**The Origins of the New Painting.** Philip Nord, Impressionists and Politics, Art and Democracy in the Nineteenth Century. Routledge. pp4-7.

It will help first to explain the circumstances of the movement’s coming into being. The term “impressionism” is a neologism invented in the 1870s. It conjures up visions of an out-of-doors painting, of light-soaked canvases depicting the passing effects of seasons and times of day. The description might well apply to the work of Claude Monet, Renoir, or Pissaro, but not to that of Manet and Degas. Neither made frequent use of the luminous palette which was a hallmark of the true impressionist. Manet experimented in the impressionist mode in the 1870s, but many of the pictures for which he is best known, the *Dejeuner sur l’herbe* (1863) and the *Olympia* (1863), were studio paintings, and Degas almost never worked *en plein air.* When he cast about for a word to identify the collective effort of which he felt himself part, he settled on ‘realist’, a referent with a long -standing and charged history. In a celebrated pamphlet of 1876, the art critic Edmond Duranty (who was close to Degas) eschewed “impressionism” as a descriptive label, proposing instead a more inclusive and less precise tag, “the new painting”. Both terms, impressionism and the new painting, will be used here as synonyms, but the issue of labelling does point to a larger question of genuine importance. If the new painting made room for an assortment of artistic currents, realist as well as impressionist, what gave the movement, so disparate in appearance, its coherence?

Common generational experience provides a partial answer. The new painting first affirmed its identity in the 1860s. Pissaro, the oldest of the artists involved, was born in 1830, and Pissaro’s earliest comrades- Manet (b.1832), Degas (b. 1834), Monet (b. 1840), Renoir (b.1841) - were not far removed in age. The movement was joined in the 1870s by a troop of younger artists , Mary Cassatt and Gustave Caillebotte among them, but the newcomers were not that much younger. Cassatt was born in 1844, Caillebotte in 1848. The new painters were on occasion referred to as the *jeune école,* and when they started out, a youthful ardour was a quality they held in common.

They also shared a deep antipathy toward France’s Academy of Fine Arts. The Academy in the mid-nineteenth century enjoyed extensive institutional prerogatives. Until 1863, it administered the School of Fine Arts, and, as already noted, the Salon. The Academy lost formal control of both the School and the Salon at that date. The former was henceforth governed by a state-appointed board, the latter by an organising jury which consisted in part of state nominees, in part of elected members. Elections (a brief period of liberalisation apart in the late 1860s) were conducted under circumstances of restricted franchise, which excluded most artists from participating. In practice, however, the Academy continued to enjoy considerable informal authority in the art world. The professors appointed to conduct the teaching workshops at the School of Fine Arts were academicians. In 1875, the three principal ateliers were run by Alexandre Cabanel, Jean-Leon Gerome, and Henri Lehmann, Academy-members all. As for Salon elections, voters tended to cast ballots for the masters who trained them (with certain notable exceptions). Cabanel was a perennial victor, and he wielded his power to punishing effect against painters he judged out of sympathy with the academic aesthetic he believed in. To be sure, the Academy harboured artists of varied artistic persuasions, and in this sense it is exaggerated to speak of a single, academic aesthetic. Nevertheless, on certain points there was a modicum of agreement. A painter worthy of the name drew his inspiration from a thematic repertoire founded in the classics of history, literature, and antiquity. And he painted in a style with sufficient surface finish such that colouring and factor did not distract from content. This was the institutional and aesthetic setting in which the new painting crystallised.

The new painters railed against the tyranny of the Salon system; they spurned, and from the very outset, the outworn thematics and stylish good manners of academic art, devoting themselves instead to a painting of modern life that was often rough and unfinished in its execution. The revolt they conducted was a collective and not just an individual effort. No doubt over the course of time, each artist elaborated a signature style. This was above all the case from the 1880s, when the new painters began to lose touch with one another, parting ways in pursuit of more individualised careers. But for a period in the 1860s and 1870s, a robust if sometimes contentious camaraderie reigned among the artists. They shared rooms and painted side by side; they frequented the same salons and cafes, and they exhibited together. Between 1874 and 1886, the *jeune école* mounted eight independent Salons. Not every new painter took equal part in these various manifestations of collective identity. Cassatt and Berthe Morisot (b.1841), as women of breeding, were excluded from joining in the boisterous good fellowship of the cafe. Manet, heart set on making his name at the official Salon, declined to take part in the new painters’ independent exhibitions. But all three had occasion to demonstrate their loyalty to the common enterprise by other means and in other venues. Membership in the group was fixed in part by aesthetic affinity but also by ongoing participation in a particular network of sociability and collective action.

General affiliation, a common aesthetic and institutional project, and a commitment to group endeavour: these were among the defining attributes of the new painting. But I would like to make the additional claim that politics too had a hand in framing the movement’s identity. In a sense, how could it be otherwise? The generation the new painters belonged to was one scarred by political cataclysm. The oldest among them had witnessed first-hand the collapse of the Second Republic. The youngest grew to maturity under the imperial regime of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte (1851-70). And all were of an age to perform military service during the Franco-Prussian war, to absorb as adults the buffets of military defeat and of the civil strife that followed.

A history so turbulent and disturbing did not leave the new painters untouched. Monet met Georges Clemenceau (b.1841) in the 1860s, and the two remained lifelong friends. Renoir judged Léon Gambetta (b.1838) “the simplest and most courteous man I have ever met”. Clemenceau, Gambetta, Rochefort: a more notorious trio of political troublemakers it would be hard to find. They first made names for themselves as uncompromising enemies of Louis-Napoleon’s Second Empire and with equal zeal battled the clerical and crypto-monarchist governments of “Moral Order” that came to power in the mid-1870s (1873-7). Their militancy did not diminish until a new Republic had been founded, France’s Third, and even then Rochefort, the most intransigent of the lot, remained implacable in his oppositionism. The generation that spawned the new painting was the same that shepherded in the Third Republic. The painters and politicians involved in the two enterprises knew, and to a lesser extent, admired each other.

What will be argued here is that such parallels and connections had a formative impact on the new painting. In the 1860s, as the movement began to take shape, it was taken up by a band of critics who couched their praise in an idiom charged with political formulas and catchphrases.

The manoeuvre was not just rhetorical, for the critics themselves were more often than not republicans. Philippe Burty (b.1830), Théodore Duret (b.1838), and Émile Zola (b.1840) are all cases in point. The new painting’s critic friends cast it as an aesthetic analogue to republicanism in politics. The artists, it was claimed, were bent on a democratisation of France’s exhibition system, all the better to bring to the public a modern art which, in its celebration of the pleasures of the everyday, was accessible to the common run of humanity in a secularising age. No more the Salon of old run by a handful of accredited masters. No more an outdated visual culture which presupposed audiences versed in the classic texts, both sacred and profane, of western civilisation.

The *jeune école* did not bridle such characterisations, but then again, they too tended to a republican politics. It was an allegiance that would deepen in the wake of the disasters of 1870-1, *l’annee terrible*. As the decade of the 1870s wore on, the new painters more and more made a home for themselves in the republican society, camping out in its salons and feeding off its social and journalistic resources. The attachment may have been transient, as it was for Degas, or opportunistic as it seems to have been for Renoir, but an attachment there was, and in the cases of Manet and Monet it was sincere and enduring. Indeed, for a portrait of the republic milieu, its interiors and inhabitants, there is no better place to look than the painting of the *jeune école*. The Vichy regime of Marechal Philippe Pétain railed against the political class of the Third Republic as a cabal of Protestants, Freemasons and Jews. It was in just such circles that the new painters travelled, and it is just these faces, in unprecedented numbers, who peer out from the canvases they painted.