city versus countryside), while also evoking Sensier's earlier Salon quote in which he described the peasantry as a race. Millet's arrival in Barbizon becomes more than his return to the rural world, but is described as a chemical and biological reconnection, as if the peasant has a genetic bond to Nature. Millet's exuberance at being in the countryside seems matched by Sensier's own relief to have the peasant returned to his "own sphere."

Within the rural context, Sensier argues that the "peasant painter" worked naturally and painted those who worked "virtuously." Natural order was Sensier's primary concern, and the peasantry's stationary position at the societal base determined and preserved it. His reactionary perception of the peasantry as a fatalistic "race" attracted him to Millet and to his art. By affirming values from the feudalistic past, Sensier sold to the bourgeois not only Millet's art, but a more stable (and conservative) myth. While the conservative bourgeois myth ideologically contained the peasant, Sensier's social vision exhumes and venerates the French serf and ascribes to him fatalistic contentment. And yet, paradoxically, while Millet's peasant pacified Sensier's anxieties of modernism, the Socialist critic Sabatier-Unger declared *The Sower* to be the "modern *Demos*."¹¹⁰ During Millet's career, both Sensier and the Socialists battled over property rights to Millet's fatalism. However by 1890, Millet was perceived as the moralistic "peasant painter." Neil McWilliam argues that Sensier's biography was strategic as it "neutralized disquiet

¹⁰⁹ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, 82.

¹¹⁰ F. Sabatier-Unger, "Salon de 1851," *La Démocratie pacifique*, quoted in Herbert, "Millet Reconsidered," 34.

over the political intent behind the artist's work, creating a complex psychological image of the peasant painter which stressed his stoical reverence for suffering rather than any aggressive desire for change."¹¹¹

The biography did serve to depoliticize Millet until 1973, when T. J. Clark offered a new political reading—one which considered Millet's canvases within the culture in which they were produced, rather than as the isolated and self-contained products of genius. In his reconstruction of Millet's artistic conditions, Clark particularly emphasizes the forest of Barbizon. In 1850 Millet wrote to Sensier: "The gayest thing I know is the calm, the silence, which is so sweet, either in the forest or in the cultivated land—whether the land be good for culture or not. You will admit that it is always very dreamy, and a sad dream, though often very delicious."¹¹² Yet Clark argues that the forest was neither "sweet" nor "silent" during Millet's career. Instead, he writes, "In the Ile de France, the center of agitation in 1848 was not the open farmland but the woods...Barbizon, where plain met forest fits that description precisely. One thing is certain: in the middle years of the nineteenth century the forest was no place to go looking for an idyll."¹¹³ Thus, Sensier and Clark held oppositional views of the Barbizon forest, interpretations that parallels their readings of the artist. For Sensier, the forest represented an untainted setting of calm refuge for the peasant painter, while for Clark it was the stage for violence, a trait which Millet included in the faces of his laborers, attracting the critical attention of the public.

¹¹¹ McWilliam, "Mythologising Millet," 438.

¹¹² Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, 93.

¹¹³ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 79.

Chapter Two: The Revolutionary's Artist

According to the critics of Sensier, one of his greatest faults as Millet's biographer was his naiveté. Millet's peasant roots, his exodus from Paris to the village of Barbizon in 1849, and his canvases of agricultural labor had inspired Sensier's sentimental interpretation of Millet's life's work. Yet while Sensier considered Millet's art as a form of Romantic expression, other art commentators during the mid-nineteenth century argued that Millet's paintings were not merely images of the rural idyll, but depictions of the oppressed peasant and a conceptualization of socialism. As noted in Chapter One, Sensier's biography played a significant role in stemming this perception of the artist until the late twentieth century. The critic associated with reviving the politicized reading of Millet is T. J. Clark, one of the most significant Marxist art historians of the post-1945 period. In *The Absolute Bourgeois*, Clark asserts, "In the late 1850s Millet took on Courbet's mantle. He was the Socialist trouble-maker, however, much he protested the contrary...in the course of a decade, Millet's subject-matter became dangerous, the one bone left in the gullet of the Empire, the one class [workers of the forest] not to get its pickings from the economic boom."¹ Clark rejects Sensier's "sentimental" description of Millet's art, and suggests that it was, rather, "often more political than it looks at first sight."² He argues that the social and political relevance of Millet's subject matter enabled his paintings to challenge prevailing ideas and have an "effective" or active function within the historical process of the Second Republic. Through an analysis of Clark's methodology and his reading of Millet's paintings, this chapter aims to explain

¹ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 81.

² *Ibid.*, 178.

how the artist's canvases lent themselves to the socialist interpretation that Sensier and other nineteenth-century French Republicans feared.

In 1973 Clark published his companion volumes, *Image of the People* and *The Absolute Bourgeois*. Both books cover the period from the 1848 February Revolution to Louis Napoleon's *coup d'etat* in 1851, focusing on those whom Clark deems "four of the greatest artists of the mid nineteenth century." The former and better-known of the two studies extensively charts the society and art of Courbet, while the latter discusses the careers of Millet, Daumier, and the poet Baudelaire. The books jointly propose that there are specific historical moments when art can be political, and the Second Republic was an example.³ In his search for a revolutionary republican art, Clark proposes that these four artists created paintings that operated in a way to "effect" social change. Clark's analysis of the social and historical conditions in which their art was produced is called the "social history of art." While the books can be read separately, he intended them to be parts of one unified study.⁴ Consequently, this chapter will focus mainly on the individual essay on Millet in *The Absolute Bourgeois*, but it will also refer to the didactic first chapter of *Image of the People*, which is an explanation of Clark's methodology.

In his introductory chapter of *Image of the People*, entitled "On the Social History of Art," Clark explains that his research "tries to reconstruct the conditions in which art was, for a time, a disputed, even an effective, part of the historical process."⁵ Clark's analysis of mid-nineteenth-century State patronage and Salon criticism along with the political

³ Ibid., 7.

⁴ *Image of the People* is based on Clark's doctoral dissertation completed at the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, and *The Absolute Bourgeois* is the companion volume, which was an extension of his research on art production during the Second Republic.

⁵ Clark, *Image of the People*, 10.

events and revolutionary ideology convinces him that there was an inescapable intersection of art and politics during the Second Republic. He argues that the period from 1848 to 1851 was:

...a time when art and politics could not escape each other. For a while, in the mid-nineteenth century, the State, the public and the critics agreed that art had a political sense and intention. And painting was encouraged, repressed, hated and feared on that assumption.⁶

It was at this specific moment in French history, Clark asserts, that this intersection enabled art to have an unusual role, an “alien power,” within the historical process.⁷ He proposes that art had an “effective” role, which can only be understood within the social conditions where it was created.⁸ Clark maintains:

What I want to explain are the connecting links between artistic form, the available systems of visual representation, the current theories of art, other ideologies, social classes, and more general historical structures and processes...If the social history of art has a specific field of study, it is exactly this—the processes of conversion and relation, which so much art history takes for granted.⁹

Clark’s study of French social structure and its relation to art and artist cause him to argue that the truly political and effective art was not the result of State patronage, but the work of “private” artists such as Millet, Daumier, Baudelaire, and Courbet. He asserts that “their art is more political than is commonly said, and less revolutionary.”¹⁰ Clark uses the word “private” to mean the outdated identity of each of the artists (for Millet, it was his peasant heritage, and for Courbet, it was his Bohemian image). They either held or assumed this identity, which subsequently, gave them a disconnection and social

⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁹ Ibid., 12.

¹⁰ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 178.

aloofness from any one class or set of values.¹¹ Thus, their works were produced “in retreat or obscurity, designed for a very different kind of patron,” or in other words, the State did not commission the art, that was the “art of revolution.”¹² Clark contends that while the privacy of each artist was unique, each of their lives naturally, but decisively, intersected with the social and political realities of the Second Republic and influenced the art they made. Hence, the art of revolution was “quirky and unexpected, comic or disillusioned; its strategies are indirect, almost sly...they are accurate, but they are not well-meaning.”¹³

Clark’s conclusions regarding the “artists that matter” have a two-fold effect. First, by establishing a criterion for a revolutionary art, Clark necessarily rejects two contemporary political forms of art, state art and propaganda, as being truly “effective.” In the second chapter of *The Absolute Bourgeois*, entitled “The Art of the Republic,” Clark narrates the Provisional Government’s official recognition of art’s potential as a political tool, citing its repeated aesthetic efforts to create an art that conveyed the nature of the fledgling government.¹⁴ Yet despite its endeavors, from decorated arches to a government-sponsored contest for artists to contribute a composition that “united in a single person

¹¹ Ibid., 71.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ In an article entitled “Art, Labour and Mass Democracy: Debates on the Status of the Artist in France Around 1848,” Neil McWilliam echoes Clark’s assessment of the Provisional Government’s acknowledgement that art had the potential to be a powerful tool in engaging the mass public. Like Clark, he concludes that the arts policy under the Second Republic was ineffective in establishing a republican ideology. McWilliam’s essay and subsequent book, *Dreams of Happiness* (1988), however, highlight the leftist origin (Saint-Simonians) of the idea of “art as a dynamic social catalyst.” Ironically, despite the arrival of republican democracy, leftist ideologues held art in such an esteemed societal position, the republican officials sought to centralize cultural policy even more than the previous Academic tradition had. He writes, “In this crucial respect, the state distinguished art from all other forms of labour. Rather than merely producing commodities, artists had the potential to fashion ideology and thus help to consolidate radical social transformation. If such power was to be harnessed in the interest of republican democracy, then the cultural agenda had to be set by those responsible for the nation’s political future.” *Art History* 64 (1988): 84.

Liberty, Equality and Fraternity,” Clark concludes, “State art was a failure.” He continues, “It failed to find a form for the revolution, it failed to decide on a style for public statement, it never escaped from a stifling tradition.”¹⁵ Clark also ignores the painters who were deliberately political, such as Adolphe Leleux and Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier, calling them “second-rate” since they “try to apply an ideology—apply it like a set of instructions, or an undercoat of paint.”¹⁶ Conversely, Millet and the others “come to the facts of politics sideways, unexpectedly, taking themselves by surprise.”¹⁷

The second effect is Clark’s reinterpretation of aesthetic “realism.” Clark argues that the art of these painters was “real;” he does not, however, use the term to connote the artist’s depiction of society as truthful or as a “slice of life.” Instead, he defines “real” art as a composition that challenges and critiques a specific society’s ideology (its prevailing conventions and conditions). In this sense, realism has more to do with the contemporary reaction to the art than with the aesthetic components of the work. But the only way that an art historian can gauge a work’s realism, Clark argues, is by recreating the work’s materiality (the medium and prevailing academic tradition and conventions) and the historic conditions in which it was produced. When discussing modern art (art from the last two hundred years), Clark relates a work’s realism to its revolutionary (or “effective”) potential. During the Second Republic, State art was incapable of realism because it was weighed down by the academic tradition and an incoherent vision of the new government. In other word, it was unable to challenge the ideology of the day.

¹⁵ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 64, 71.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Clark's emphasis on reconstructing the immediate artistic conditions is distinctively Marxist. He establishes concrete limits on his research (from 1848 to 1851) because he is committed to Karl Marx's historical focus on specific moments or "conjunctures." In his introduction to the *Grundrisse*, Marx argued for the necessity of associating art with the culture that produced it. In other words, he applied historical materialism to art. He writes:

Let us take for instance the relation of Greek art, and that of Shakespeare's time, to our own. It is a well-known fact that Greek mythology was not only the arsenal of Greek art, but also the very ground from which it had sprung. Is the view of nature and of social relations which shaped Greek imagination and Greek art possible in the age of automatic machinery and railways and locomotives and electric telegraphs? Where does Vulcan come in as against Roberts & Co? Jupiter, as against the lightning conductor? and Hermes, as against the *Crédit Mobilier*?¹⁸

Likewise, Clark argues that only within this complex framework of "connecting links" and "conditions" can the meaning of an artwork become more lucid. Specificity enables the scholar to examine the relations between artists, art, institutions, conventions, and the wider context of politics and history.¹⁹

Clark's emphasis on the specific social environment of economic forces surrounding an artwork leads to a second Marxist principle, which is the understanding of art as a product of its immediate creative conditions. Marx asserted that art should be studied in terms of the culture that produced it because art was the result of its socio-economic dynamics. Society, according to Marx, is divided between the forces of production (also referred to as the "base" or "foundation") and a social consciousness known as the

¹⁸ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford University Press, 1977), 359.

¹⁹ This call to Marxist art historians is in response to Arnold Hauser's "epochal history" in his four-volume work *The Social History of Art* (1951). Jonathan Harris, "T. J. Clark," *Key Writers on Art: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Chris Murray (New York: Routledge, 2003), 71.

“superstructure.” The latter consists of the social relations such as legal and political arrangements, which determine the “higher culture” (philosophy, poetry, morality, religion, and art). Hence, the production of art relies on its direct context with society, and art is not separate, but a part of society and the economic process.²⁰ Marx describes this relationship in his preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*, writing:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.²¹

As the economic base “conditions” the “social consciousness” (or ideological sphere), the forces of production influence how a society thinks about itself.²² Accordingly, those who own the economic base also own the ideology. Marx asserts this principle of the base-superstructure model and the creation of a consciousness in other writings as well.²³ Since

²⁰ This is the primary reason Marx objected to the nineteenth-century notion of “art for art’s sake” and formalism, arguing that neither approach acknowledged the social, economic, and political factors in the creation and sale of art.

²¹ Marx, *Selected Writings*, 389.

²² Jeffrey Reiman, “Moral Philosophy: The Critique of Capitalism and the Problem of Ideology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Marx*, ed. Terrell Carver (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 158-9.

²³ In their initial treatise on ideology, *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels explain, “The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour...Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc.—real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process” (Marx, *Selected Writings*, 176). Later in the same work, they explicitly assert the inevitable nature of the dominant class to influence and dominate the superstructure, declaring, “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby,

art is understood as the product, Marx considered the artist (as the producer of art) to be a member of the working class (the proletariat). He believed the ruling class (the bourgeoisie) exploited the artist by commissioning, owning, and using the art for capitalist profit, thus reducing the art to a commodity.

Yet while the social history of art reconsiders the basic elements of art and the context of its production, it is also interested in the “work” that the art may have done on that environment, which leads to Clark’s notion of the *public* and its interaction with the artist.²⁴ In the 1999 preface of *Image of the People*, Clark writes, “I have spent a lot of time since 1970 trying to describe pictures more convincingly, and attempting a fiercer and more complete dialectic between description and history.”²⁵ One of the primary ways Clark has evaluated the political and aesthetic context of the period is through his extensive use of documented responses of the contemporary critics. What interests Clark most is not so much what the critics said, but what they did not say. These silent gaps constitute what Clark identifies as the *public*, which he differentiates from the audience. While the latter concerns those who saw the completed painting, Clark intends the *public* to mean the unconscious values of the day.²⁶ He claims that both the critic and the artist respond to the public, yet even within this interaction, the public remains elusive.²⁷ Clark writes:

[The critic’s reaction] makes up a complex dialogue—between artist and critic, between critic and critic, between critic and public (sometimes that public makes an appearance, in imaginary form, within the criticism itself; for the most part it is an

generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it” (Marx, *Selected Writings*, 236).

²⁴ Harris, “T. J. Clark,” 71.

²⁵ Clark, *Image of the People*, 6.

²⁶ Colin Mercer, “Public Subjects and Subject Publics,” *Social History* 9 (1984): 35-36.

²⁷ Keith P. F. Moxey, “Semiotics and the Social History of Art,” *New Literary History* 22 (1991): 993.

implied presence, a shadow, an occlusion; it is what critic and artist, in their civilized and hypocritical discourse, agree to leave out—but without success).²⁸

Clark further describes the public with a metaphor from psychoanalytic theory. In this analogy he relates the “discarded theories” (or the other art methodologies) to cognitive psychology, which approaches a patient by listening to his words, believing the statements as real, and then offering a diagnosis based on rationalism. Similarly, those who subscribe to the “discarded theories” approach the critics’ texts, accepting them as the contemporary sentiments on a work. The Freudian analyst, on the other hand, listens to the patient but focuses instead on repeated patterns of irrelevant information because he believes unrelated additives point to the unconscious, where the problem is thought to exist. While the cognitive psychologist emphasizes the patient’s reason, the analyst accentuates the patient’s unconscious. Clark proposes that the social history of art is like the analyst, listening for the “irrelevant” information within the critics’ text, ultimately providing him with a clearer sense of the public and a “fiercer and more complete dialectic between description and history.” Clark writes:

The unconscious is nothing but its conscious representations, its closure in the faults, silences and caesuras of normal discourse. In the same way, the public is nothing but the *private* representations that are made of it, in this case in the discourse of the critic. Like the analyst listening to his patient, what interests us, if we want to discover the meaning of this mass of criticism, are the points at which the rational monotone of the critic breaks, fails, falters; we are interested in the phenomena of obsessive repetition, repeated irrelevance, anger suddenly discharged—the points where the criticism is incomprehensible are the keys to its comprehension. The public, like the unconscious, is present only where it ceases; yet it determines the structure of private discourse; it is the key to what cannot be said, and no subject is more important.²⁹

From his reading of the mid-nineteenth-century art criticism, Clark concludes that the ambiguous identity of the People during the Second Republic was a primary component of

²⁸ Clark, *Image of the People*, 11.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

the public, which in turn affected both the critic and the artist. Clark explains that after the 1848 February uprising and the advent of universal suffrage, the bourgeois wondered, “Were the People savages or heroes?”³⁰ He states:

The People was everyone except king and aristocracy; it was the Third Estate to which the bourgeois himself belonged. But the People was also something quite different from this; it was the mass of men whom poverty had deprived of true human status, the mass outside the body politic, the class whom the bourgeois knew as his enemy and opposite.³¹

Clark describes the general attitude shift of the bourgeoisie during the mid-nineteenth century from a romantic notion of the body politic to a fearful notion of the masses.

During the February uprising, the bourgeoisie had initially allied with the artisan and mechanic on the barricades, and the April vote and conservative victory seemed to satisfy bourgeois anxieties of universal male suffrage. Yet after the Provisional Government abolished the National Workshops and the subsequent June Days occurred, the bourgeoisie shifted in its posture toward the laborers, and the alliance collapsed.³²

Central to the class tension was bourgeois anxiety over the statistical power of the illiterate peasant vote, which was capable of swinging French society to the Right or the Left. The landslide election of Louis-Napoleon as the first president of the Republic in December 1848 proved their fear to be well-founded. Clark explains, “At the time, no one knew what that victory signified...But one thing was certain. The peasants had disobeyed their masters, had voted against the Republic, and had arrived as a political force.”³³

From 1849 until 1851, both the Right and the Left recognized the power of the peasant

³⁰ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 11.

³¹ Ibid.

³² In *The Class Struggles in France*, Marx explains the inevitability of the failed alliance as, “It could not be anything but a compromise between the different classes which together had overturned the July throne, but whose interests were mutually antagonistic” (*Selected Writings*, 290).

³³ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 15.

voice and tried to woo them to their party's ticket. Clark describes the "battle for peasant allegiance:"

It was a struggle against almost total ignorance, and for that reason its results were unpredictable. During these three years, the peasantry were inert and volatile at the same time. In certain times and places they stood like a rock against the efforts of Left and Right; in others, they changed direction almost overnight. . . . They were men who could not read, whose politics consisted of 1789 and reminiscences of Napoleon's army. They were tinder, waiting to be struck—tinder which might flash for a moment, or burn. But like it or not, they were the masters now.³⁴

In 1851 the conservative economist Adolphe Blanqui wrote, "The new fact in the present situation is the political arrival of this rural population, who are called to set a great weight in the scales of our destinies."³⁵ Thus, the public consisted of both a general anxiety over the political instability of the republic and bourgeois social fear of the masses, something Agulhon calls "a fascination with horror and excess."³⁶ This latter component of the unconscious will be further discussed in relation to Millet's interaction with the Parisian suburbs, or *banlieue*.

Clark contends that the "shadowy presence" of the public affected the critic, but also the artist. Millet encountered the public through his peasant status and his move to rural Barbizon. This interaction was a significant factor in his work's political realism.³⁷ Clark states:

The social history of art sets out to discover the general nature of the structures that [the artist] encounters willy-nilly; but it also wants to locate the specific conditions of one such meeting. How, in a particular case, a content of experience becomes a form, an event becomes an image, boredom becomes its representation, despair becomes

³⁴ Clark, *Image of the People*, 87-8.

³⁵ Cited by Clark, *Image of the People*, 88.

³⁶ Agulon, *The Republican Experiment*, 95.

³⁷ Clark's notion of the artist's interaction with the public is similar to Walter Benjamin's description of Baudelaire's "shock experience" with modernity. Benjamin refers to it as the "jostle of the crowd." Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 172-6.

spleen: these are the problems.³⁸

Yet the identity or constitution of the public was indefinable, and Clark avoids a precise assessment. He writes:

I want to put back ambiguity into that relation [of artist and public]: to stop thinking in terms of the public as an identifiable ‘thing’ whose needs the artist notes, satisfies, or rejects. The public is a prescience or a phantasy within the work and within the process of its production. It is something the artists himself invents in his solitude—though often in spite of himself, and never quite as he would wish.³⁹

In recreating the conditions of Millet’s artistic production, Clark is primarily interested in his interaction with the public and his representation of it. Within this type of inquiry, Clark suggests that one can “understand the strength of mid-nineteenth-century art and the desperation of what followed.” He writes, “For the artist, inventing, affronting, satisfying, defying his public is an integral part of the act of creation.”⁴⁰

While the public influenced Millet’s art, his art, in turn, influenced the public. Clark argues that during the Second Republic, art and politics converged at the point of ideology. He writes, “A work of art may have ideology (in other words, those ideas, images, and values which are generally accepted, dominant) as its material, but it *works* that material; it gives it a new form and at certain moments that new form is in itself a subversion of ideology.”⁴¹ In other words, the root of a work’s dynamic effect on history is its ability to be critical of the unconscious values. While art is a product of its immediate social setting, Clark asserts, it also has its own ideology, thus enabling it to be independent and critical of its historic environment. Clark explains:

Art is autonomous in relation to other historical events and processes, though the

³⁸ Clark, *Image of the People*, 13.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

grounds of that autonomy alter. It is true that experience of any kind is given form and acquires meaning—in thought, language, line, colour—through structures which we do not choose freely, which are to an extent imposed upon us... Nevertheless, there is a difference between the artist's contact with aesthetic tradition and his contact with the artistic world and its aesthetic ideologies. Without the first contact there is no art; but when the second contact is deliberately attenuated or bypassed, there is often art at its greatest.⁴²

Hence, Clark's understanding of art is both as a product and as having an immanent aesthetic value.⁴³ Keith Moxey summarizes Clark's argument:

Art is thus defined as something quite distinct from an important aspect of the social formation from which it is derived. Art may be bathed in the values of the class that is responsible for its creation yet instead of being enmeshed in the transactions that constitute social life, it manages to escape those circumstances in order to become an active agent which can 'work' or manipulate the class values with which it is associated.⁴⁴

Only within the context of the work's immediate relations can it become critical (or autonomous) and "effect" social change.⁴⁵ Clark states, "In certain circumstances, works of art can attack, dislocate, even subvert an ideology. And sometimes, rarely, that dislocation has some political significance."⁴⁶ When this happens, Clark asserts, it is "often art at its greatest."⁴⁷ It was in this context of political uncertainty and social fear in the Second Republic that Millet created his paintings of peasants. In this next section, this chapter will explore Clark's explanation of how Millet was one of the "artists that matters"—how Millet encountered the public as a peasant, the public's influence on his

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ This understanding of art is derived from the Althusserian school of Marxist thought. In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970), Louis Althusser revised Marx's economic model, and "theorized the relative autonomy" of the superstructure. Hence, this elevates social practices (such as art and literature) to a productive, rather than a reflective, role in the formation of ideology.

⁴⁴ Moxey, "Semiotics and the Social History of Art," 986.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Harris, *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 73.

⁴⁶ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 180.

⁴⁷ In the 1999 preface of *The Absolute Bourgeois*, Clark qualifies his idea of "great" art. He writes, "I do not mean that the test of art, even in 1848-51, is its ability to 'respond' to political events, or its choosing the right side in political struggles. There are occasions, and I think the Second Republic was one of them, when the facts of politics impinge on the realm of art, and invade the sphere of the aesthetic which individual bourgeois artists work to preserve" (7).

private production of art, and the subsequent interaction between his canvases and the unconscious values of the day.

Clark introduces Millet through his subject matter of labor. Ordinary peasant chores occupied his canvases, such as *Woman Carding Wool*, *Men and Women Trussing Hay*, *The Winnower*, *Haymakers Resting*, *The Sower*, and *The Gleaners*. On their own, paintings of laboring peasants were not revolutionary. During a historical moment like the Second Republic, however, when the political power of the peasants was great and the national fate was questionable, the images became controversial. Viewing Millet's paintings within this specific context is what Clark refers to as putting "back the doubt into revolution...a sense that everything was at risk."⁴⁸ The "effective" quality of Millet's art was the timing of the form of the subject matter, which granted him "sideways" access to the political ideology.

Clark claims that over the course of Millet's career there was a common element in his paintings, which was his representation of labor. Rather than appearing as a progressive act, work seems as an endless cycle of inconsequential motions. Over time these trained actions became automatic, at times robotic, affecting the worker's inner psyche by eclipsing the individual's temperament. The laborer loses his identity and essentially becomes an appendage to the task. In this explanation, Clark relies on Marx's idea of Alienated Labor. Marx writes:

The object that labour produces, its product, confronts it as an alien being, as a power independent of the producer. The product of labour is labour that has solidified itself into an object, made itself into a thing, that objectification of labour. The realization of labour is its objectification. In political economy this realization of labour appears as a loss of reality for the worker, objectification as a loss of the object or slavery to

⁴⁸ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 16.

it, and appropriation as alienation, as externalization.⁴⁹

Clark refers to the idea of alienation as the “privacy of labor.” He states, “They [the painted laborers] do no more than illustrate their tasks, they are created to grasp the hay or wield the pitchfork; they are not so much anonymous as perfunctory.”⁵⁰ The more one works, the more he is de-identified, and eventually becomes isolated and solitary from the respective act of labor. In this equation, the sublime exists within the work itself, while the worker becomes the ordinary and consequently the subordinate. Clark concludes, “[Millet] had to suggest that work was tragic, in the old sense of that word, as well as ordinary.”⁵¹

Searching for the moment when Millet’s representation of labor became “in itself a subversion of ideology,” Clark traces the artist’s career from its early failures to later successes.⁵² He claims that it took years for Millet to find a form for his despairing perception of work. To Clark, *The Sower* [figure 1] submitted to the Salon of 1850-51 was Millet’s first moment of “success,” or, in other words, when his art converged with politics. Until then, Millet’s paintings were a part of history, but were unable to “act” upon it. According to Clark, Millet’s art “failed” to be political during the early part of the Second Republic because it lacked a convincing style for his subject matter. Clark describes Millet during this restless period as one who was “in search of a style.”⁵³ The problem was two-fold. Compositionally, Millet needed a natural setting that enforced the tragic yet ordinary task of labor. Clark writes, “[Millet] wanted a nature which was

⁴⁹ Marx, *Selected Writings*, 78.

⁵⁰ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 72.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵² Clark states, “The problem [of depicting work as both tragic and ordinary] was difficult; that was why Millet sometimes failed” (*ibid.*, 73).

⁵³ *Ibid.*

intimately known and bitterly resented.”⁵⁴ Using one of the artist’s journal entries from 1865, which was a description of the Norman coast, Clark deconstructs Millet’s view of the natural world into three fundamental components, and argues that over time Millet’s paintings effectively balanced all three. In the journal passage, Millet first personifies a cliff, describing it as having “superb physiognomy.” He continues, “. . .it makes one think that it must have been on heights such as these that Prometheus was chained.”⁵⁵ Clark suggests that the primary pictorial component is Millet’s shift of nature from a landscape to a body, even more specifically, a famine victim. Clark explains, “There is first a nature with a physiognomy of its own, with a surface like some worn and naked body, fleshless and emaciated, bones showing, head worn in fantastic shapes.”⁵⁶ Second, Millet includes a laborer, or a “Prometheus figure,” who is daily tortured by his setting, reflecting the fatalism of nature. And finally, the artist indirectly represents the peasants through their village homes, sheep, and fields. Clark states:

These are the transitions—from nature to physiognomy, from landscape to myth, from there to the people of the place. . . . In the Second Republic Millet is in search of a style to enforce these transitions; in search of images of landscape, and ways to place his people against them; and in search of a balance of myth and commonplace.⁵⁷

Millet’s second stylistic issue was reconciling his classical instruction with his subject matter. His training in Cherbourg and in the studio of Paul Delaroche had emphasized the human form and historic landscapes. While the forms, outlines, and shadowing of Michelangelo and Poussin impressed Millet, his loose brushstroke also showed the influence of Delacroix. From 1846 to 1850, Millet tried to reconcile the Classical and the

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Romantic traditions. Clark suggests that Millet's primary difficulty during this period was his application of classicism to the contemporary laborer. He argues that "classical form works best when yoked to the improbable," and Millet wanted to depict real, or very probable, labor.⁵⁸ Consequently, Millet's paintings of 1847 and 1848 still seem "far away from a style to suit and yet ennoble the commonplace, or a means to force home the analogy between the cliff-face and Prometheus."⁵⁹

By 1848, however, Millet began to resolve the stylistic tension in *Hagar and Ishmael in the Desert* [figure 3] (1848-49), which Clark describes as a "definitive success." He continues:

It closes one period in Millet's classicism, just because it abbreviates and simplifies what had gone before, discards the baggage and displays the essentials of a style...there are two figures, each drawn in hard outline against a plain background of sand and sky...the painting works almost entirely by a bleak contrast of figure and ground."⁶⁰

Clark suggests the forms of Hagar and Ishmael are a fusion of David's sketch for *The Death of Bara* and Delacroix's *Massacre at Scios*, but the most powerful pictorial tool is Millet's adeptness in handling space. Since the desert terrain lacks typical instruments to gauge scale, such as trees or landmarks, Ishmael's placement is nebulous, "hovering somewhere between foreground and background." Clark argues:

That [spatial] device is used for a purpose: it makes the void of the desert, and its ambiguous distances, without having to resort to piece-by-piece description...He suggests both space and flatness with complete economy, by putting two figures together, and warping the distance between them. Once that is done, space is inferred from a few clues, a couple of horizon lines; and flatness (lack of 'physiognomy') is enforced by the strip of canvas—the mere distinction—between Ishmael's back and Hagar's thigh. The best use Millet made of classicism was to portray emptiness: that is appropriate. *Hagar* was a full stop. It pared a style down to its essentials, and one

⁵⁸ Ibid., 75.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 76.

could go no further that way.⁶¹

The Provisional Government commissioned *Hagar* for 1,800 francs, a fee that meant “...the State expected a work of some importance: not a Salon showpiece, a *grande machine*, but not certainly, a landscape or a genre study.”⁶² The subject matter was Millet’s choice. In the end, however, Millet collected the money, but never submitted it to the jury. Instead, he promised two other paintings in its place, *Haymakers Resting* (a major work) and *Seated Peasant Girl* (a small panel), but the former never reached the exhibition either. *Haymakers Resting* [figure 4], a painting of four peasants who take a break from their work in the shade of a haystack, is somber in color and gestures. Clark describes the effect of the composition as, “a kind of sullen savagery in the forms, a pastoral turned sour and taciturn.”⁶³ Considering that Millet adopted the same style of *Hagar* in *Haymakers Resting*, but used it on “a different subject, a different world altogether,” Clark suspects that the jury had not rejected the painting, but that Millet had withdrawn it.

Millet’s halt on *Hagar* and possible withdrawal of *Haymakers Resting* leads Clark to reason that Millet’s artistic evolution was not simply based on stylistic problems, but also economic difficulties. From 1845 to 1849, Millet struggled with poverty in Paris, settling for painting signs and saleable nudes. As Millet’s style became increasingly consistent with his perception of labor, Clark believes that Millet compromised aesthetically so as to benefit commercially. He writes, “[Millet] had plenty of reasons to conceal his real direction, to compromise on purpose, and produce what people wanted. He was poor, and

⁶¹ Ibid., 77.

⁶² Ibid., 75.

⁶³ Ibid., 78.

the revolution made him poorer.”⁶⁴ Clark argues that the circumstances surrounding *Haymakers Resting* imply “indecision, almost panic, on the painter’s part.”⁶⁵ Clark explains:

In the course of a month, Millet had abandoned the picture he had been working on as a State commission: he had decided, in spite of his need for sales, not even to show it in the Salon. He had planned instead to show his first large-scale painting of the peasantry, and then for some reason this second plan collapsed. The end of the sequence is well known. Just a week after the Salon opened, he packed his bags and left Paris for Barbizon, taking with him his family and a Republican friend, the engraver Charles Jacques.⁶⁶

Clark’s speculations regarding Millet’s stylistic compromise alludes to another aspect of Marx’s theory of alienation. Not only did Millet paint the alienated worker, but he as an artist also became alienated from his own production. According to Marxist theory, by selling a canvas to or painting for the bourgeois, the artist becomes separated from his art (or labor). When he has to sell his labor power, then the artist becomes a commodity, losing the ability to exercise free will.⁶⁷ Clark’s assertion that Millet was aware of and alarmed by his “definitive success” in recreating his form of labor suggests the artist’s encounter with the public. As a needy painter with a family, Millet anticipated the Salon’s negative response and chose to abandon the paintings, rather than weather the criticism.

To Clark what is central to Millet’s burgeoning new style was its inspiration. Clark argues that while Millet’s move to Barbizon evidenced a new period in his art, Paris inspired the style, not embarrassment or the country air according to the “Sensier legend.” Clark states that his move was a “decisive retreat” from political turmoil, cholera, and

⁶⁴ Ibid., 75.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 76.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Laurie Schneider Adams, *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 59.

urban expenses, but the stylistic change first appeared in *Hagar* and *Haymakers Resting*. The “sullen savagery” and “pastoral turned sour and taciturn” was the foundation of Millet’s new style, and its specific inspiration, Clark asserts, was the outskirts of Paris. He writes, “This is the countryside as Millet saw it: his world defined before Barbizon, painted first on the banks of the Seine, in the industrial suburbs of Paris.”⁶⁸ Clark’s reference to the industrial suburbs is based on a comment that Millet made to Sensier. Sensier explained that while Millet worked on *Haymakers Resting*, he sat uninspired on the banks of the Seine at St. Ouen, writing “I don’t see anything but inhabitants of a suburb; I want a country-woman.”⁶⁹

Considering the historical context, Clark’s conclusion is significant. If Millet’s new style developed on the banks of the Seine, then the peasants of Millet’s paintings from 1848 to 1851 were not rustic people, but rather those who lived in the suburbs of Paris, or the *banlieue*. In the mid-nineteenth century the *banlieue* consisted of an outer ring of homes, factories and fields around Paris, and was one of the locales of the *classes dangereuses*.⁷⁰ In his book entitled *Laboring Classes and Dangerous Classes*, Louis Chevalier describes the *banlieue* with a quote from Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*:

To wander in a reverie, that is, to stroll, is a good way for a philosopher to pass the time; especially in the species of countryside—rather ambiguous, fairly ugly, but queer and having two natures—which surrounds certain large towns, notably Paris. To observe the banlieue is to observe the amphibious. End of the trees, beginning of the roofs; end of the grass, beginning of the paved road; end of the furrows, beginning of the shops; end of the rut, beginning of passion; end of the divine murmur, beginning of the human growl; hence, it is of extraordinary interest. Hence the dreamer’s seemingly aimless walks in these rather unattractive places, forever

⁶⁸ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 78.

⁶⁹ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, 81.

⁷⁰ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 78.

marked by the passer-by with the adjective “sad.”⁷¹

Hugo’s contrasts of the countryside and the suburb demonstrate the apparent environmental and spiritual despondence that came with modern industrialism, the death of nature and the birth of manufacturing. Clark designates the district as the “no man’s land of factories and farmland,” a place sustained by immigrant workers, such as quarrymen, who were “notorious for radical politics and violent unrest.”⁷² Despite Millet’s yearnings for a rustic subject, the *banlieue* workers’ sadness influenced the faces of his peasants. The result was the “sullen savagery” that further enabled him to complete the appendage for his subject of labor.

The idea that Millet’s subjects were workers of the *banlieue* not only contradicts Sensier’s Romantic notion, but again suggests Millet’s encounter with the public. His observance and portrayal of a group of people who were socially frustrated, “sad,” and feared, shifted his art toward the political. Using a description of the Port-Marly laborers by the nineteenth century sociologist T. Châle, Clark accentuates the conservative bourgeois’ abstract notion of the People and fear:

The itinerant workers who come singly and in all seasons of the years are, on the contrary, almost always driven from their homes by their vices, their wrong-doings and misconduct. It is they more than anyone who have introduced in this part of the *banlieue* those deplorable symptoms of degeneracy to which I have drawn attention in the present monograph.⁷³

Clark recognizes T. Châle’s sentiments as an integral part of the bourgeois “fantasy” of the suburban laborer. His emphasis, however, is not on the fantastic quality of the thought,

⁷¹ Louis Chevalier, *Laboring Classes and Dangerous Classes: in Paris during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton University Press, 1973), 106-7.

⁷² Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 78.

⁷³ T. Châle, ‘Debardeur et piocheur de craie de la banlieue de Paris’, *Les Ouvriers des deux mondes*, t. 2, 1858, quoted in Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 78.

but instead on the ubiquitous nature of the fear among the minds of the bourgeois.⁷⁴ Clark notes that while Millet's interaction with the Parisian working class ended with his move to Barbizon, Millet then met the workers from the forest of Fontainebleau, another area of political unrest.⁷⁵

Clark explains that while in 1849, Millet was still a "painter of classical subjects" (because these pictures sold), his art took on a new quality in 1850, which Clark describes as "violent." Through a combination of Millet's more vigorous and open brushwork, one similar to Delacroix's, and a theme of death, "the peculiar terror of the countryside and country people" became apparent in his work.⁷⁶ At this time, Millet produced two versions of *The Sower*, painting the first from 1849 to 1850 [figure 5] and the second in late 1850 [figures 1 and 6].⁷⁷ Millet had painted this subject earlier in 1846 [figure 7], however, it was a smaller panel with muted colors and the sowing figure was an adolescent boy, minor in relation to his surroundings. Clark describes the sowing figure, "his body cramped and his outflung arm painted softly, almost weakly."⁷⁸ His next version, *The Sower* (1849-1850), according to Clark, is "the best picture Millet painted in the period of the Republic" and is typical of Millet at work, shifting between myth and reality. He states, "[Millet] went back to the Bible or to memories of his childhood landscape, took up an old theme and changed it, pushed towards an image of open

⁷⁴ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 78.

⁷⁵ Clark explains that in December 1848, Barbizon had voted for Bonaparte, "but for a Bonapartism of its own devising." The candidate ran on the platform that Napoleon would seize the forests back from the landowners and give them to the people (Ibid., 79).

⁷⁶ Ibid., 82.

⁷⁷ In 1846, Millet sketched his first version of *The Sower*, which depicted a small adolescent boy, viewed from above, sowing seeds across the terrain.

⁷⁸ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 82.

violence and then painted another, more still and more constricted.”⁷⁹ Most audiences assume the main figure in both versions to be the sower of the biblical parable found in Matthew 13: 1-9, which is a story of a man who scatters seed that represents the Truth. Clark, however, disagrees and argues that Millet’s figure is a sower from the apocalyptic parable of Matthew 13: 24-43. According to this parable, a man (who represents the Son of God) sows wheat, but while everyone is asleep, another man (who represents the devil) comes and sows weeds among the wheat. At the harvest, the wheat (or the righteous) inherit the Kingdom of God, while the weeds are cast into Hell. In light of this parable, Clark believes the main figure to represent the devil sowing, which harkens back to theme of violence.

In the first version, Millet depicts a monumental peasant figure filling the entire canvas with his physical form. Clark writes, “Here the Sower dominates the picture space, head and shoulders breaking the skyline, the legs splayed further apart and the body leaning backwards; the throwing shoulder braced upwards, and the arm now definite, foreshortened with a clenched fist, sharply painted.”⁸⁰ Despite the depiction of a commonplace rural task, Millet broke from the tradition of Brueghel and other peasant painters by adorning the peasant with Michelangelesque dignity.

In late 1850 (probably October or November), Millet painted another version of the subject, which appeared at the Salon of 1850-51. Again, Clark questions Millet’s decision. Technically and compositionally, the second *Sower* was inferior. It was less defined with a hastier and thicker brushstroke (*impasto*) and the figure appears static. Amid the chiaroscuro, the Sower’s face is barely visible, and the figure is slightly lower on the

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 82, 93.

horizon. Clark writes, “The man stands more toward the centre of the canvas, moving neither forward nor back...”⁸¹ And rather than thrusting his “sowing” arm near the view’s space, he appears to drag it behind him, appearing “cramped and automatic.”⁸²

The only known record concerning Millet’s reason for submitting the later version is a conversation that Sensier claimed to have had with the artist. Sensier explained that Millet disliked the proximity of the second sower’s right hand to the frame. He claims, “The first “Sower” (1850) was executed with fury, but having reached the end of his work, Millet found, like Michael Angelo with his statues, that the stuff was insufficient, the canvas was too short.”⁸³ Unconvinced, Clark asks, “But is the hand that close to the edge? And why was the picture brought to a conclusion if the fault was so obvious? Why, later was it sold?”⁸⁴ He continues:

Putting the two versions side by side, we can see that Millet moved back towards the image of 1846: he tried to contain the energy, the continuous contours, of the painting he had just done, and reinstate something of the first panel’s awkwardness. The figure is less sculptural, and the pose becomes once again more constricted, difficult. The shoulder no longer juts upward, the lower, scattering the grain in a smaller arc, and the back leg no longer kicks into the earth with such force. All these changes are minor ones, but together they change the weight of the image.⁸⁵

Clark also notes that the minor changes altered the appearance of labor. Rather than the first Sower, who swiftly and gracefully runs through the fields with his seed bag hugging his body, the second Sower appears weighed down by the sack, and the activity appears cumbersome. Clark comments, “Where in the first picture the parts cohered, the bag of

⁸¹ Ibid., 93.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, 89.

⁸⁴ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 93.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

grain seeming to join in the forward movement, now they are heavy, separate, painted in a flatter and more abbreviated way.”⁸⁶

Clark offers two possible reasons for Millet’s decision. The first was the artist’s fear of the critics. He suggests that Millet altered his painting to present a less threatening peasant image to the Salon audience and to ensure future government and private commissions. Clark writes, “Millet needed both, and he was well aware of the State’s and the market’s sensibility.”⁸⁷ Yet, Clark’s second explanation is more consistent with his overall argument concerning Millet’s effective art. Contrasting the two paintings, Clark writes that the second Sower “combines weakness with the shadow of assertion: it does not operate on the world.”⁸⁸ This last phrase highlights the overall inconsequential and insubstantial effect the figure has on nature. Millet’s first Sower was dominant and dynamic, thrusting across the canvas. Such a productive representation of sowing, however, did not align with Millet’s image of labor.

Millet considered work to be a perpetual task that could, at best, maintain the environment, but never radically alter it. Clark contends that the static quality of the second Sower is more realistic to Millet because the chores of sowing and reaping are endless. Clark states, “...in this second Sower, figure and ground do not answer each other...And the making of *The Sower* seems to have crystallized that notion of work.”⁸⁹ At the end of the chapter, Clark remarks that Millet once told Sensier that his favorite quotation was, “By the sweat of your brow you shall eat your food.”⁹⁰ This statement is

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 94.

⁹⁰ Genesis 3:19.

part of God's curse of Adam. The entire verse reads: "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." Accordingly, Millet's view of work was not shrouded in bitterness or a call for a socio-economic change, but one of divinely appointed justice. Labor was Adam's and Millet's curse.

In light of this argument, Millet deliberately chose to submit a painting that sought to recreate the monotony of labor in its most accurate form, rather than submitting a painting that was, academically-speaking, superior. Hence, his selection demonstrates volition rather than trepidation and a private, rather than a public, art. This is not to say that Millet was indifferent to Salon criticism. In fact his correspondence with Sensier gives evidence that he was sensitive to and even protested socialist affiliations. Yet whatever his intentions were in depicting labor as he chose, Clark argues that *The Sower* entered the political sphere. Millet's representation of the curse challenged the bourgeois' unconscious values and notion of rural society, and the critics took notice.

At the Salon of 1850-51, there were nineteen critics who wrote about Millet's painting, and Clark notes that their reactions were consistent with their political allegiances. Twelve from the Left and Center found his work to be innovative, six from the Right disliked it, and one was moderate. The feature which received the most criticism was Millet's technique, rather than his subject matter. They disapproved of his heavy application of paint and his indecisive outlines. Only one critic (Paul Mantz) appreciated the impasto, while the others considered it to blemish but not ruin the composition.

Whether or not they liked the painting, all of the critics recognized the field worker's savagery, and depending upon their political opinions, the violence was either an

unnecessary characteristic or heroic attribute. One of the hostile critics, named Auguste Desplaces, considered Millet to have “vilified the sower.” He writes, “Why this crudity, why all these black tints and monochromes? Wherever has M. Millet encountered such a vicious-looking labourer, such a dark sky, or such a desolate landscape at seed-time?”⁹¹ In contrast the more moderate critic Albert de la Fizelière saw dignity and spirituality in the peasant. He writes:

Alone, in the middle of bare and newly turned ground, as if he understood the grandeur of his mission...this man who, like a minister of God, holds in his hands the riches of the earth, and with the faith of an apostle throws them to the wind; and then, in the distance, under that cloud, a flock of birds of prey, whose screech is like an irony, a threat.⁹²

Unlike Clark, Fizelière considered the Sower to be the disciple of Truth, rather than the devil sowing weeds.

What intrigues Clark is that neither group of critics considers the violence a fundamental feature of the picture. Some regarded it as a “momentary lapse in taste,” while others noted it, only briefly, focusing more on “the poetry of nature.” Clark writes, “For most critics *The Sower* was a pastoral image, which altered but did not discard the pastoral tradition. Most critics described it in these terms; only the men of far Right and Left were obliged to react to the savagery, and strive for a reading in terms of politics.”⁹³ Clark uses this observation to distinguish Millet from Courbet, who scarcely had an audience that noticed the pastoral in his work because they had immediately skipped to the underlying political message. The conservative critic Paul de Chennevières wrote, “How greatly I prefer his Sower to Courbet’s peasants! And in this great farm-lad,

⁹¹ Auguste Desplaces, salon review in *L’Union*, (January 29, 1851), quoted in Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 94.

⁹² Albert de la Fizelière, salon review in *Le Siècle* (April 15, 1851), quoted in Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 94.

⁹³ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 95.

painted in thick impasto, what beauty, poetry, and grace!”⁹⁴ Expressing a similar sentiment, but from the Left, critic Rocheréry stated, “M. Millet’s picture is certainly painted from life, like M. Courbet’s, but one can sense greater spontaneity and depth in the painter’s impressions, a truer love of country life and country people.”⁹⁵

The critics’ overall gentle response to Millet leaves Clark puzzled. And while he does not simplify it with a single answer, he does attempt to explain it. When Millet exhibited *The Sower*, he submitted an accompanying work entitled *Men and Women Trussing Hay*. Since both involved rural imagery, the pastoral element may have spoken louder than the brutish peasants did. Clark summarizes, “And where the tradition survived, the critics saw the tradition more easily than its transformation.”⁹⁶ Despite his innovative approach to the pastoral, Millet had retained many of the classical rules of the Academy, and their eye focused immediately on the chiaroscuro, perspective, and compositional arrangement. The peasant’s strain and bitterness were an afterthought. In fact, most considered the sower’s expression and posture to be emblematic of Millet’s artistic status—he was a painter full of potential, yet plagued by inaccuracies. In the words of Clark, the critics were “obtuse.” None of them noticed that Millet had used restraint and contained the Sower, and instead had commented on his movement and expression. He continues, “But where there are straws to clutch at—shadows, literal or otherwise, of the great tradition—critics will clutch with the best of them. When Courbet hangs in the next room, even *The Sower* is reassuring.” In other words, Millet’s art still spoke in aesthetic tradition; it had not yet become subversive because the critics “saw the tradition more easily than its

⁹⁴ Paul de Chennevières, *Lettres sur l’art français* (February 1, 1851), quoted in Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 95.

⁹⁵ P. Rochéry, *La Politique nouvelle*, vol. 1, 350-1, quoted in Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 95.

⁹⁶ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 95.

transformation.”⁹⁷ Clark considers both versions of the *Sower* (1849-50 and 1850) to be innovative depictions of the rural life, and thus significant in Millet’s evolution as an artist whose art was revolutionary. Still, as the critics’ reaction demonstrates, the traditional conventions of the paintings obscured their ability to challenge the public. He summarizes Millet’s Salon submissions as “poetic and naïve...because Millet still obeyed most of the rules of their aesthetic.”⁹⁸

By 1851, Millet had finished two canvases, *Going to Work* [figure 8] and *Ruth and Boaz*. Clark asserts that these paintings are examples of the artist using “the trivial to express the sublime: that is the true power.”⁹⁹ Millet sold the former in February, and Clark remarks, “It is a painting which manages, in Millet’s particular way, to be brutal and delicate.”¹⁰⁰ The painting relies on compositional opposites (man and woman, sharp and swollen profiles) and outline, while color was used with “extraordinary sureness.” Clark notes that the artist strikes the perfect balance between the picturesque and “monotonous ugliness.”

Ruth and Boaz was not ready for the Salon of 1852, but was submitted the following year with a different title, *Harvesters Resting* [figure 9]. In the painting, Millet again represents a Biblical reference within a contemporary scene.¹⁰¹ The traditional artistic

⁹⁷ In “Millet Reconsidered,” Robert Herbert describes the overall leftist reception of *The Sower* as an image of the new liberal spirit. He quotes the leftist critic F. Sabatier-Ungher’s remarks from the “Salon of 1851”: “Come, poor laborer, sow your seed, throw out to the soil your fistfuls of grain! The soil is fertile and will bear fruit, but next year as this, you will be poor and you will work by the sweat of your brow, because men have so well arranged things that work is a malediction, which will be the only real pleasure of intelligent beings in a regenerated society. His gesture has a Michelangesque energy and his tone a strange power [...]; he is a Florentine construction [...]. He is the modern *Demos*” (33-34).

⁹⁸ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 96.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 97.

¹⁰¹ The Old Testament story (Ruth 4: 1-22) involves a young Moabite woman named Ruth, who married into a Jewish tribe and, according to custom, went to live with her husband’s family. Shortly after the wedding, Ruth’s husband died, which legally enabled her to return to her own family. Ruth, however, chose to stay

depiction of this story is to represent the moment when a fieldworker introduced Boaz to Ruth; however, Millet chose instead to represent Boaz's introduction of Ruth to the other laborers at the noontime meal.

According to most scholars, including Clark, this composition represents the most important work that Millet painted. He worked on it the longest, he prepared the greatest number of sketches for it, and it won him a second-class medal at the Salon of 1853. Rather than accentuating the spiritual significance of Ruth and Boaz, Millet dresses the couple and the other peasants in nineteenth-century peasant clothing. According to Clark, Millet masters his subversive style through "a move towards the particular, away from the approximate sublime," meaning Millet articulated contrasts, such as man and landscape, line and color, and man and woman.¹⁰² In turn, these oppositions create tension. For example three large golden-brown haystacks serve as a backdrop for the composition, while two-thirds of the foreground encompasses a group of twelve peasants, whom Boaz interrupts from either cooking or lounging against the hay. Most focus their attention on Ruth as Boaz introduces her. She stands to the far left looking at the ground and carrying a bundle of gleaned wheat. Boaz stands between the two parties as the intermediary figure and looks straight ahead at the viewer. Despite the warm earth tones of this canvas, there is a tension in its depiction of social awkwardness. Millet contrasts Ruth's timidity with the crude and clumsy reactions of the other peasants, a few of whom never

with her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi, and travel to Bethlehem, Naomi's homeland. Ruth provided food by gleaning in the field of Naomi's wealthy relative named Boaz, who was a Jew. While gathering food one day, Ruth attracted Boaz's attention and was invited to join the harvesters for a meal. Soon, he heard of Ruth's loyalty to her mother-in-law and diligence, and married her. Boaz and Ruth had a son, Obed, who was in the line of David.

¹⁰² Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 97.

acknowledge her and continue eating, while the others vacuously stare at Ruth and appear resistant to include her.

Within this canvas, Clark argues, Millet reconciled his perception of labor with the “appearance of inevitability.”¹⁰³ Clark refers to a letter Millet wrote in 1863, which discussed the limited socio-economic scope of peasants. Millet described them as “destined to their station in life” and that “it is impossible to imagine they should ever have the idea of being anything except what they are.”¹⁰⁴ Clark insists that whether or not the peasants in the canvas can see the oppression, the viewer at the Salon can. Rather than painting a scene of unquestionable injustice, Millet depicted a Biblical story of a peasant meal interrupted by a newcomer, which suggests “in spite of Millet’s ideology, peasant resentment as well as peasant fatalism.”¹⁰⁵

While Clark’s formal discussion of Millet concludes with *Harvesters Resting* and the end of The Second Republic, he alludes to Millet’s post-1853 career. Clark remarks that toward the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Second Empire, Millet’s subject matter became focused on the peasants and woodsmen of Barbizon, a “dangerous” subject matter, “the one class not to get its pickings from the economic boom.”¹⁰⁶ Titles from this period include: *The Gleaners*, *The Diggers*, *Death and the Woodcutter*, *Women Gathering Faggots*, *Man with a Hoe*, *Killing the Pig*, and *Peasant Woman Grazing her Cow*. As with Millet’s earlier works, the subject matter was rustic and ordinary; yet, considering that the Provincial Government had curtailed gleaning and faggot-gathering rights and the woods were closed to peasants’ pigs and cattle, the images became political

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Letter to Théodore Pelloquet (2 June 1863), quoted in *Nineteenth-Century Theories of Art*, 342.

¹⁰⁵ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 97.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 81.

and social. During this time, many peasants were forced to emigrate to the banlieue or the quarries for work or they struggled to survive in the countryside. As Millet portrayed the labor, he recorded their hopelessness.¹⁰⁷ Clark writes:

[The paintings] are, unexpectedly, a systematic description: picture by picture they indicate the key tasks and situations of this particular society. They are a portrait of a class, and a society, in dissolution. But not, for that reason, without a kind of despairing and aggressive class-consciousness of its own.¹⁰⁸

Clark argues that Millet's paintings grew more unpopular through the Second Empire.

For example, the Universal Exhibition of 1855 rejected both *A Woman Burning Grass* and *A Man Binding Faggots*. When *The Gleaners* [figure 10] hung in the 1857 Salon, a critic wrote that in the background there were “the pikes of the popular risings, and the scaffolds of 1793.”¹⁰⁹ In 1859, the jury rejected *Death and the Woodcutter*; however, Alexandre Dumas publicly defended it: “Millet's woodcutter...is not the peasant of 1660, but the proletarian of 1859.”¹¹⁰ Finally, in 1861 the Baron of Nieuwerkerke, who was the Directeur des Beaux-Arts, “repeats that he does not like your [Millet's] painting (one would think you produced art for ruffians) and [the Baron] carries his ill will as far as to decide that your two figures should be displayed somewhere in the Himalayan heights of the gallery.”¹¹¹ Whether or not Millet's intent was to be a revolutionary, his graphic

¹⁰⁷ In “Constructing the Harvest: Gleaners, Farmers, and Officials in Early Modern France,” Liana Vardi contends that gleaning was not a straightforward issue in the mid-nineteenth century, but included “the nature of communal life, agricultural methods, labor relations within the village, approaches to property, changing perceptions of charity, as well as definitions of criminality and marginality.” Millet's painting *The Gleaners* (1857) initially played on the bourgeoisie's fears of the countryside, but Vardi claims that with the depopulation of the countryside by the late-nineteenth century, Millet's gleaning figures became sentimentalized and “imbued with a nobility, piety, and passivity that struck an overwhelmingly sympathetic chord.” See *The American Historical Review* 98 (1993): 1426.

¹⁰⁸ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 80.

¹⁰⁹ In “Millet Reconsidered,” Herbert notes that critic Paul de Saint-Victor, in *La Presse* described the three gleaning women as “the three Fates of pauperism” (46).

¹¹⁰ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 80.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

documentary of disappearing French rustic customs provoked the public to associate his art with labor, class, and the changing countryside.

Clark argued in 1974 that the method of formalist art history was flawed and in crisis, along with earlier prevailing Marxist accounts of art, such as Arnold Hauser's reductive version of the social history of art. According to Clark, "To escape from this situation...we need *facts*."¹¹² In order to access this information, he claims that art historians must understand how the work of art and ideology relate to one another. In addition, he asks, "What exactly were the conditions and relations of artistic production in a specific case? Just *why* are these particular ideological materials used, and not others? Just what determined this particular encounter of work and ideology?"¹¹³ In his analysis of Millet, Clark does provide facts of the French economic, social, and political events surrounding Millet's art. His examination of the suburbs of Paris and the *banlieu*, which Louis Chevalier called "the proletariat of the woods," and the countryside of Barbizon provide an original understanding of Millet's artistic context and peasant type. Furthermore, Clark asserts that in the 1850's, Millet took on "Courbet's mantle," yet he never contends that the artist tried to be political. Instead, the political force of his art was its "realism," which Clark describes as "an intense, almost at times a lunatic, desire to reinvent the force of the Bible's phrase: 'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.'"¹¹⁴ Central to Clark's description of Millet's "realism" was its ability to disappoint and criticize the conservative bourgeois ideology, which defended the triplet: Religion, the

¹¹² Clark, "The Conditions of Artistic Creation," 561.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 98.

Family, and Property.¹¹⁵ Clark states, “The strength of his art, in any case, came in the tension of the tragic and the ordinary; and the sense of both was something Millet learned, by hard work.”¹¹⁶ Instead of only concerning himself with the details of the artist’s representation and subject, Clark focuses on the “tension” that exists when Millet’s art interacted with the prevailing ideology.

One criticism of Clark is that his analyses, though valuable, are too narrowly focused, and have, in fact, helped to support the value of the canonical approach of traditional art history. The “artists that matter” to Clark are the same ones that “matter” to the formalists. Thus, while his methodology emphasizes the value of Millet’s art in specific historical conjunctures in the mid-nineteenth-century, rather than in the idealist canon, his study of the artist still tends to leave his reader “somewhere in the Louvre.”¹¹⁷ Moreover, British art historian Adrian Rifkin argues that Clark’s historical accounts have put undue emphasis on the aesthetic, rather than widening the territory of his studies to include a broader assortment of cultural artifacts. He argues that Clark’s work is “an exemplary instance of the way in which ‘social art history’ puts particular demands on historical material...these demands produce an eclectic and pragmatic use of evidence on the one hand, and theoretical inconsistency on the other.”¹¹⁸ According to Rifkin, the individual artworks can not sustain the “particular demands” that Clark requires of them, which leads

¹¹⁵ Augulon, *The Republican Experiment*, 97.

¹¹⁶ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 98.

¹¹⁷ In “Left of Center, Against the Grain,” John Hutton quotes the British art historian Adrian Rifkin: “In Tim Clark’s work...the fundamental issues of the reception of works of art and its diverse meanings have been broached. But in one way or another we are always left somewhere in the Louvre...” *Radical History Review* 38 (1987): 69.

¹¹⁸ Adrian Rifkin, “Marx’ Clarkism,” *Art History* 8 (1985): 492. In this essay, Rifkin critiques Clark’s methodology, assumptions, and subject matter in the book under review, *The Painting of Modern Life* (1985), as well as in Clark’s two earlier books (1973).

him to make “speculative generalizations” and to select paintings which reinforces his a priori value judgments.¹¹⁹

Similarly, in the 1990 study entitled *The Spectacle of Nature: Landscape and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth-century France*, the late-British art historian Nicholas Green challenges the confining approach of social art history and, indirectly, Clark.¹²⁰ He writes:

The sticking-point is the retention by art history, even radical art history, of a set of texts designated *art* as the fulcrum for cultural analysis...certain highly wrought and codified objects—whether oil paintings, banners, cathedrals, 1950s furniture or critical writing on art—[which] provide not only the way into research but its touchstone.¹²¹

Green asserts that the inadequacy of Clark’s methodology (and others’) is its orientation to individual artists and their works, which neglects relevant representations of visual and textual culture. In his own inquiry of the French countryside and the urban population’s idealism of nature during the first half of the century, he expands his scope to consider mundane artifacts, such as jokes, country houses, theatrical spectacles, leisure, and tourist guidebooks, as well as paintings and photographs. Green asserts:

Methodologically, the procedure goes like this. We move from the given set of texts (visual or otherwise) outwards to the wider historical structures within which they are seen to be produced and circulated. In doing so, we cast the net much wider than the received wisdom of art history, to draw in the state and its institutions, family patterns, professional groupings, and so on. From there, armed with such knowledge, a number of conclusions can be drawn out about the connections between texts and social relations.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Robert Herbert makes a similar accusation, which I mention in the Conclusion.

¹²⁰ Nicholas Green’s book was based on a doctoral dissertation supervised by Griselda Pollock and Adrian Rifkin.

¹²¹ Nicholas Green, *The Spectacle of Nature: Landscape and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth-Century France* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 3-4.

¹²² Green, *Spectacle of Nature*, 3-4.

His approach, a synthesis of Marxism and post-structuralist ideas (mainly Foucauldian “discourse theory”), ultimately seeks to ‘bend the “spirit” of historical materialism in new directions.’¹²³ Green argues that Marxism’s emphasis on class identity is needed; however, it does not satisfactorily examine issues of gender, sexuality, and regional identity, for which his notion of “discourse” allows. Green’s cultural analysis of nineteenth-century France is valuable both as a critique of Clark’s procedure and in its efforts to widen art history’s field of vision beyond “pictorial codes” and class formation. The shortcomings of Marxist art history which Rifkin and Green discuss are primarily associated with Clark’s brand of economically-focused social history of art, rather than the methodology in general. In Chapter Three, Robert Herbert, also a social historian of art, demonstrates a more inclusive approach to Millet and his response to the nineteenth-century urban-industrial changes.

¹²³ Ibid., 7.

Chapter Three: The Naturalist

In the 1976 exhibition catalogue entitled *Jean Francois Millet*, Robert Herbert argues that Millet was an artist whose fame suffered from both “fabrication” and misunderstanding. He challenged both Sensier’s romanticized myth of the artist’s life, which consoled bourgeois fears, and the politicized interpretation of Millet’s peasant, to which leftist contemporaries of Millet and T. J. Clark adhered. Herbert claims that those treatments of the artist are narrowly based on approximately five percent of Millet’s entire work. He states:

The reputation of an artist frequently interferes with a fresh look at his art, and Millet has suffered from this more than most painters of the 19th century...Historians took their positions on the basis of such selected works, the only ones that were frequently reproduced, so that Millet’s reputation in our century came to rest upon perhaps 50 of nearly 500 oils, and perhaps 100 of his 3,000 drawings, watercolours and pastels.”¹

A broader examination of the artist’s body of work, according to Herbert, defies both readings, revealing that, in fact, Millet “had few hopes in reform, but he was not a reactionary opposed to change.”² Throughout his many writings on Millet, Herbert elaborates on the diverse interpretations of his art, a variety he attributes to a single factor. He contends that the fatalism Millet depicted in laborers has evoked different readings depending on the viewer’s historical perspective and knowledge of the artist’s entire oeuvre. While Sensier sentimentalized Millet’s fatalistic peasants and Clark politicized them, Herbert argues that they embodied Millet’s style of peasant *naturalism*.³ He contends that Millet’s artistic style was an amalgamation of literary references, nostalgia

¹ Robert Herbert, *Jean François-Millet*, exhibition catalogue, 22 January-7 March 1976 (London: Graphic Press Ltd., 1976), 9.

² *Ibid.*, 11.

³ *Naturalism* is a disputed term and conjures several connotations in both Art History and Literature. Herbert uses the term to describe realistically depicted art that is also imbued with the artist’s personal emotion. Further explanation of this definition will follow in the chapter.

for pre-industrial society, and pessimistic observations of human toil. In light of his demographic statistics on mid-nineteenth-century France and biographical knowledge of Millet, this chapter will discuss Herbert's argument that the artist's canvases were both a product of society and a product of the individual.

Like Clark, Herbert calls himself a social historian of art. Holding a Marxist view of class structure and employing detailed historical evidence, Herbert seeks to recreate the conditions surrounding the artist so as to "recover the real Millet" from Sensier's sentimental biography.⁴ In addition to analyzing contemporary Salon criticism, he examines in particular how the mid-nineteenth-century Parisian urban-industrial change affected Millet and his representation of rustic scenes. Herbert writes:

I thought the stuff of ordinary daily life should enter into art history. I realized that nineteenth-century artists were just as involved with the art market, contemporary art reviews, street theater, and everything else that makes up culture, as the artists I saw working around me.⁵

Clark and Herbert are often methodologically associated in their efforts to employ a theoretically-informed yet empirically-grounded Marxist approach to art. Yet when the two scholars' discussions move past the environment surrounding the production of Millet's art to the art itself, their conclusions diverge. The distinction between the two scholars is evident in the initial questions which prompted their respective studies of Millet. In *The Absolute Bourgeois*, Clark wonders whether there was a revolutionary art during the Second Republic, while Herbert asks why Millet depicted rural life amidst modern development. As seen in Chapter Two, Clark maintains the Marxist notion that art can transform history as an agent of social change. During the Second Republic,

⁴ Herbert, *Jean François-Millet*, 9.

⁵ Herbert, *Millet to Leger*, vi.

Clark argues, Millet's art entered the political arena through his heroic depiction of peasants. His study accentuates the ideological effect of Millet's paintings of peasants as they challenged the mid-nineteenth-century *public*. Similarly, Herbert recognizes art as a product of its material conditions, yet he does not hold a Marxist view of art's dynamic role in history. Consequently, Herbert's analysis of Millet's art began with the artist himself, rather than with the Marxist dialectic. He writes:

In order to recover the real Millet, we shall have to look beyond his reputation to the whole range of his art, and to the ways it was received in his own lifetime. To that end, the texts that accompany the individual works in this exhibition [entitled *Jean-François Millet*] treat [the paintings and drawings] in their contemporary contexts, and provide a body of interpretation that attempts to overcome the distortions of the artist's posthumous reputation.⁶

As social historians of art, both Clark and Herbert seek to restructure the contexts surrounding Millet's paintings and to locate the art in a particular time and place in history. Yet, when Clark establishes the context of mid-nineteenth-century France, he describes Millet as participating in a historical act already in motion; whereas Herbert's reconstruction depends upon the artist as a central presence. Herbert is interested in both what is being represented in Millet's art and the identity of the artist. He examines Millet within the broad scope of history and economics, but he is also interested in giving an account of Millet's artistic intent. For example, Herbert emphasizes Millet's melancholic temperament as a component of the artist's projection onto his art. His reading of Millet emphasizes the full, human dimensions of Millet's canvases, and seeks to "avoid another distortion, namely, the 20th century's preference for an art of 'pure form' at the expense of deep personal feelings and the way such feelings were given social and allegorical

⁶ Herbert, *Jean François-Millet*, 9.

meaning.”⁷ Conversely, in *The Absolute Bourgeois*, Clark never mentions Millet’s personality, the psychology behind his artistic decisions, or his “deep personal feelings,” but is instead narrowly focused on the questions of labor, class identity, production, and consumption in relation to Millet’s art. This distinction between Clark’s and Herbert’s analyses of Millet demonstrates the variety within the methodology.

Herbert’s initial interest in Millet’s art began with his recognition that the artist’s drawings disputed the sentimental portrayal that Herbert had “inherited” from his academic training.⁸ He writes:

Instead of seeing an artist who sacrificed form to Christian moralizing, I saw a powerful draftsman, the heir of Rembrandt and Goya...Form preceded social meaning, not the reverse. Structure created meaning, but the meaning resulted from a dialogue with what the artist had seen and felt.⁹

Empirically studying the conditions in which Millet painted, Herbert explains, “My method is the transparent one of juxtaposing documented events and settings, customs, locations, and institutions to the forms and subjects of specific pictures and then make broad deductions.”¹⁰ He states further:

...I did not think that the art historian should begin with major social crises and then seek the art that reveals them. For France from the 1850s to 1880s, economic historians could deal with the rapid expansion of the railroads, seaport traffic, and international trade, but I was looking at paintings of rural villages...I wanted to restore the flesh of real painters and their culture to the bones of style and form.¹¹

While Herbert wrote this in 1970, three years before Clark would publish *The Absolute Bourgeois*, he seems to anticipate Clark’s approach to Millet. As I showed in Chapter Two, Clark’s analysis of the artist began, first, with the “social crises” of the 1848

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Herbert, *Millet to Leger*, vii.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., viii.

¹¹ Ibid., vii.

Revolution and the tumultuous politics of the Second Republic, and, second, with the public's critical response to Millet's art and the way in which the paintings participated within the nexus of socio-political events. Herbert, on the other hand, remained unconvinced that Millet was either a Romantic or a socialist, while he sought to rescue Millet from sentimentalism. Instead, he wondered why the "powerful draftsman" painted rural scenes in light of the urban-industrial revolution.

Herbert observed that Millet was not alone in his depiction of peasants. During the mid-nineteenth century, novelists, song writers, and other painters were increasingly concerned with popular subjects and genre. He writes:

Admitting that there had always been rustic themes in literature, we nonetheless find that on the eve of the 1848 Revolution, the German writers Hebel, Gotthelf, and Auerbach appear in their first translations; their French counterparts, Courbet's friend Max Buchon, Gustave Mathieu, and Pierre Dupont, all come to public attention at the same time. Unlike former writers, these men treat rural life with considerable realism, and with relatively little of the embellishments of Romanticism.¹²

Typically, the writers accompanied their rural subjects with social commentary. The painters, however, with the exception of Gustav Courbet, who was affiliated with the socialists, were generally quieter in their social statements. Yet, despite their silence, Herbert argues that "the pervasiveness of peasant motifs can be demonstrated to be not the political expression of one or of a few artists, but a social and artistic phenomenon of remarkable extent related to the Revolution of 1848 and its aftermath."¹³ He contends that the rural worker was one of the most important subjects because he was "the embodiment of artists' attitudes toward the urban-industrial revolution."¹⁴

¹² Herbert, "City vs. Country," in *Millet to Leger*, 26.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 25.

Central to Herbert's argument are the dramatic demographic changes in Paris during the mid-nineteenth century. In 1790, he states, the Department of the Seine (Paris and its surrounding area) had a population of 725,000, which by 1831 had increased to 735,000. In this period of forty years, the population had increased by 10,000 or 1½%. Yet from 1830 to 1860, Herbert maintains, the population tripled (to 1,954,000). Due to the low birth rate, he attributes the figure almost entirely to the heavy influx of rural peoples to Paris and its suburbs. Overall, from 1858 to 1866, the rural population remained the same size (about 26 million), but the urban population grew from 6,646,000 to 11,595,000.¹⁵

During the Second Empire, amidst the urban demographic changes, Napoleon III and Baron Haussmann launched a building campaign in Paris to accommodate these new numbers. The government employed thousands of rural immigrants, who had been forced to move to the city due to poor harvests, to build 24,000 new buildings. While some of the migrant laborers expected to return eventually to their villages, most did not. This considerable shift of displaced farm workers towards urban centers during the early to mid-nineteenth century was referred to as the “depopulation of the countryside.” While labor was needed in the city, reformers and eventually official efforts sought to prevent the emigration due to its detrimental effect on traditional harvesting and the agricultural economy. For example in 1846, Eugène Bonnemère's book entitled *Les Paysans au XIXe siècle* was the winning submission amongst forty-nine entries for the Academy of Nantes' competition on “The Causes of Emigration from the Countryside

¹⁵ Herbert, “Millet Reconsidered,” 44.

and the Ways of Stopping It.”¹⁶ Two years later, the National Assembly launched an official survey of the emigration issue, and by 1862 there had been fifteen books written on the phenomenon and prevention of urban growth. Herbert writes, “There was, as we see, an assumption that [emigration] was bad and must be halted, and although the need of the city for labor was apparent, many reformers were willing to call a halt to city growth, if necessary, to stem the disruption of country life.”¹⁷

Within this context of urban growth, construction, and emigration, Herbert asserts, there was a simultaneous increase in landscape and genre painting in place of religious or historical subjects. Millet, along with Courbet, practiced this new style, and by 1848 his *Winnower* [figure 11] represented “the new man, ostensibly stripped of religious, mythological, and historical references—actually still present, but transformed.”¹⁸

Describing the *Winnower*, Herbert writes:

... a vigorous standing male shaking his basket, became the embodiment of the spirit of 1848 when it appeared in that year’s Salon, its red kerchief unconsciously echoing the great Revolution of a half-century earlier. Courbet who, like Millet, had exhibited hardly any peasant subjects before 1848, took the figure of the *Winnower* in the following year for his famous *Stonebreakers*, turning him to a three-quarter view and substituting stones for grain... for it is evident that in the laborer and the peasant, both artists found reincarnations of the heroic figures of Renaissance and Baroque art.¹⁹

By comparing Millet’s grain-sifting peasant to Courbet’s stone-breaking toilers, Herbert positions Millet as a potential radical. Yet it is not enough to say that Millet was categorized as a socialist because he painted peasants; after all, Charles Jacque, Constant Troyon, and Jules Breton painted peasants, and they were all acclaimed by conservative critics. The distinction between Millet and the others, according to Herbert, was the

¹⁶ Herbert, “City vs. Country,” 25.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 27.

¹⁹ Ibid.

artist's articulation of fatalism as endless sweat and drudgery, rather than the idealism of nature's gifts to man. Herbert contends that Millet's laborers stylistically challenged traditional portrayals of the common man. Rather than depicting a static and naïve figure in the regional dress of a past era, Millet painted vigorous and titanic peasants in contemporary clothes, resembling the scale and dignity of the heroic figures of Renaissance and Baroque art. After the Revolution of 1848, Millet's prominent natural man associated him with the new era of individualism in both radical politics and aesthetics. In addition, he concentrated his scene of work by depicting a single chore, a method which differed from earlier rustic artists such as Léopold Robert, who sought to portray various aspects of peasant life in a single composition.

At the Salon of 1850-51, the politically moderate critic Taxile Delord compared Millet's *The Sower* [figure 1] with Robert's *Harvesters* [figure 12]:

These two painters, in different degrees and under different climates, have understood and rendered the ideal of the poetry of the countryside from the modern point of view. The one [Robert] sought it in the melancholy and grandeur of old Roman types; the other in the suffering of the race of the Gauls, in the miseries of the rustic proletariat.²⁰

Herbert states that Delord's last phrase was a sentiment typical of the contemporary view of Millet—that he painted fatalistic peasants. He suggests that two primary compositional factors influenced this interpretation. First Millet created a limited world for the peasant subjects by emphasizing a single mundane task. The peasant's entire identity and being becomes associated with that one chore. Second, Millet endowed his peasants with dynamism to accomplish their work, which was uncharacteristic in other, more passive, rustic art. Yet despite their energy, the toilers' environment hardly changes.

²⁰ Taxile Delord in *Charivari* (7 January 1851), quoted in Herbert, "City vs. Country," 29.

In *Woodsawyers* and *Faggot Gatherers* [figure 13] (both of 1850-51), though the peasants diligently work, their strength seems to overwhelm the chore itself. Herbert explains:

Shoulders rise up in great curves which are continued by the sweep of active arms, forming continuous pictorial movements which cover naturalistic detail, the better to induce a feeling of integral thrusts of power. Other figures have limbs drawn tautly toward the body, squeezing pressing and gathering in centripetal energy, as though steel springs were being wound by the artist.²¹

In light of the political and social uncertainty of the Second Republic, Millet's dynamic toilers gained him praise from the Liberals and hostile criticism from the Conservatives. Both groups reacted to the same attribute of the peasant, which was contemporaneity, rather than Robert's nostalgia.

By focusing on the form and expressions of Millet's toilers in contrast to the rural scenes of the Salon artists, Herbert offers a radical perspective on Millet. Yet according to him, this interpretation is incomplete because it does not heed Millet's own words about his paintings, which reveal a man who did not seek social change, but who appreciated "the age-old struggle of man for existence, a struggle which would continue forever unchanged."²² Herbert explains, "Millet was a fatalist who saw no possibility of reform, but instead found in the peasant of his day the proof that life had continued unaltered since time immemorial."²³ Herbert uses the term "fatalism" in a way that is similar to both Sensier and Clark. While he disagrees with Sensier's pious portrayal of Millet,²⁴ Herbert concurs that the artist did believe man was condemned forever by God's curse on Adam. Thus, unlike Courbet, who announced his political radicalism in his

²¹ Herbert, "City vs. Country," 27.

²² *Ibid.*, 30.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ In his essay entitled "Millet Revisited," Herbert challenges the Sensier myth, claiming, "This pious artist who wept when he read the Bible and prayed before he painted did not go to church" (295).

writings and controversial rustic paintings, Millet's peasants, according to Herbert, represented "a dialogue between man and implacable fate."²⁵

At the Salon of 1850, Herbert contends, the critics misunderstood Millet's pessimism and fatalism and linked his *Sower* with the politics of Courbet, who submitted *The Burial at Ornans*. The utopian socialist Sabatier-Unger referred to his *Sower* as the embodiment of the new common man, "le Démos moderne."²⁶ In 1863, the Salon observers associated Millet's fatigued toiler of *Man with a Hoe* [figure 2] with Dumoulard, a peasant who had murdered his employer's family. Herbert argues that the brutalized toiler has no "spark of rebelliousness," and instead appears like a Christ-figure amongst the thorns and thistles of the landscape.²⁷ He notes that Jules-Antoine Castagnary was among the few reviewers who saw the toiler as Millet had intended to portray him. The critic described the fatigued peasant as one who represented "the sinister grandeur of implacable fate" and Millet himself as the "tough evoker of the most somber miseries."²⁸

Millet's submission to the Salon of 1869 was named after La Fontaine's fable *Death and the Woodcutter* [figure 14], yet the jury rejected his depiction of the seventeenth-century allegory. The fable describes a poor woodcutter, who one day staggers and groans under the weight of his load, and eventually drops the bundle because the pain is too much to bear. As he rests, the man begins to list all his miseries, asking: "What pleasure had he had since the day of his birth? Who [is] so poor as he in the whole wide

²⁵ Herbert, *Jean François-Millet*, 11.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Herbert, "Millet Reconsidered," 48.

²⁸ Jules-Antoine Castagnary, "Salon de 1863," in *Salons (1857-1870)*, Vol. 1 (Paris, 1892), 151, quoted in Herbert, *ibid.*, 48.

earth?”²⁹ In despair, he summons Death, who immediately stands before him with his scythe. When Death asks how he could help the man, the woodcutter sheepishly asks him to merely help lift the wood onto his back and to leave. The moral, according to La Fontaine, is that while death cures man’s ailments, “it is better to suffer than to be dead.”³⁰

Concerning Millet’s *Death and the Woodcutter*, Herbert claims that the painting’s reference to the literary fable is obvious; however, to the conservative Salon critics, the picture “seemed to solicit the sympathy of the public for the plight of the peasant.”³¹ Despite the critics’ reading and dismissal of the work, Herbert asserts, “For the artist the woodcutter represented not a cry for change, but the age-old struggle of man for existence, a struggle which would continue forever unchanged.”³² Herbert explains:

Instead of confirming the middle-class view that life on the farm is a happy round of healthy tasks, Millet brought the laboring peasant directly into the observer’s presence, with a sense of the grueling, wearing tasks he performs. He usually showed the peasant in a struggle with obdurate nature, which only reluctantly yields to dogged effort, a dialectic in which nature stands for fate, and therefore one which embodied Millet’s sense of the meaning of life: man versus fate. This dialectic, as already noted, became transformed in the minds of contemporaries to that of man versus social order.³³

Yet despite the social reformers’ use of his art as a weapon against the established authority, Millet claimed to have no part in the liberal movement. After the Salon of 1850, he wrote Sensier:

But, to tell the truth, the peasant subjects suit my temperament best; for I must confess, even if you think me a socialist, that the human side of art is what touches me most,

²⁹ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, 93.

³⁰ James de la Fontaine, *Death and the Woodcutter in Beasts and Citizens: Forty Fables of La Fontaine*, trans. Craig Hill (Concord: Palm Press, 2003), <http://www.lafontaine.net/lesFables/fable>.

³¹ Herbert, “City vs. Country,” 30.

³² *Ibid.*, 30.

³³ *Ibid.*, 33-4.

and if I could only do what I like,--or, at least, attempt it,--I should do nothing that was not an impression from nature, either in landscape or figures. The gay side never shows itself to me. I don't know where it is. I have never seen it...³⁴

Amidst the demographic changes, the industrial revolution, and modernized farming equipment, the constant in Millet's world was man's ultimate destiny to work. Millet continues:

You are sitting under a tree, enjoying all the comfort and quiet of which you are capable; you see come from a narrow path a poor creature loaded with fagots. The unexpected and always surprising way in which this figure strikes you, instantly remind you of the common and melancholy lot of humanity—weariness. It is always like the impression of La Fontaine's "Wood-cutter," in the fable: "What pleasure has he had since the day of his birth? Who so poor as he in the whole wide earth?" Sometimes, in places where the land is sterile, you see figures hoeing and digging. From time to time one raises himself and straightens his back as they call it, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. "Thou shalt eat thy bread in the sweat of thy brow." Is this the gay, jovial work some people would have us believe in? But, nevertheless, to me it is true humanity and great poetry!³⁵

Millet's observations of the suffering and despair of mankind, particularly of the laborer, represent his fatalistic attitude toward the perpetual struggle of man for survival. Unlike the dynamic efforts of socialism to alter society, fatalism considers efforts to bring about change as futile. To Millet, rebellion was as productive as a fieldworker protesting the thorns and thistles of his land. In the letter above, Millet deliberately disassociates himself (and his art) from the socialist movement, and instead explains to Sensier, his bourgeois friend and business agent, that his artistic muse was the struggle between peasant and nature, rather than peasant and politics.

Since Millet had the opportunity to rise into the bourgeoisie in Paris and become a classical and reputable painter, like his instructor, Delaroche, Herbert contends that the reasons Millet left Paris to paint scenes of pastoral toil in Barbizon were the unstable and

³⁴ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, 93.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

unpredictable social changes of the nineteenth century. While there are no records of Millet's explicit reaction to the demographic and industrial changes, Herbert refers to the artist's recollections of his initial days in Paris (1837), which Sensier recorded:

Then Paris, black, smoky, muddy, where I arrived at night, and which was to me the most discouraging sensation of all. I got to Paris one Saturday evening in January, in the snow. The light of the street-lamps, almost put out by the fog, the immense quantity of horses and wagons passing and repassing, the narrow streets, the smell and the air of Paris, went to my head and my heart so that I was almost suffocated. I was seized with a sobbing which I could not control.³⁶

Herbert remarks that whenever Millet subsequently broached the topic of Paris in his letters to his biographer, he used images and words that evoke noise, instability, and anxiety. These themes contrasted his sentiments to Sensier in his first letter after reaching Barbizon: "...the country is superb, [Charles Jacque and I] will work more quietly than in Paris, and, perhaps, do better things. In fact, we want to stay here some time."³⁷

Thus, contrary to Sensier's myth, Millet's canvases did not reveal the "peasant painter" reacquainting himself with his rustic heritage and piety, but rather represented his aversion to the urban-industrial revolution. While Herbert acknowledges the solace Millet takes in his rural environment, he disagrees with the reasons Sensier gave for the artist's move. Sensier suggested that Millet settled in Barbizon to escape the corruption of the city and to reconnect with his rustic roots (and "race"). Herbert responds to Sensier's logic that Millet's paintings were autobiographical, asking "What is more absurd than to think a real peasant would want to paint scenes from his daily life?"³⁸ From this question, he intimates that the peasant's life, which was difficult, mundane, and

³⁶ Ibid., 46.

³⁷ Ibid., 82.

³⁸ Herbert, "Millet Revisited," 296.

at times tragic, would be an undesirable subject for an actual peasant to relive in artistic imagery.³⁹ While Clark also disagrees with Sensier's explanation, arguing that Millet's move was a "decisive retreat" from turbulent politics, a weak economy, and the cholera epidemic, his analysis does not elaborate on Millet's own reaction to the contemporary socio-economic environment.⁴⁰

Moreover, Herbert contends that by 1849, the time of Millet's "flight from the city," the artist had "long ceased to be a peasant," rather "the real Millet was an intellectual formed in Paris who saw peasant life through historical eyes."⁴¹ Unlike Sensier's construction of "peasant painter, who farmed in the morning,⁴² painted in the afternoon, was constantly in debt to creditors, and personally identified with the sufferings of the peasant, Herbert contends that Millet lived amongst the peasants, but was not one himself. Instead, he claims, Millet was "the most cultured French painter of the mid-century except for Delacroix," "had a maid from 1851 on," and "his table was known among his familiars for its abundance."⁴³ In this sense, Millet adopted in Barbizon a voyeuristic role as the naturalist artist who was comforted by the rural world and its primeval past, but was not of it. Herbert maintains:

[Millet] immersed himself in a rural environment out of nostalgia for the pre-industrial past. Like many progressive thinkers of his generation he detested the city and

³⁹ Herbert's suggestion that an artist with peasant roots would not depict what is familiar to him (i.e. peasant life) seems unconvincing; however, it should be noted that some of the most-renown "peasant painters," such as Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Jules Breton, Jules Bastien-Lepage, Vincent Van Gogh, and, as Herbert argues, Millet, were not "real" peasants, though they spent time in the rural setting. In a review of two exhibition catalogues concerning Breton and Bastien-Lepage, respectively, Neil McWilliam discusses the disputable claims of these two artists' peasant heritage. In "Country Life," *The Oxford Art Journal* 9 (1986): 80.

⁴⁰ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 76-8.

⁴¹ Herbert, "Millet Revisited," 295-6.

⁴² Sensier writes, "[Millet] had two occupations: in the morning he dug or planted, sowed or reaped; after lunch he went into the low, cold, dark room called a studio" (84).

⁴³ Herbert, "Millet Revisited," 295.

regarded with horror the rapid spread of industrial change. He found in nature a renewal of self, a release from the city, a necessary calm.⁴⁴

Thus, according to Herbert, the countryside offered Millet a sanctuary from the contemporary political and social tumult and stability through its timeless agrarian-based lifestyle, the opportunity to commune with nature, and a “moral” economy with laborers, who were free of the machine-made aspects of urban life and the ruthlessness of capitalist industrialism.

Millet’s personal response to the urban-industrial changes is fundamental to Herbert’s analysis of the artist’s choice to depict peasants. Sensier’s explanation of Millet’s Parisian exodus to the countryside enabled the biographer to interpret the “peasant painter’s” art in Barbizon as an extension of himself. In this sense, as Sensier minimized the social context in which Millet worked, the painting became a projection of the man. Conversely, Herbert argues that there was a distance between the painter and the rural imagery he portrayed since Millet was relatively untouched by the peasant’s struggle for existence. For both Millet’s rustic subject matter and his rural immigration, Herbert posits a three-fold, interrelated explanation which grounds his naturalistic reading of the artist. He argues:

Millet’s naturalism, we now discover, was not a case of merely recording what he saw about him. His choice of subject was determined by a process largely hidden from us, but for which we have clues: *his early immersion in the Bible and in the Latin classics, his flight from the city, his brooding temperament...* his art is formed of a complex tangle of arbitrary conventions and hidden attitudes.⁴⁵

Unlike Sensier’s explanation, Herbert’s does not reduce Millet’s exodus and his art to his peasant heritage, nor does it detach Millet’s “product” from him and claim an elevated

⁴⁴ Ibid., 256.

⁴⁵ Herbert, *Jean François-Millet*, 38 (italics added).

ideological purpose for his art in the manner of Clark. Instead, Herbert's naturalist reading depends on Millet's sophisticated education, his urban exodus, and his melancholic disposition. Together, these three interconnected elements of Millet's life influenced both his response to the urban-industrial changes and his artistic decisions. Before discussing these three factors, however, a brief explanation of Herbert's use of the term "naturalism" is necessary.

In the quote above, Herbert explains that Millet's naturalism "was not a case of merely recording what he saw about him." This statement acknowledges the complexity of Millet's depiction of contemporary reality, while also suggesting Herbert's distinction between the two terms *naturalism* and *realism*. Until the mid-nineteenth century, these terms had a long and allied tradition, as applied to the visual arts, one that dated back to the seventeenth century. Most often, the words connoted the representation of the external world as it is actually perceived, rather than a metaphorical or abstract depiction. While the terms conveyed similar meanings and were typically used interchangeably, fine distinctions and uses of the terms still existed. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, both terms became associated with the artistic movement called Realism, the "new art" identified in particular with Gustav Courbet and his successors and championed by leftist critics such as Théophile Thoré, Jules-Antoine Castagnary, Jules-François-Felix Champfleury, and Edmond Duranty. In the Realist discourse, both terms were used to accentuate the stylistic shift away from the artificiality of Classicism and the emotionalism of Romanticism, and towards the artist's deliberate attempt to record clinically the nature and structure of the present-day. According to Linda Nochlin, the common (and problematic) aim of Realists was to render an unmediated world, "to give a

truthful, objective and impartial representation of the real world, based on meticulous observation of contemporary life.”⁴⁶

From about 1840 to the 1870’s, the depiction of material reality became the primary concern of Realist artists in France, who painted during a time of political and social upheaval, industrial changes, Positivist influences, and urban demographic flux. In 1856, in his short-lived journal *Réalisme*, Duranty exhorted artists to paint these contemporary events, but also to work directly from nature. Believing truth to be derived from nature, the critic disapproved of the Academic curriculum and its hierarchy of subject matter. According to the Academy, the hierarchy of subject matter was as follows: history painting, portrait, landscape, genre. Rather than exalting history painting, the traditional apex work, Duranty instead promoted landscape and portraiture. He described the artistic movement:

Realism is the opposite of a school. To speak of a ‘school’ of realism is nonsense: realism is a frank and total expression of an individuality that attacks precisely the conventions and imitation of any kind of school. A realist is completely independent of his neighbor; he renders sensations that this nature and temperament lead him to feel when he confronts something.⁴⁷

Traditional critics denounced the Realist emphasis placed on the everyday subject matter. This form of painting, which had previously been labeled as genre painting, had held the lowest position on the compositional hierarchy since it theoretically did not have the rhetorical and “transformative” power of history painting. Despite the protests of the Academy, the radical critic Théophile Thoré substantiated Duranty’s choice of subject matter, arguing that Realism was a democratic art in its accessibility and comprehension

⁴⁶ Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 13.

⁴⁷ Cited by Gabriel P. Weisberg, “The Realist Tradition: Critical Theory and the Evolution of Social Themes,” in *The Realist Tradition*, exhibition catalogue (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 1.

by all viewers, unlike the past events and ancient myths depicted in history paintings. History painting had both a pictorial and philosophical aim: the artist sought to depict in the Grand Manner⁴⁸ a serious and elevated subject from the past, which contained a morally edifying message.⁴⁹ In 1868 in his *Nouvelles Tendances de l'art*, Thoré maintains:

An art for man should be one of the primary democratic goals of young artists: Man does not exist in the arts of the past, in the arts of yesterday; and he still has to be invented. Almost never was man, in his common capacity as man, the direct subject of painting and of the other plastic arts, not even of literature...⁵⁰

Until the 1860s, critics within this discussion used the term *naturalism* to describe the Realist's pictorial style—the empirical rendering of the “spontaneous” perception of nature.⁵¹ But in 1863, Castagnary recognized that the second generation of Realists “rendered sensations” differently from the first generation of Realists (including Courbet and François Bonvin), and coined the term “naturalism” to describe the younger artists, such as Jean François Raffaelli, Léon Lhermitte, and Jules Bastien-Lepage.⁵² The critic explains:

The Naturalist school re-establishes the broken relations between man and nature. By its dual focus, upon the life of the fields, which it already interprets with such agrestic power, and the life of the cities, whence its greatest triumphs will come, it tends to embrace all forms of the visible world. Already it has ended the separation of line and colour, and restored them to their true role. By returning the artist to the center of his epoch and obliging him to think, it determines the true utility, and thus the morality, of

⁴⁸ According to Cecil Gould in *An Introduction to Italian Renaissance Painting* (1957), the Grand Manner was “an attitude rather than a style.” He writes, “The general aim is to transcend Nature... The Subject itself must be on an elevated and elevating plane... Similarly, the individual figures in such a scene much be shown purged of the grosser elements of ordinary existence... Landscape background or ornamental detail must be reduced to a minimum and individual peculiarities of human physiognomy absolutely eliminated... the expressive gesture is one of the keynotes of the Grand Manner and on the whole its most constant characteristic.” Quoted in *The Oxford Dictionary of Art*, ed. Ian Chilvers and Harold Osborne, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 216-217.

⁴⁹ Albert Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 9.

⁵⁰ Théophile Thoré, “Nouvelles Tendances de l'art,” in *Salons de Th. Thoré, 1844-48* (Paris, 1868), quoted in Weisberg, *Realist Tradition*, 2.

⁵¹ Weisberg, *Realist Tradition*, 3.

⁵² *Ibid.*

art.⁵³

Castagnary acknowledged and endorsed the trend of the younger generation of artists, who were not content merely to paint what they saw, but also wanted to “interpret” the contemporary scenes. In other words, the Naturalists still claimed to depict “reality” scientifically, while also including the inner feelings and psychological effects of the subjects within their paintings. Castagnary explains:

The Naturalist school asserts that art is the expression of life in all its facets, seen from all angles, and that its only goal is to reproduce nature by bringing it to its maximum of power and intensity; it is truth counterpoised by science.⁵⁴

The addition of human empathy, according to Castagnary, enabled the Naturalist to portray society with greater accuracy. While the Naturalist’s “interpretation” of reality distinguishes him from the Realist, his scientific investigation of a contemporary event separated him from both the Romantics and the Classicists. In his Salon review of 1867, Castagnary criticizes the depiction of historical events as irrelevant, uncreative, and even without beauty. He argues:

What need is there to retrace history, take refuge in legend, or scan the archives of the imagination? Beauty lies before our eyes, not in the brain; in the present, not the past; in truth and not in dream; in life and not in death. The universe before our eyes is that which the painter must represent and translate.⁵⁵

Herbert’s interpretation of Millet coincides with Castagnary’s explanation of naturalism. Rather than using the critic’s words, “interpret,” “represent,” and “translate,” Herbert describes Millet’s artistic process as a “dialogue” between the past and the present. He explains:

⁵³ Jules-Antoine Castagnary, “The Three Contemporary Schools,” in *Art in Theory 1815-1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Jason Gaiger, Charles Harrison, and Paul Wood (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998), 413.

⁵⁴ Jules-Antoine Castagnary, “Naturalism,” in *Art in Theory 1815-1900*, 412.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 414.

The result of this personal dialogue of past and present is the peasant naturalism for which [Millet] is known. This naturalism is not any mere imitation of rural life, but a complex creation in which youthful memories were encrusted upon his knowledge of earlier European arts and literature, which in turn had been pulled abruptly into current awareness by the events of 1848. In a sense, the analysis of Millet's art depends upon our discovery of how purely personal biography can be transposed into art of social and historical meaning.⁵⁶

As Herbert reconstructs the events surrounding Millet's artistic production, he deliberately maintains as his focal point Millet rather than his art. Exploring the painter's education, urban exodus, and "brooding temperament," Herbert concludes that, as an artist, Millet did not concern himself with an empirical portrayal of the present rural society. Instead, his paintings of peasants both preserved the past in his own mind and interacted with the contemporary issues, causing critics to associate him with contentious politics and to affiliate him incorrectly with the "new art" of Realism. Herbert explains, "[Millet's] art was the embodiment of memories of his own youth, superimposed over the varied textures of contemporary life."⁵⁷

Similar to Castagnary and Herbert, art historian Linda Nochlin distinguishes between Millet's style of painting and that of the definitive Realist Gustav Courbet in her eminent study of mid-nineteenth-century social and intellectual life entitled *Realism* (1971). Comparing two portrayals of contemporary labor scenes found in Courbet's *The Stonebreakers* (1849) [figure 15] and Millet's *The Gleaners* (1857) [figure 10], Nochlin explains that while both artists sought to paint a "valid image of hard times in the country," Millet's painting was more widely accepted and easier for the Salon audience to receive. She writes:

Millet's composition implies something beyond the fact of specific nineteenth-century

⁵⁶ Herbert, *Jean François Millet*, 10.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

peasants performing a routine task—an extremely low one even by farm-labour standards—and conveys a comforting suggestion of the timeless, quasi-religious validity and moral beauty of labour in general.⁵⁸

Millet “implied” the past, according to Nochlin, through three stylistic devices: a formal compositional division between a foreground and a background, the representation of two types of labor (the primitive gleaning and the “productive human activity near the horizon”), and the allusions to the past through the classical forms of the gleaners and the Biblical reference to the story of Ruth. Conversely, Nochlin argues, “Courbet implies nothing, in formal terms, beyond the mere fact of the physical existence of the working pair and their existence as painted elements on the canvas.”⁵⁹ Without any reference to the past and relying solely on a positivist view of the present, Courbet offers none of the idealism or “reassuring reiterations of meaning” which Millet provides.⁶⁰ Nochlin concludes that while both artists depicted equally desperate forms of labor, Millet assuaged his audience with “consoling analogies” either to a Biblical or a Classical past.⁶¹ Consequently, Nochlin suggests that while Courbet consciously and meticulously sought to depict the concrete facts of contemporaneity, Millet incorporated timelessness and tradition within his representation of mid-nineteenth century society. Whether or not this was Millet’s artistic intention, his embellished pictorial conventions distinguished him from Courbet’s realist style and associated him with naturalism.

Herbert argues that Millet’s literary references, or “consoling analogies,” were a result of his “early immersion in the Bible and the Latin classics” and are the first factor in his

⁵⁸ Nochlin, *Realism*, 117.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

naturalist style.⁶² Contrary to Sensier's sentimental portrayal of Millet's humble origins, Herbert argues that Millet was an educated and refined man, a fact that influenced his rural depictions. He explains:

An indefatigable reader, [Millet's] letters and those of his friends show his literary preferences: the Bible, which he interpreted rather as a Protestant than as a Catholic, Virgil, Theocritus, La Fontaine, Montaigne, Dante, John Milton, Shakespeare, from all of whom he could cite by memory. He was familiar with Sir Walter Scott, Robert Burns, Fenimore, and even William Ellery Channing!⁶³

Herbert catalogues the artist's literary influences not only to dispel the "Millet-myth," but also to suggest that these authors share a common portrayal of the human condition, something which attracted Millet. The artist's penchant for Greco-Roman authors, Biblical stories, and pastoral poets, according to Herbert, was motivated by his fatalistic perception of the world. Herbert describes the themes which Millet encountered in his reading as a "complex tangle of literary and historical knowledge."⁶⁴ They subsequently affected Millet's observations and depictions of contemporary peasants, whom he saw as unchangeable subjects of burden.

Contrary to Clark's argument that turbulent politics and the industrial proletariat of the *banlieue* shaped Millet's subject matter, Herbert claims that literature's "complex tangle" influenced the artist's canvases. Initially, Millet gave many of his paintings religious titles, though he later exhibited them with secular names. Most likely he did this because vanguard artists after 1848 discredited and discarded sacred and classical subjects on account of their Academic association. Herbert refers to Millet's renaming of religious

⁶² Herbert, "Millet Reconsidered," 38.

⁶³ Herbert, "Millet Revisited," 296.

⁶⁴ Herbert, "Millet Revisited," 296.

themes as genre descriptions as his “secular shift.”⁶⁵ Despite the new titles, the literary themes are still present. Herbert argues that *Grafting a Tree* (1855) was a Virgilian allusion⁶⁶, *Shepherd Showing Travellers Their Way* (1838-40) was a contemporary depiction of the Biblical pilgrims to Emmaus⁶⁷, and *Going to Work* (1851) was a present-day expulsion from the Garden of Eden.⁶⁸ Regarding the latter work, Herbert writes, “There is a nearly primeval innocence in these peasants setting out in the morning to dig potatoes, carrying their tools and a jug of water: a nineteenth-century Adam and Eve or a couple from Theocritus.”⁶⁹ He suggests that Millet’s observations of Barbizon laborers triggered his own memories of characters from texts, something which influenced his compositional depiction. Herbert does not deny Millet’s insistent claim to Sensier that he merely painted what he saw, yet Herbert suggests that the “complex tangle” of literature complicated the artist’s direct vision of contemporary society and the images he produced.⁷⁰

According to Herbert, literature influenced not only Millet’s perception of his Barbizon subjects, but also how he viewed himself in relation to them. Herbert argues that Millet’s erudition alienated him from the average peasant, describing the artist as a “distant observer” of the laborers, whom “he hardly knew personally.”⁷¹ He continues,

⁶⁵ Herbert, “City vs. Country,” 39.

⁶⁶ Virgil writes, “Graft thy pear tree, Daphnis; posterity shall pluck thy fruit.” Quoted in Herbert, “City vs. Country,” 36.

⁶⁷ This New Testament story (Luke 24:13-35) is one of the events following Jesus’ resurrection. He appeared to two men on the road to Emmaus, who were upset after hearing about Jesus’ crucifixion. After they traveled, Jesus ate with them and spoke of all the prophets. As soon as both became convinced that their guest was the Messiah, Jesus vanished. The two men left immediately for Jerusalem to explain what they had seen.

⁶⁸ Herbert, “City vs. Country,” 38-9.

⁶⁹ Herbert, *Peasants and “Primitivism,”* 32.

⁷⁰ Herbert, “Millet Revisited,” 296.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

“He spoke of their narrow minds, of their insensibility before the beauties of nature, of their life eroded and exhausted by their work until they were hardly above the level of animals.”⁷² While Sensier’s biography portrays Millet as a rustic painter, whose depiction of peasants was autobiographical, Herbert claims that Millet did not personally identify with the laborers’ daily toil or hardships. Instead, like the prose he read, the way in which the peasants represented universal suffering fascinated and, indeed, comforted Millet. In reaction to the Industrial Revolution and the modern upheavals, Herbert suggests, Millet found timelessness in his memories of childhood and the Barbizon peasant. He argues that the rural laborer embodied social stability, not social change, and “the past surviving into the present, this past which he wished to hug to his breast as his safeguard and his salvation.”⁷³ Hence, Millet observed a rustic world to which he did not belong, and painted it in response to an industrial world that he feared. According to Herbert, Barbizon was the manifestation of primeval stability and consoled the artist’s anxiety of modernity.

Although Herbert’s argument rebuts the mid-nineteenth-century bourgeois critics who found socialist messages in Millet’s paintings, it seems at first glance to endorse Sensier’s romantic construction of the artist, which he opposes. Recognizing this potential contradiction, Herbert states:

To the extent that the style of “naturalism” would seem to require a presentation of present-day reality, Millet’s devotion to age-old unchanged life strikes us now as paradoxical. Yet the very heart of the present argument is that the rural past became the perfect expression of contemporary urban sensibilities. We are sure, in any event, that Millet’s and Courbet’s peasants were accepted in their day as fully avant-garde, and we are also sure that naturalist critics did not require or even prefer the new

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

urban-industrial imagery as expressions of modernity.⁷⁴

Thus, he argues, one way Millet responded to the *contemporary* political upheaval and urban-industrial change was to depict the timeless peasant bound to the soil. His sentimental agrarian scenes commented on his personal anxieties over the stability of France during the mid-nineteenth century. According to Herbert, the artist sympathized with the rough existence of the Barbizon laborer, while the timelessness of the peasant figure comforted him during revolutionary times. In this sense, Millet held his own paternalistic myth of the countryside, a pre-industrial golden age uncomplicated by the social upheaval. Thus, Sensier held a myth to sustain his position within the modern industrial world, while Millet's myth was a reaction to that same modern world.

Furthermore, Herbert contends that since Millet's generation of artists acted as a stylistic bridge between the Romantics and the Impressionists, it is expected that there would be remnants of Romanticism within his naturalist style. He writes, "It was nonetheless difficult for the post-1848 generation to renounce overnight the centuries-old saturation in religious and mythological subjects...they stood as a generation of transition who secularized old themes."⁷⁵ Millet's contemporary rendition of the Expulsion entitled *Going to Work* (1851) [figure 8], mentioned above, effectively illustrates Herbert's argument concerning the artist's role as an intermediary. Millet "secularizes" the Expulsion story by dressing the peasant couple in contemporary garb and depicting them as a pair dignified through their stance and emotional composure, yet maintains the primeval theme of Adam's curse.

⁷⁴ Herbert, "City vs. Country," 36.

⁷⁵ Herbert, "City vs. Country," 38.

As noted earlier in the chapter, Herbert describes Millet's naturalist style as a "personal dialogue of past and present."⁷⁶ This dialogue between past texts and contemporary subjects existed not only within the artist's observations of Barbizon, but also during the process of depicting scenes of labor. Unlike Clark, who considers Millet's stylistic change to be a product of the socio-economic context, Herbert argues that the artist rarely painted directly from nature, but instead from images saved in his mind, including the Norman landscape of his birthplace, which often serves as a backdrop for many of his Barbizon peasants. He explains that once Millet began work on a composition, his sketch and draft process involved multiple steps of successive tracings, modifications, carbon copies, and charcoals refinements. Yet throughout this process, according to Herbert, Millet's changes were not inspired by a closer examination of the environment, but by the "internal logic of formal structure and his desire for a pose more enduring than candid."⁷⁷ In response to the "enduring" postures of Millet's agrarian figures, Nochlin refers to them as "time-honoured poses."⁷⁸ Both scholars argue that the artist's use of classical conventions, such as modeling, generalized contours, and formal compositional configuration, enabled him to achieve this effect.

Herbert describes Millet's method of composition in relation to the artist's *Woman at the Well* [figure 16]:

[Millet] progressively brought the chest around toward the frontal plane, diminished the gap between the two arms, and lowered the head and upper body. The final image (a pastel in the Louvre) is perfectly acceptable as a natural one, but it has a definitive structure that endows it with a superior dignity. The forms are made to respect the flat surface of the paper by a broadening of the planes and by the abrupt shifts in direction of their contours. The left contour of the Chicago drawing, instead of

⁷⁶ Herbert, *Jean François Millet*, 10.

⁷⁷ Herbert, "Millet Reconsidered," 38-9.

⁷⁸ Nochlin, *Realism*, 119.

moving in smooth curves, consist of a series of straight lines. These geometric lines, part of the tracing process, are retained in the movements of the final composition. They speak as much for the way the human hand moves with decision over flat paper as for the image they evoke. They are a more perfect embodiment of the real world referred to because, being unnaturalistic, they expose the artist's role and hence the manner in which we make contact with that world and also, for the same reason, because they approximate the simplified mental images we carry about in our minds.⁷⁹

According to Herbert's description, Millet's subtraction and economy of lines rendered a simpler, yet more dignified form, and the process of reduction was accomplished through Millet's specific memories, rather than through the direct "impartial" observations which the Realists claimed to paint.⁸⁰ Thus, Millet's classicizing and idealization achieved a traditional and "enduring" figure style. Herbert suggests that the "realism" of Millet's sketch was not in the depiction of the female form itself, but in the lines he adjusted and clarified because they represent the artist's intimate interaction between man and nature. Millet began to depend on the line itself to evoke mood. Again, Herbert demonstrates that the misreading of Millet's canvases as contemporary genre pieces reveals the ignorance of the artist's laborious method of depicting human toil, one which integrated his observations of Barbizon, childhood memories, and literary references.

Conversely, Clark contends that while Millet's childhood memories and Biblical knowledge had an effect on his paintings, the most significant influences were the "peculiar terror of the countryside and country people" and the artist's perception of labor.⁸¹ In his discussion of the two versions of *The Sower*, Clark describes the stages of Millet's work: "here as elsewhere Millet moved between myth and reality, went back to the Bible or to memories of his childhood landscape, took up an old theme and changed it,

⁷⁹ Herbert, "Millet Reconsidered," 39-40.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 41.

⁸¹ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 82.

pushed towards an image of open violence and then painted another, more still and more constricted.”⁸² Millet decided to submit the less dynamic sowing figure to the Salon, according to Clark, because it more accurately portrayed his notion of human labor as endless and unproductive. Unlike Herbert’s explanation of Millet’s “realism” as an internal dialogue within the painter, Clark contends that Millet’s “realism” was an external interaction. It was dependent on the painting’s ability to challenge or disappoint the *public*, or the prevailing ideology.

In Herbert’s discussion of *The Sower* (1850), he claims that it serves as another example of Millet’s artistic process of multiple sketches. With black conté crayon (a pulverized graphite combined with clay blended with some wax and oil), charcoal outlines, and an application of nostalgia to a contemporary subject, Millet produced several drawings and an oil of the same subject before creating his Salon version. Rather than focusing on the differences in the figures’ movement in the two oils, Herbert emphasizes the landscape of the Salon composition. Millet’s monumental sower casts seeds over Norman hills, rather than the plains of Barbizon. Since the artist had not visited his native Cherbourg since 1845, Herbert argues, Millet painted the scene from memory. In addition, while the sowing figure is dressed in contemporary clothes, the subject was most likely inspired by one of the Biblical parables of the sower found in the Book of Matthew. Herbert suggests that if the conservative critics had paid more notice to the terrain, they would have been less likely to label Millet as a Realist, accepting the

⁸² Ibid.

sowing figure to be a childhood memory, or a “look to his own past,” rather than a revolutionary laborer of 1848.⁸³ He continues:

What no reviewer saw at the time was the connection with Millet himself. *Le Démos moderne*, yes, but the sower is not on the flat lands of Barbizon, where Millet painted it. He is walking down the hills of Gréville, his native land, and in him we must find the artist’s alter ego, and through that, the special power of the figure.⁸⁴

Herbert acknowledges that from his modern perspective he is more easily able both to separate the painting from the tumultuous context in which he worked and to recognize the Academic influences and Biblical allusions in his canvases. Yet he contends that a primary reason for the misreading of Millet during his career and afterwards was the contemporary critics’ political interpretation of his rustic paintings prompted by the revolutionary events during mid-nineteenth century France. Since, Herbert asserts, Millet’s art superimposed the past onto the present, the artist’s naturalism rarely points to the “real” world, but instead to his artistic technique as well as his personal and literary recollections. Failing to recognize this interaction leads to a misreading of his art.

Herbert explains:

Millet’s importance to history is not that he provided us with a pictorial commentary on rural life, but that he created a memorable art. His work was a powerful force because it drew together past art and present aspiration, melted in the crucible of a rare talent.⁸⁵

Hence, his earlier charge to “find the artist’s alter ego” is similar to his initial goal to “recover the real Millet,” except rather than rescuing the artist from the Sensier myth, Herbert seeks, in this case, to detach Millet from his contemporary critics’ politicized views of his peasants.

⁸³ Herbert, *Jean François Millet*, 78

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Herbert, “City vs. Country,” 34.

Besides misreading Millet's innovative depiction of the peasant as a political statement, critics and scholars have, according to Herbert, obscured the artist's naturalism by losing sight of Millet's personal reaction to the urban-industrial changes. Herbert contends that the artist's "flight from the city," as noted above, was further evidence that his rustic subject matter was more personal than political, constituting a second factor in his naturalistic style. Moving beyond Millet's indirect references to Sensier concerning the changes in the city and the country and his reaction to them, Herbert examines the way in which the artist "comments" on his exodus through his amalgamation of artistic styles and rustic genre. Throughout Millet's career, Michelangelo and Poussin influenced his peasants' monumental forms and his use of heavy *chiaroscuro* to articulate the weight and strain of the muscles in the style of an antique or Renaissance relief. For example, Millet sought to apply to his large canvases Poussin's theory of the *affetti*—"the pure crystallization of emotional experience in a work of art."⁸⁶ As in an antique frieze from the Parthenon, Millet sought to achieve a "frozen vision" in his paintings through numerous sketches to achieve meticulous compositional balance and strength of form.⁸⁷ For example, before he began painting *The Gleaners*, Millet completed twenty drawings [figure 17]. Additionally, his landscapes were inspired by the Northern Lowland painters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, such as Brueghel. This group of painters, according to Herbert, directly communed with nature and painted their personal responses, rather than being dictated by man-made guidelines. He writes:

[Millet's] dislike of virtuosity and formulae was so intense that the extracts he copied out from Grimm, Buffon, Montaigne, Mme de Staël, the Brontë sisters, and others, are

⁸⁶ Denys Sutton, *J.-F. Millet: A Loan Exhibition in aid of the National Library for the Blind* (London: Wildenstein & Co. Ltd., 1969), xi.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

largely devoted to the condemnation of cleverness and skill and to the celebration of the naïve, directness of vision that he favored.⁸⁸

Herbert describes such originality and imagination in art or literature as “primitivism.”⁸⁹

He continues:

[Millet] found this directness both in older forms of art, especially those deemed ‘primitive’, and in memories of his own youth in Normandy. His dialogue with nature was indeed a personal one, but it represented a conflating of his own youth with “youthful”, that is, earlier forms of European art. This is why Brueghel was so important for him in his later years, and why he collected Northern prints of the 16th and 17th centuries. Their “primitive” qualities appealed to him because he was convinced that they represented artistic imagination closely in touch with the natural life.⁹⁰

Thus, Herbert suggests that Greco-Roman influence enabled Millet to render an active pose, while retaining a compositional poise and stability. Furthermore, the “primitivism” of the Northern Lowland painters lent to his rural images a quality of spontaneity and sincerity found only in nature.

Millet’s assimilation of both the Classical and “primitive” to depict contemporary labor resulted in a robust and earthy peasant, whose graceful and enduring movements not only embodied Millet’s devotion to a primeval past, but also detached the peasant from contemporary political issues, which further enhanced his appearance of timelessness.⁹¹

Millet’s nostalgic reaction to the urban-industrial revolution is apparent more often in what is omitted from his scenes of work than what is included. The most common “omission” from his canvases was that of the new agricultural tools and techniques.

⁸⁸ Herbert, *Jean-François Millet*, 13.

⁸⁹ Herbert writes, “When art-minded Parisians of the nineteenth century referred to “les primitifs,” they did not mean peasants or non-Europeans, but medieval and early Renaissance artists: Clouet, Fouquet, van Eyck, Fra Angelico. These were deemed painters who stood at the beginning of the modern tradition, therefore primitive in the sense of first, or original.” *Peasants and “Primitivism,”* 14.

⁹⁰ Herbert, *Jean-François Millet*, 13.

⁹¹ Herbert, “City vs. Country,” 36.

Instead, Millet's peasants wield old-fashioned tools such as hoes, wheeled wooden plows, and rakes. According to Herbert, there was only one modern farm near Millet's house in Barbizon, which he portrayed in the background of *The Gleaners*. Herbert writes, "It is significant that this farm, modern for its large size and use of teams of laborers, is the foil for the timeless labor of the gleaners in the foreground: past versus present again."⁹² He argues that Millet's omission of the new farming techniques alludes to a quality of timelessness and "unmediated hand labor."⁹³

In his paintings of domestic scenes, Millet referred to pre-industrial labor as well, particularly the subject of the spinner, who represented the outmoded textile methods. In 1856 Bonnemère wrote in *Histoire des Paysans*:

It is rigorously true to say that the most skillful spinner does not earn 10 centimes a day: she earns nothing. The city has taken from the county this precious resource: it is toward the city that the peasant turns his face, in order to follow with his regrets this richness which has forever flown, in order to contemplate these powerful machines which have broken under the first turn of their wheels the distaffs of all the peasants.⁹⁴

Millet's portrayal of the peasants' anatomical form and the physics behind their chores relied on his direct observation, yet his interpretation of the scene and nostalgic additions shift his paintings from Realism to naturalism. Herbert describes the artist's depiction of anachronistic tools and the spinner as Millet's "self-appointed task" to preserve the image of labor as an intimate struggle between man and nature.⁹⁵ Modern industry not only affected the performance of work, but also distanced the laborer's contact with the soil, a

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Herbert, *Millet to Léger*, ix.

⁹⁴ Eugene Bonnemère, *Histoire des paysans depuis la fin due moyen age jusqu'à nos jours 1200-1850*, Vol. 2 (Paris, 1856), quoted in Herbert, "City vs. Country," 38.

⁹⁵ Herbert, "City vs. Country," 38.

result which Millet considered tragic. In response to the criticism of his *Man with a Hoe*, Millet wrote to Sensier:

Is it impossible to admit that one can have some sort of an idea in seeing a man devoted to gaining his bread by the sweat of his brow. Some tell me that I deny the charms of the country. I find much more than charms,--I find infinite glories...But I see as well, in the plain, the steaming horses at work, and in a rocky place a man, all worn out, whose 'han!' has been heard since morning, who tried to straighten himself a moment and breathe. The drama is surrounded by beauty. It is not my invention. This 'cry of the ground' has been heard long ago.⁹⁶

Millet's own urban experience and exodus heightened his vision of the "drama" of man laboring in the countryside, leading to peasant portraits which acted not as realistic depictions, but as portrayals of the cursed struggle against the "cry of the ground."

Millet's alterations in his depiction of work were artistic decisions applied not only to the tangible farming implements and landscape, but also to the intangible psyche of the peasant. Millet's attempt to portray the laborer's thoughts further distinguishes him as a naturalist, and, according to Herbert, also indicates the artist's own "brooding temperament," a third factor of his naturalism, as has been noted throughout this chapter. Herbert writes, "[Millet] was essentially a pessimist who believed that fate and history were apolitical forces that kept the peasant in his weary place."⁹⁷

For thirteen years, from *The Sower* of 1850 to *Man with a Hoe* of 1863, the critics interpreted Millet's pessimism and fatalism as radical politics. Unlike Clark's political interpretation of Millet, Herbert's inclusive reading of him as a naturalist aims to understand the influence of Millet's rural heritage, his response to the social changes, and his pessimism of man's destiny. Yet as opposed to Sensier's biographical approach to the artist, Herbert's personal interest in Millet is supported by an empirical understanding

⁹⁶ Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, 157-8.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

of the social and political conditions in which he painted. In particular, his statistical findings regarding the “depopulation of the countryside” have not only provided an alternative explanation for Millet’s Parisian exodus, but have also established a new context in which to read Millet’s seemingly conservative views.

Moreover, Herbert’s tripartite explanation of the influences on Millet’s naturalist style demonstrates that Millet himself was guilty of fabricating an identity, the Barbizon peasant. While in his letters to Sensier, the artist claimed to paint what was in front of him, Herbert’s scholarship establishes that Millet’s peasant was predominately invented from literary narratives with fatalistic themes, memories of his childhood in Normandy, and nostalgic pastoralism in response to the urban-industrial change.

While Herbert explains why the critics interpreted Millet’s canvases as socialist statements and the reason the artist depicted rural scenes, his analysis does not leave room for the possibility that Millet’s response was, at times, radical. For example, while he claims that Millet appreciated the “naïve, directness of vision” of the Northern Lowland painters as a representation of artistic imagination, Herbert does not mention that this—to depict the world truthfully—is fundamentally a Realist idea. Furthermore, Herbert’s explanation for Millet’s decision to portray outmoded farming methods, like spinning wool, seems inflexible. He argues that Millet painted subjects like the spinner “to preserve old-fashioned institutions...in face of the industrial revolution,” relying on Bonnemère’s insight to explain spinning to be one of modernization’s casualties.⁹⁸ Yet, while he recognizes that “such subjects could nevertheless incorporate contemporary attitudes,” his naturalist reading does not allow for the possibility that Millet painted a

⁹⁸ Herbert, “City vs. Country,” 38.

socially provocative subject intentionally.⁹⁹ Thus, one could argue that just as Millet's direct observations of mid-nineteenth-century France were not neutral, neither were his fatalistic words, on which Herbert relies to recreate Millet's conservative views and apolitical artistic intentions.

Herbert's desire to rescue the artist from the Sensier myth and to "recover the real Millet" is also problematic. While it is true that of the three readings of Millet, Herbert's offers the most wide-ranging analysis, it is nonetheless impossible to "recover the real" artist and to access his artistic intentions. Most likely, Herbert does not use this phrase literally, but instead to signify his multi-faceted reading of Millet's stylistic dialogue between the past and present. Moreover, he dismisses the restrictive romantic and politicized interpretations of the artist. According to Herbert, the other readings either exclude valuable information regarding the person of Millet or the environment in which he worked. Yet, since Millet's written words serve as a significant component of his reconstruction of the artist, Herbert himself inevitably becomes hedged in by his own naturalist reading, which limits the possibility of realism in Millet's art.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

Conclusion

At an art auction for the Secretan Collection in Paris on 1 July 1889, a bidding war over Millet's *Angelus* (1857-59) was launched between John Sutton, the delegate of the American Art Association, and Antonin Proust, the representative of a consortium of twenty-eight French, Russian and Danish art collectors who desired that the painting hang in the Louvre. In the end, Proust acquired the painting for 553,000 francs before an excited crowd, who lauded his winning bid as a national victory and sang the *Marseillaise*. Unfortunately for Proust and the Parisian audience, the French government considered his offer to be excessive and refused to fund it. Consequently, *The Angelus* [figure 18] ended up in New York, and only later in 1909, when a Paris department store owner named Alfred Chauchard obtained the painting for 800,000 francs and bequeathed it to the French state, did it return to France. Due to the initial dismay of the French public after the auction, an allowance was made, which sanctioned the hanging of the painting in the Petite Galerie in Paris for two years. After the auction, the image, which represented a praying couple, became a significant element of mass culture as it appeared on postcards, color prints, dinner plates and the fabrics of rugs and drapes.¹

The irony of the auction, of course, lay in the feverish response of the public to Millet, who had died in January 1875 with meager savings and as a relatively unpopular and misunderstood painter. His short-lived, posthumous popularity was based on a painting which was not even one of his masterpieces. Moreover in May 1875, fifty-six of his paintings were sold in Paris for 321,634 francs and in June, at the Emile Gavet Collection,

¹ André Fermigier, *Jean-François Millet* (New York: Rizzoli International Publishers Inc., 1977), 12.

ninety-five of his drawings collected 431,500 francs.² Individually, both of these amounts were lower than Proust's bid, and even their sum total was less than Chauchard's buying price. Yet, shortly after the auction, Millet's supposed sentimentality returned him to his ignored status within the developments of modern art.

As the previous chapters have shown from the three perspectives of Sensier, Clark, and Herbert, Millet suffered countless attacks from contemporary reviews and persistent misinterpretation throughout his career and afterward. In fact each author begins his analysis of Millet by first declaring his intention to salvage the artist's reputation from critical misunderstandings. Sensier claims to "defend [Millet] from attacks" and "to show him as he seemed to us during the thirty years of our friendship."³ Clark establishes Millet as one of the "artists that mattered" during the Second Republic because his art was able to "come at the facts of politics sideways."⁴ And Herbert seeks to rescue Millet from the "basement of art history" by "destroying the Millet-myth," promulgated by Sensier in particular.⁵ As a result, we are left with three varied readings of the artist: romantic, politicized, and naturalist, respectively.

On a basic level, these three chapters serve as a case study of the problems of interpretation in art history: the socio-political context and bias of each author influence his understanding of the artist. This is perhaps most apparent in the case of Alfred Sensier, whose biography offers a picture of the artist as the sentimental "peasant-painter," whose connection to the soil, deep piety, familial devotion and virtue inspired his depiction of rural scenes. Writing against the nineteenth century's unstable background of urban-industrial

² Ibid.

³ Sensier, x.

⁴ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 178.

⁵ Herbert, *Millet Revisited*, 295.

change, Sensier's romanticized construct of the artist demonstrates his own conservative values as a member of the bourgeoisie and his subscription to the rural myth of the countryside. In addition, his role as Millet's agent economically motivated him to present a de-politicized and sanctified image of the artist to the Salon critics and his prospective bourgeois clients. Yet despite his fabrications of the artist's life and invented dialogues, Sensier's sentimental elaboration of the painter has left the most enduring imprint on his reputation as the celebrant of the rural idyll.

From the "moment of 1968," T. J. Clark challenged this moral understanding of the "peasant painter" by arguing that Millet's art was significant not because it was the product of a peasant and artistic genius, but because it interacted with and critiqued the prevailing artistic conventions and political ideologies of the Second Republic. More than any other scholar during the twentieth century, Clark's politically-charged reading revived the nineteenth-century critical debate between the socialist and conservative reviewers surrounding Millet's peasants, the very element which Sensier had deliberately tried to quell. Thus, Clark's radical, Marxist reading of Millet's art shifted the role of the painter from a eulogist of the bucolic world to a historical participant (whether or not he wanted to be) in the effort to change the social conditions of the oppressed peasant.

Unlike the other two writers, Robert Herbert's reinterpretation of Millet spans four decades (from 1962 to 2001), and has been the most productive modern analysis to reverse pejorative views of the artist. His naturalist reading of Millet both criticizes Sensier's myth of the artist and Clark's politicized interpretation, which, according to Herbert, starts with the social crisis and then finds the artists and painting that match it. His twentieth-century perspective makes use of French demographic statistics and the spectrum of peasant art with

which to compare Millet's paintings and words. Consequently, he is able to synthesize Millet's art as both a product of the society and of the individual.

Yet even more important than biases and socio-political context of each author is the way in which these two factors materialize in the methodology they used to examine Millet. These three chapters demonstrate the changing styles of interpretation in art history and the recent debate in historiography. If the aim of the art historian is to shed light on the artwork so as to explain why the object looks the way it does, then considering these three divergent interpretations of Millet's art, one might ask: has progress been made in the art criticism of Millet?⁶

The answer to this question is, in a sense, determined by the value of historiography, which is the record of where the discipline has been and where it is going. To read Clark or Herbert after reading Sensier is somewhat startling. Sensier's narrative of Millet reminds us of where the discipline of art history has been—an artist-centered, biographical approach. Central to his biographical method was the understanding that art history considers works of art in relation to the artist's life and temperament. Thus the "genius" and creativity of Millet's art was a product of the man, not his social context. In fact, as was noted in Chapter One, Sensier made few references to the turbulent political conditions in which Millet worked. Instead, he relied on his personal correspondence with Millet, the artist's melancholic personality, and his peasant heritage as an explanation for both his return to the countryside and his choice to paint rural scenes. While Sensier's own conservative response to the "depopulation of the countryside" and biographical approach obscure and, at times, mythologize the artist, his contribution is fundamental to the historiography of Millet. First,

⁶ On discerning the value of historiography in the interpretation of an artist, see David Carrier's "Piero Della Francesca and His Interpreters," *History and Theory*, 26 (1987), 150-65.

his account is valued because of his historical proximity to the artist.⁷ Second, his correspondence with the artist has provided a written record of Millet's own views concerning his artistic decisions and his fatalistic outlook.

Conversely, Clark's approach, the social history of art, was not concerned with Millet, the man of genius, but the participation of his paintings in the socio-political events of his time. Thus, he decentralized and "demystified" the traditional approach to artistic creation by shifting the emphasis of the discipline away from the artist to the circumstances of the production of an individual work within a particular society.⁸ Rather than viewing Millet within the traditional developmental narrative of art history, Clark understood the artist's paintings as historical events in themselves. Through his explanation of the Second Republic's art market, his reconstruction of the uncertain conditions of nineteenth-century France, and his application of Louis Chevalier's concept of the "proletariat of the woods" to the peasant types near Barbizon, Clark convincingly recreated the environment in which Millet painted. Yet, the limitation of Clark's reading is his selective, rather than comprehensive, approach to Millet's oeuvre. By choosing only the works which support his central thesis, Clark's reading of the painter is based on approximately twenty paintings and drawings and the Salon criticism surrounding them. He prefers Millet's later paintings, which, in his opinion, possess the characteristics of "sullen savagery", misery, and violence.

Clark's weakness, however, is Herbert's strength.⁹ As another social historian art Herbert offers a broad reading of Millet, one that gives an account of the artist's intent in light of the

⁷ Carrier makes a similar point regarding Piero della Francesca: "Vasari's account is valued because he is so much closer historically to the artist than we are" (153).

⁸ Svetlana Alpers, "Is Art History?" *Daedalus* 106 (Summer 1977), 2.

⁹ In a footnote of "Millet Revisited," Herbert states, "My catalogue in progress records approximately 400 oils, 200 pastels, 300 water-colours, and over 2,000 drawings" (295).

particular urban-industrial changes of the mid-nineteenth century, such as the tremendous growth of Paris and its effect on the countryside. Yet unlike Clark, Herbert's naturalist reading also considers the identity of the artist himself (his literary penchant for the Bible and Classical pastoral poetry, his urban exodus, and his profound pessimism). Herbert's reconstruction of Millet's productive context relies on demographic statistics, Millet's writings and prolific career, and contemporary Salon criticism. As a result, his criticism has a wider scope than the more ideologically confined readings of Clark or Sensier, and is rarely challenged.

Herbert's broader, yet more nuanced, reading demonstrates the evolution that has been made in the art criticism of Millet and, indeed, sheds more light on both the artist and his paintings. The auction painting mentioned at the beginning of this chapter is a good example.

Consider how Sensier described Millet's production of *The Angelus*:

In this truly original picture, Millet wished to give an impression of music; he wanted the noises of the country, and even the church-bells, to be heard... This was one of his favorite pictures; in it he revived his childhood's sensations... The man, a true peasant of the plain, his head covered by a mass of short straight hair like a felt hat prays silently; the woman is bent and full of devotion.¹⁰

While the excited bourgeois public at the auction would have appreciated Sensier's wistful and sentimental reading of the scene, it adds little to our understanding of Millet's intention and pictorial arrangement. Herbert, on the other hand, considers the differences between the man and the praying woman to be central to the understanding of the painting. He explains:

The man is not praying, but instead revolving his hat between his fingers while he waits for his wife to finish her prayer... Millet, he did not go to church. His mother and grandmother had died a few years before the *Angelus* was begun, and they had been kept from the knowledge of his commonlaw wife and his children... Millet's painting is therefore not a celebration of his own religious feeling, but of the simple fact that in rural life, woman's place is associated with religion... It is not the man

¹⁰ Sensier, 132.

whom the light strikes in Millet's picture. Instead it comes from behind him and strikes strongly upon the front of the woman's form, to separate and glorify her. Further in harmony with the opposed roles of man and woman, his side of the composition is relieved only by the digging fork, symbol of labour, while her side is replete with symbols of woman's function of gathering the fruits of labour for her family.¹¹

Herbert contradicts Sensier's claim that the man in the painting is praying piously. Instead, he relates the scene to a secular Millet. Moreover, his analysis elucidates the gender roles of mid-nineteenth century rural France, an observation which shows his understanding that a painting can reflect the society to which it belongs.

Millet's social context, compositional style, and rustic subject matter invite a wide variety of interpretations of his art. Yet, the criticism on Millet shows not merely a series of antithetical, isolated opinions, but a kind of evolution, one that has gradually come to include both the artist and the society in which he worked. What becomes apparent in the understanding of his peasants is that the interpretative *author* is as important as Millet's laborers themselves. While Sensier's myth-making, for example, is easier to "categorize" than Herbert's more inclusive social art history, this disparity is not entirely due to methodology. Although interpretative approaches consider a wider scope of contextual information surrounding artistic production (as Nicholas Green demonstrates) and shifts away from stylistic labels, the interpreters, in the case of Millet, still have the tendency to cast the artist in their own image. Sensier's own nostalgia, Clark's contentious politics, and Herbert's diplomacy are all projected onto their romantic, politicized, and naturalist readings, respectively. Thus the value of historiography is not only in the historical grounding of each author's reading, but in the understanding of the author himself. Even given the limits of each critic's personal preoccupation, the process of criticism, still, has served Millet well.

¹¹ Herbert, *Jean-François Millet*, 87-8.

Appendix
Figures



1. J. F. Millet, *The Sower*, 1850. Oil on canvas, 40 x 32 ½ in.
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



2. J. F. Millet, *Man with a Hoe*, 1863. Oil on canvas, 32 x 39 ½ in.
J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.



3. J. F. Millet, *Hagar and Ishmael in the Desert*, 1848-49. Pen and ink, 4' 11" x 7' 9". Mesdag Museum, The Hague.



4. J. F. Millet, *Haymakers Resting*, 1849. Pen and ink, 35 x 45 in. Louvre, Paris.



5. J. F. Millet, *The Sower*, 1849-1850.
39 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 32 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. Museum of Fine Arts,
Boston.



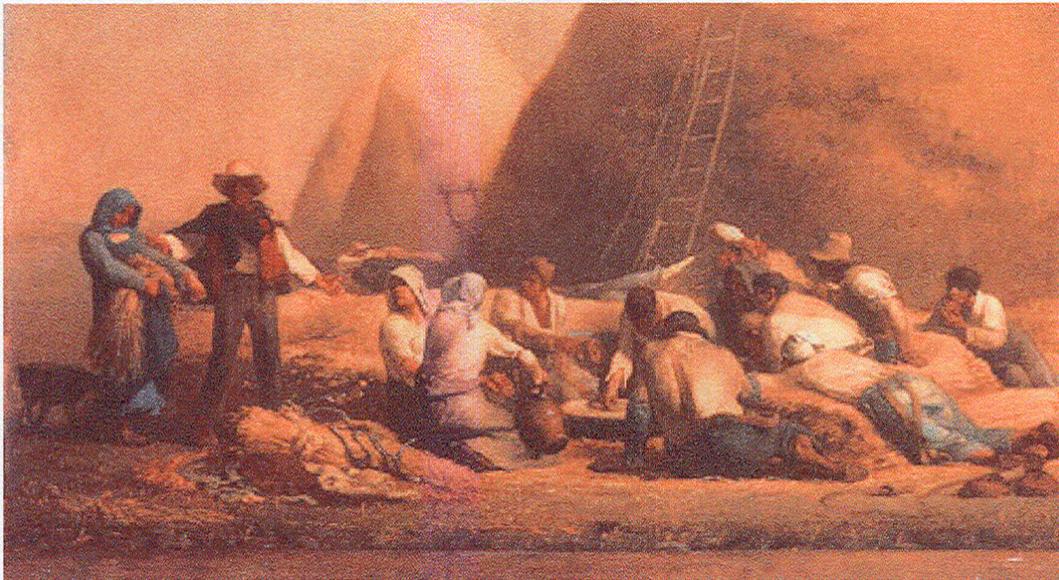
6. J. F. Millet, *The Sower*, 1850.



7. J. F. Millet, *The Sower*, 1846-47. Oil on canvas.
37 x 23 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. National Gallery of Wales, Cardiff



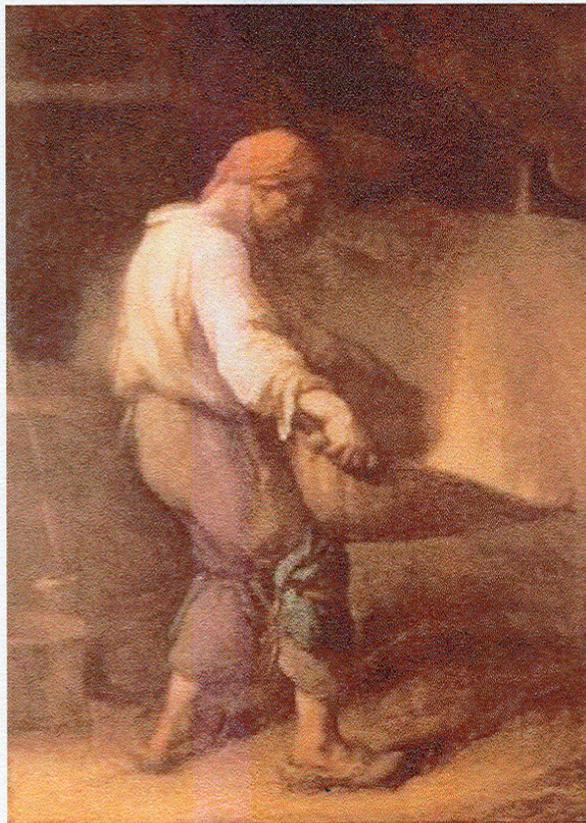
8. J. F. Millet, *Going to Work*, 1851. Oil on canvas. 22 x 18 in. Cincinnati Art Museum.



9. J. F. Millet, *Harvesters Resting*, 1851-53. Oil on canvas. 47 x 26.5 in. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



10. J. F. Millet, *The Gleaners*, 1857. Oil on canvas. 32 ½ x 43 in. Louvre, Paris.



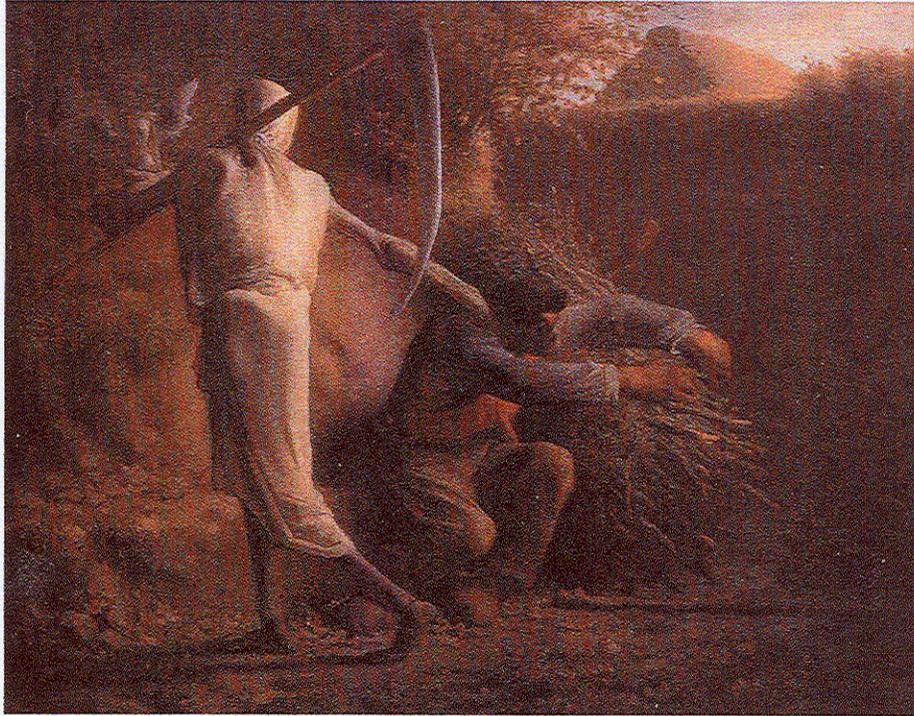
11. J. F. Millet, *The Winnower*, 1848. Oil on canvas.
31 x 23 in. Louvre, Paris



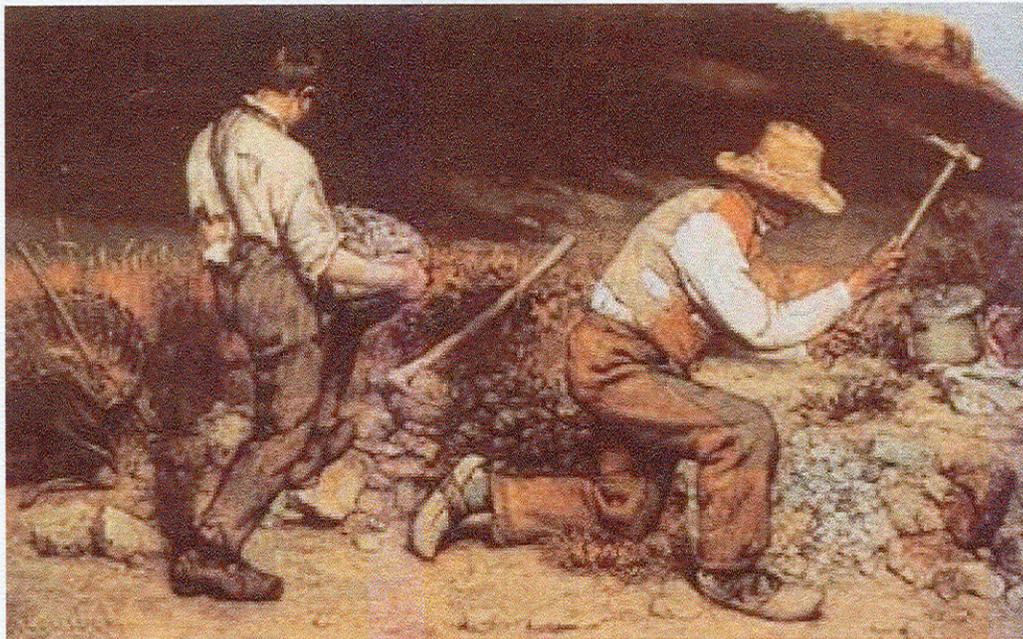
12. Leopold Robert, *Arrival of the Harvesters*, 1830. Oil on canvas. 55 ¾ x 79 ¼ in.
Louvre, Paris.



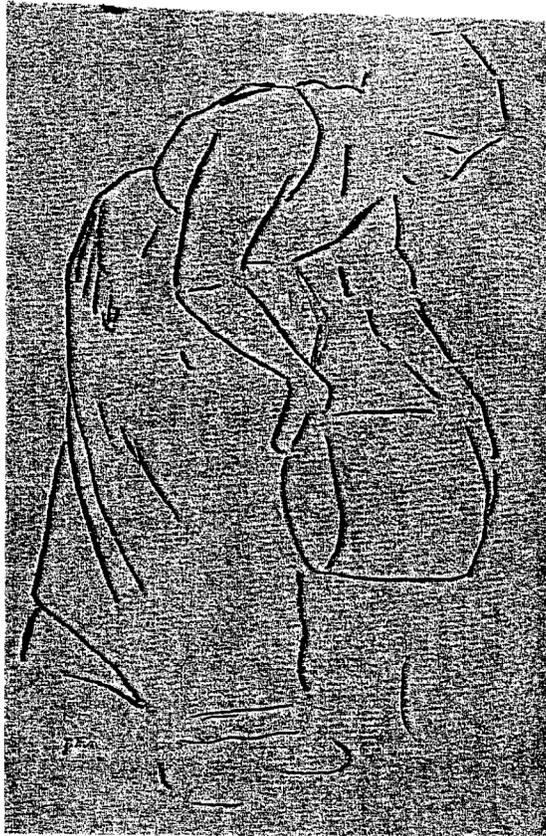
13. J. F. Millet, *Faggot Gatherers*, 1850-51. Oil on canvas. 15 x 18 in.
Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach.



14. J. F. Millet, *Death and the Woodcutter*, 1859. Oil on canvas. 30 ½ x 38 ¾ in. Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek, Copenhagen.



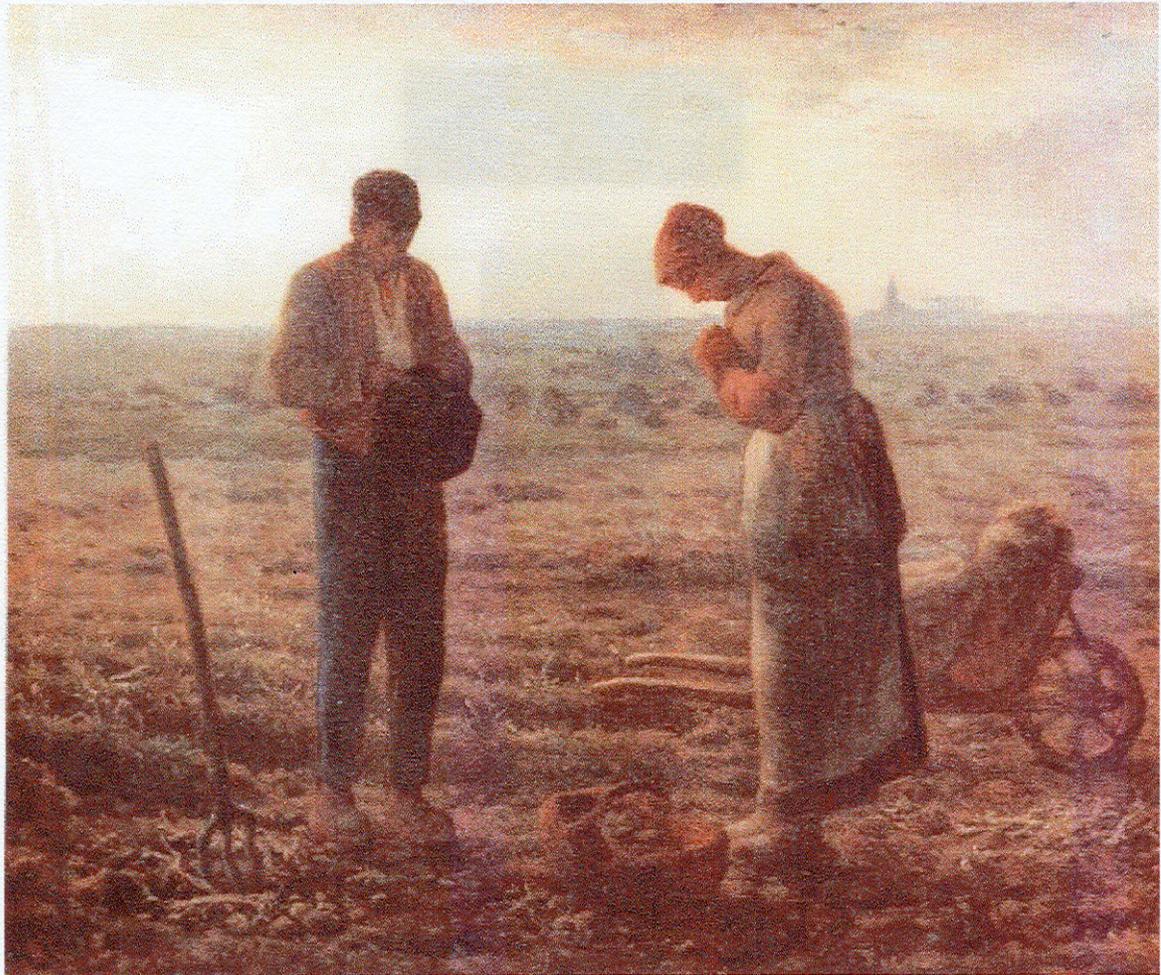
15. Gustav Courbet, *The Stonebreakers*, 1849. Oil on canvas. 65 x 93 ¾ in. Formerly Staatliche Gemaldegalerie, Dresden. Destroyed in World War II.



16. J. F. Millet, *Woman at the Well*, 1856-57. Charcoal. Art Institute of Chicago.



17. J. F. Millet, *The Gleaners*, 1855-56. Pencil on paper. 10 x 6 in. British Museum, London.



18. J. F. Millet, *The Angelus*, 1855-57. Oil on canvas. 21 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 26 in. Louvre, Paris.

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