European Cultural Developments (1848-1914)

The great political and economic changes of this period were accompanied by cultural achievements that included the development of a literate citizenry and substantive innovations in science, literature, art, music, and other areas of intellectual activity. In large part, these developments occurred as a reaction against the mechanistic sterility of the scientism and positivism of the age: however, some achievements, such as Charles Darwin's theories of evolution and natural selection, ironically extended the exaggerated claims of scientism. From Darwin, Richard Wagner, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud to Claude Monet Richard Strauss, Igor Stravinsky, Oscar Wilde. Thomas Mann, and James Joyce, intelligent Europeans of the era pursued differing, and at times opposing, approaches in their quest for truth. For much of the nineteenth century, after romanticism had exhausted its charms, artists sought to master reality by giving a ruthlessly truthful rendering of it the so-called movement of realism in the arts and letters. Though realism's practitioners were self-consciously "bohemian" in their lifestyles, their efforts oddly paralleled the go-getting worldly realism of many staid liberals, especially the captains of industry and trade who triumphed after mid-century. Later, many philosophers became critical of liberal democracy, which they identified with mass culture and political ineptitude. Artists attempted to escape their plight through moving into symbolism with their pen or brush; there, they were free to express their fantasies of hope and despair.

Realism

Western art had had realistic tendencies since the Renaissance, and a number of writers in the seventeenth century, such as William Shakespeare. Miguel de Cervantes, J.J.C. von Grimmelshausen, and others, can lay claim to a considerable amount of realism in their works. But until the 1830s, idealizing tendencies in the arts and letters always prevailed and dominated the arbiters of taste and all the teaching academies. It is with the rise of the megalopolis (big city) that we begin to see a more programmatic realism develop, fed by two major innovations: photography and mass-circulation, often sensationalistic, journalism.

The modern techniques of photography were developed in France by Joseph-Nicéphore Niepce and Louis Daguerre in the 1820s and 1830s; the

word "photography" was coined by the British astronomer Sir John Herschel in 1839, when the details of the photographic process were made known by Daguerre. The need for technical fine-tuning and fights over patents kept photography from becoming commercially viable, and popular, until the 1850s when the pioneer Nadar (pseudonym for Gaspard Tournachon) opened studios and inaugurated the rage for personal (and business) photos. In one respect, we may look at the realism of photography as a double-pronged challenge to the plastic arts: one either had to go away from realism into fantasy, or had to embrace its potential and perhaps go further than society photographers dared.

The other innovation spurring on realism in arts and letters was the development of the mass-circulation (later, illustrated) "penny press." Newspapers had been a fact of life in Europe since the early 1600s, but in all countries they were hampered by strict censorship, costs of paper, slow printing presses, and (often) a stamp tax. The mass-circulation press, already thriving in the new United States, was introduced into England and France in the 1830s, but in England most evaded the onerous stamp tax, and were thus both illegal and radical. With the end of the stamp tax in Britain in 1855, the era of the popular press took off. In the 1840s, the steam-powered rotary press was perfected: in the 1860s, illustrated newspapers became possible, thanks to advances in the daguerreotype, supplanted in the 1880s by Otto Mergenthaler's invention of the linotype.

Alongside these innovations there developed the mind set of the first realists in the aesthetic realm. As early as the 1830s, Charles Dickens in England and Honoré de Balzac in France were producing novels more realistic than the public was used to; in the 1840s, the author Eugene Sue (1804-1857) wed sensationalist realism to melodramatic excess in his bestsellers *Mysteries of Paris* and *The Wandering Jew* of the 1840s. In general, the early realism of even the masters Dickens and Balzac contains more sentimentality and melodramatic plotting than was used by the later naturalists, who affected to be cold, more scientific, bland.

Realism in the arts begins, more or less, with Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), whose *Burial at Ornans* (1850) shows a Catholic funeral in the countryside without extraneous emotion, artificial poses, or any of the other traits of academic painting of the time (see Figure 7-1). It can be profitably compared with the equally impressive *Burial of Count Orgaz* by El Greco, a masterpiece of the Spanish baroque.

Figure 7.1. Gustave Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* (1850) shows a real, somewhat mundane, Catholic funeral procession without a dramatic focus; the deceased Is not even shown. The normalcy, even every-dayness, of the scene would have shocked contemporaries used to more drama, more moral uplift.

Other exemplars of the realist school in painting were Edouard Manet and Edgar Degas of France, and Ilya Repin of Russia. Manet shocked the art world with two realist masterpieces, one after the other: the *Luncheon on the Grass*, exhibited at the Salon des Refuses of 1863, and his saucy *Olympia* (see Figure 7-2), exhibited at the Salon of 1865. By the time that Degas painted his sad *Absinthe Drinker* (see Figure 7-3) of 1876, realism was no longer as shocking.

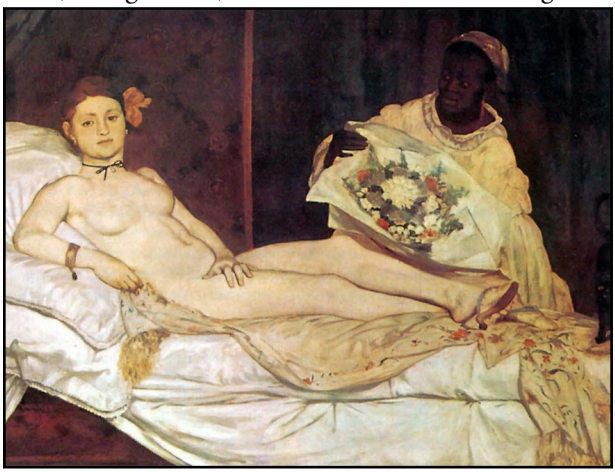

Figure 7-2_ Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1862) shows a nude more brazen than any In the Renaissance or rococo, since she presents to us an unabashed sensuality, even the businesslike, bemused smile of the courtesan; the necklace, shoes, black maid, and bird all bespeak a sordidness beyond the merely naughty.

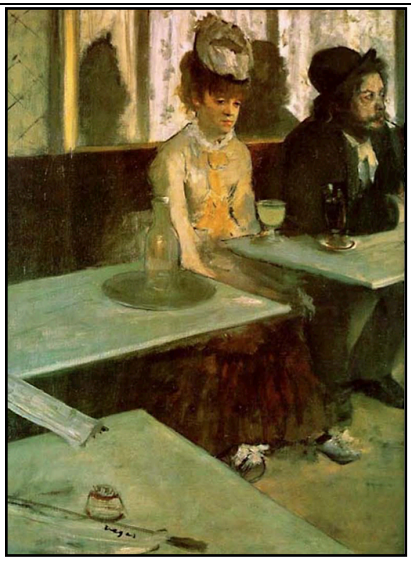

Figure 7-3. Edgar Degas's *Absinthe Drinker* (1875-76) relies on the viewer's knowledge of the stupefying effects of absinthe, outlawed in the early twentieth century for causing insanity.

In Russia, realism went hand in glove with an awakened nationalism, also the new populism that saw the future of Russia (for good or ill) in its majority of peasants. Repin's *Barge Haulers on the Volga* (1872) is justifiably famous as a subtle exposé of the inhuman working conditions prevalent even in post-emancipation Russia (see Figure 7-4).

Figure 7-4. Ilya Repin's starkly lit, dramatically composed *Barge Haulers on the Volga* (1872-1873) was based on his travels around Russia looking for the real life of real people. That this self-indicting composition could be shown at all speaks well of the liberal interlude of Tsar Alexander II.

Darwin, Wagner, Freud, and the Emergence of a New Tradition

In 1859, Charles Darwin's (1807-1882) *The Origin of Species* was published: it provided scientific evidence for evolution, a theory bandied about for decades before. Darwin's contributions to the theory were based (1) on the data that he provided in its defense and (2) in the formulation of a well-structured explanation of the mechanism of natural selection (survival of the fittest). The reaction to *The Origin of Species* was diverse and tenacious; some discussants were concerned with the implication of the theory on religion, while others were interested in applying aspects of the theory to the understanding of contemporary social problems. Within the Darwinian camp, factions emerged that supported or rejected one or more components of the theory. Samuel Butler and George Bernard Shaw accepted evolution but rejected natural selection: Thomas Huxley was Darwin's most consistent and loyal supporter. Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) developed a Social Darwinism that enjoyed a widespread vogue in scholarly and popular circles. One obvious consequence of Darwin's theory was that it necessitated a reevaluation of ideas relating to man's place in the cosmos. The doctrine of creation was challenged and thus the authenticity of prevailing religion was endangered.

In classical music, the erratic Richard Wagner (1813-1883) was both a musical genius-innovator and a vulgar polemicist. Wagner developed an aestheticism with one fundamental element: it demanded absolute artistic integrity. He shifted styles several times during his career; his *Ring* cycle revived old German epics and advanced a national myth about the history of the German people. He is much criticized for his anti-Semitic attitude, but, a walking contradiction, he attracted ardent Jewish supporters.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) established a new approach to human behavior, psychoanalysis. He accepted the impressionist interpretation that reality is not material, but is based on moods, concepts, and feelings that shift. In Vienna, Freud developed his concepts that the unconscious was shaped during the formative years, that sexuality was a dominant life force, and that free will may not exist. Freud argued his theories in *Origins of Psycohoanalysis* and *Civilizarion and Its Discontents*. The scholarly establishment rejected his unorthodox views as threats to the rationalist tradition of the West.

In science, new developments challenged the certainty and security of the old models. Max Planck's Quantum Physics. Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity, and the findings of Niels Bohr, Hendrik Lorentz, and Ernest

Rutherford, all in physics, led to a new generation of scientists reexamining many assumptions of the past. Just as earthshaking was the rediscovery in 1900 by three biologists studying heredity – Carl Correns, Hugo De Vries, and Ernst von Tschermak – of the 1866 paper of the monk Gregor Mendel. Mendel's findings on the transmission of various traits in sweet peas opened up the new discipline ofgenetics and provided invaluable support for Darwin 's theories.

Impressionism and Symbolism: Forces of the New Art

The turbulence within European cultural life during the fifty years prior to the outbreak of the First World War can be seen most evidently in the new attitudes that emerged in art and literature. Not only did intellectuals find themselves looking for a new synthesis through which to offer new vision and hope, but they were also liberated from limitations imposed on their predecessors through new ideas on optics and physics. Developments in optics enabled artists to look at nature in different ways from those of photographic realism. Painters were now free to pursue the dictates of their imaginations. Impressionism developed in France during the 1870s; Claude Monet, Edouard Manet, Pierre-August Renoir, and others pioneered the new art. Impressionism soon gave way to post-impressionism and later expressionism. At the turn of the century, more radical artistic forms such as symbolism and cubism enjoyed notoriety, if not much acceptance.

Realism itself did not die out, of course; it only branched into new areas, as can be seen in Arnold Böcklin's evocative *Island of the Dead* (1880; see Figure 7-5) and Gustave Caillebotte's arresting Mall all Balcony, Boulevard Haussmann (1880: see Figure 7-6).

Figure 7-5. Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901) was a Swiss painter who spent most of his career in Germany. His *Island of the Dead* (1880-1886) is available in different versions at different museums. The composer Sergey Rachmaninov was inspired to write a tone-poem on seeing this evocative work.

Figure 7-6. Gustave Cailiebotte (1848-1894) was a French impressionist much influenced by developments in photography. His *Man on Balcony, Boulevard Haussmann* (1880) is reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich's from-the-rear portraits.

Impressionism was never a monolithic school or movement, as can be seen in different works by Monet (see Figure 7-7) and Georges Seurat (see Figure 7-8). Each was influenced by different revelations of modern optics, namely what passing impressions might be like to the eye, and how to represent color through dots that mirror the workings of the eye's rods and cones.

Figure 7-7. Claude Monet (1832-1883) tried to render the "impression" of the moment by painting quickly, on site. His masterful and very influential *Impression: Sunrise* (1873) rejects the filled-in realism that had dominated European art since the Italian Renaissance. What could be seen as gaps or unevenness actually merge to make vagueness artistically more truthful, Impressionists thought.

Figure 7-8. Georges Seurat (1859-1891) accomplished great things In his short life, mainly the completion of masterpieces that illustrate a different kind of impressionism, his pointillism. The *Sunday Afternoon on the Isle of Grande-Jatte* is best known, but his *Bathers at Asnières* (1884) is equally astute in forcing the eye to connect dots of color.

Literature was transformed through the writings of such innovators as Oscar Wilde (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*). Thomas Mann (*Death in Venice*), Marcel Proust (the first volume of his great series of novels. *In Search of Time Past*, 1913-1927), and the young James Joyce (Portrait of the *Artist as a Young Man*, and the collection of short stories, *Dubliners*). These writers were interested in themes that had great personal value and meaning. Whereas Joyce emerged as the most seminal stylist of the twentieth century. Proust, building on such astute psychological writers as Fyodor Dostoevsky, may well be the greatest writer of the century, period.