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Translating Art into Words: The Work of Claude Monet in the Writings of Gustave Geffroy and Octave Mirbeau

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Translating Art into Words: The Work of Claude Monet in the Writings of Gustave Geffroy and Octave Mirbeau

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Jason Alan Goldstein

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Dedication

To my parents

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In these rather uncertain times, I consider myself particularly fortunate to devote my life to the study and teaching of art and literature. Careful looking and close reading slow down our frenetic pace and encourage creative thought. I have found few things more rewarding than spending an unbroken hour in front of one of Claude Monet's magnificent canvases. Experiencing Monet through the eyes and words of two of his staunchest critical supporters Gustave Geffroy and Octave Mirbeau has enriched my understanding of his paintings in ways I never could have imagined. I would have lacked the means to complete a project of this nature without the following magnanimous individuals and institutions.

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I am forever grateful for the love and encouragement of my family. My parents Gail and Kenneth Goldstein never wavered in their support and faith in me. I dedicate this dissertation to them for everything they have done. I wish to thank my sister Joan and brother-in-law Douglas Aron not only for their compassion and sound advice but also for giving me the most precious nephew and niece. Andrew and Morgan are a constant source of joy in my life.

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L'art dans les deux mondes helped me enormously in my consideration of this text. I never could adequately express my thanks to Professor Marcia Brennan of Rice University. After the untimely passing of Professor Kermit S. Champa, my undergraduate mentor at Brown University, Marcia assumed his role and provided me the direction and guidance I needed to return to the study of art history. Z. Bart Thornton of Collegiate School in Richmond, Virginia taught me the art of close reading and analytical writing, and he remains my academic role model and most trusted mentor. He has nurtured my passion for literature and teaching even when I seemed destined to pursue a radically different path. I extend my heartfelt appreciation to Madame Jane Murdock of The Kinkaid School in Houston, Texas. Madame first inspired a love of French literature many years ago, and she helped me substantially in making sense of some of the opaquer passages of prose and poetry in the research phase of this project.

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Austin, Texas
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Translating Art into Words: The Work of Claude Monet in the Writings of Gustave Geffroy and Octave Mirbeau

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

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This study identifies and assesses evocative modes of description along with visually or pictorially inspired adaptations of language in the critical and literary writings of Claude Monet's staunchest allies – Gustave Geffroy (1855-1926) and Octave Mirbeau (1848-1917). Not only did these two authors publish more on Monet than any other critics of their generation, they also maintained an intimate perspective on the artist's development from the middle of the 1880s to the very end of their lives. As much as Monet's artistic fortune benefited from their favorable and informed publicity, Mirbeau and Geffroy's aesthetic, literary, and critical practices mature and diversify based upon their experience of his paintings. An integration of literary tropes will show how the creative and critical projects of these two authors were informed by and intersected with some of Monet's pictorial methods and aesthetic. At its core, this study considers how these two authors grapple with the issue of relating the discursiveness of verbal language to the presumed near-instantaneity in the appreciation of visual images. It operates as a comparative phenomenological study with Monet's art serving as its focal point. Mirbeau and Geffroy's interpretation of Monet's paintings provides the primary avenue for exploring similarities and differences in the two author's approaches to translating works of art and other sensory phenomena into words. What descriptive and rhetorical strategies

do they develop to close a divide between seeing and saying, between thought and language? How does writing about Monet's paintings intensify their struggles with the limitations of their expressive means? How do their ways of overcoming perceived inadequacies of prose compare with Monet's solutions to pictorial challenges? Through close readings of a limited selection of their texts, I aim to demonstrate how both critical and creative writing can give 'meaning' to 'pictures.' In the process of converting their experience of Monet's art into prose, both critics effectively remake the painter and his canvases in their own image. We will uncover how Geffroy and Mirbeau's artwriting stimulates and appeals to a reader's imagination, along with how their distinctive visualizations and versions of 'Monet' and his art shape our own.

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Prelude

> *Descriptions of visual works of art tend to be boring at least when you don't have an adequate reproduction at hand. I sometimes find interpretation interesting. More often than not, I find it irrelevant or beside the … and beside the* [*sic*] *point.*
>
> — Clement Greenberg, 1976[1]

What could a critic from Claude Monet's era say about his art? Speaking during a later moment in the history of art, Clement Greenberg largely discounted description without the accompaniment of illustration as an engaging or imaginatively gratifying option. The modernist critic's remark establishes a comparative dynamic between image and text in which words operate at a disadvantage. In Greenberg's take, a critic's transformation of the contents of a work of art into words provides little interest or benefit to a viewer's appreciation or understanding, especially in the absence of its visual referent. Interpretation fares almost as poorly in his estimation. Whatever degree of illumination it offers a reader of art criticism pales in comparison to an encounter with the actual object or "an adequate reproduction" of it. Consistent with the positions of the critics examined in this dissertation, Greenberg's observation implies that a work of art communicates its meaning directly and most clearly to a viewer's eye. A verbal rendition or explication of its substance can detract from this experience or proves "beside the point."

This study identifies and assesses evocative modes of description along with visually or pictorially inspired adaptations of language in the critical and literary writings of two of Claude Monet's staunchest allies and closest friends – Gustave Geffroy (1855-1926) and Octave Mirbeau (1848-1917). Not only did these authors collectively publish more on Monet than any other critics of their generation, they also maintained an intimate perspective on the artist's development and changing convictions from the middle of the 1880s to the very end of their lives. As much as Monet's artistic fortunes may have benefited from the favorable and informed publicity these two critics generated for him, Mirbeau and Geffroy's aesthetic, literary, and critical practices respectively mature and diversify based upon a cumulative experience of his paintings. Influential members of the Académie Goncourt, both authors also published fiction and wrote plays — the former enjoying significantly wider acclaim for his novels than the latter.[2] An integration of literary tropes into my discussion will show how the creative and critical projects of these two authors were informed by and intersected with some of Monet's pictorial methods and aesthetic. At its core, this dissertation considers how these two authors grapple with the issue of relating the discursiveness of verbal language to the presumed near-instantaneity in the appreciation of visual images. It operates as a sort of comparative phenomenological study with Monet's art serving as its focal point. Mirbeau and Geffroy's interpretation of Monet's paintings provides a primary avenue for exploring similarities and differences in the two author's approaches to translating works of art and other sensory phenomena into words. What descriptive and rhetorical strategies do Geffroy and Mirbeau develop to close a divide between seeing and saying, between thought and language? How does writing about Monet's paintings intensify their struggles with the limitations of their expressive means? How do their ways of overcoming perceived inadequacies of prose compare with Monet's solutions to pictorial challenges? Through close readings of a limited selection of Mirbeau and Geffroy's texts, I aim to demonstrate how both critical and creative writing can give 'meaning' to 'pictures.' In the process of converting their experience of Monet's art into highly visual prose, both critics effectively remake the painter and his canvases in their own image. In the chapters that follow, we will uncover how Geffroy and Mirbeau's artwriting stimulates and appeals to a reader's imagination, along with how their distinctive visualizations and versions of 'Monet' and his art shape our own.

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[1] Clement Greenberg, *Art Criticism and Art Today*, Symposium at Art Net, London, 15 January 1976, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YTwkcvkT5lE, Accessed 26 September 2017.

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[2] While specialists of nineteenth-century French literature might possess some familiarity with Geffroy's novels and short stories, they mostly have been forgotten. Robert Denommé's *The Naturalism of Gustave Geffroy* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1963) represents the single monographic study concerning his literature in the English language. Mirbeau's novels, including *Le calvaire* (1886), *L'abbé Jules* (1888), *Sébastien Roch* (1890), *Le jardin des supplices* (1899), and *Le journal d'une femme de chambre* (1900), have experienced a considerable resurgence of interest in French literary studies in large part due to the pioneering scholarship of Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet.

The criticism of Gustave Geffroy and Octave Mirbeau predates an era of widely obtainable reproductions of visual art. Greenberg's reservations about the efficacy of description and interpretation, however, possess considerable relevance to these two authors and their methods for writing about Monet's art. As Mirbeau wrote in his catalogue essay for Monet's 1904 exhibition of his *London* series, "[L]a vérité est que l'œuvre d'art ne s'explique pas et qu'on ne l'explique pas. L'œuvre d'art se sent et on la sent, et inversement; rien de plus."[3] [4] We relate to a work of art most intimately and meaningfully on the level of reciprocal feeling: the work of art feels, and we feel it. Self-evident explanation does not factor into the composition or purpose of a painting or sculpture, so a critic futilely expends words in attempting to impose one onto an object. Though Mirbeau does not explicitly reference description in this particular statement, we may reason that it could interfere with or impoverish a sensorial relay between a viewer and a painting. Mirbeau never exempts himself from skepticism about the role and expressive range of a critic: “Et, si je sens, en thèse générale, l’impuissance du critique d’art à expliquer une œuvre d’art, n’est-ce point aussi et surtout que je sens bien davantage mon insuffisance personnelle…?”[5] His acknowledgement of personal deficiencies as an author in this text and other ones strengthens his claims about the ineffectuality of criticism. His repeated professions of doubt signify more than a convenient rhetorical tactic. Mirbeau believes a critic should proceed from feeling and only then with great delicacy and restraint in her writing. Words can interfere with the beauty and purity of the emotions received through our eyes: “[P]aroles et commentaires n’y peuvent rien ajouter, et qu’ils risquent, en s’y mêlant, d’en altérer l’émotion simple, silencieuse et délicieuse.”[6]

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[3] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," in *Vues de la Tamise à Londres (1902-1904)* (Paris: Galeries Durand-Ruel, 1904), 3.

[4] Since this study involves in-depth analysis of rhetorical, syntactical, and linguistic features of primary source materials, I have quoted all passages in the original language in which they were published. When considering the significance of individual words or phrases, I initially will present them in French whenever applicable, and I will use my discussion to elaborate upon their meaning. This practice remains consistent with the dissertations of my predecessors in Monet and Geffroy studies, including those by Steven Levine, Grace Seiberling, and JoAnne Paradise.

In an 1883 article on the decadent poet Maurice Rollinat’s recent publication of *Les névroses*, Geffroy ostensibly opposes Mirbeau’s view on the parameters of a critic’s mission: “La critique a pour rôle d’expliquer les œuvres originales, elle n’a pas mission de les refaire.”[7] Explanation of original works of (literary) art constitutes a critic’s primary responsibility in this statement; she only oversteps her purview in attempting to remake them into her own. This comment occurs in the context of literature, but it reflects more broadly upon what Geffroy scholar JoAnne Paradise has labeled his “scientific” approach to criticism during the 1880s.[8] Paradise argues in her study that Geffroy’s criticism from the 1890s assumes a more poetic cast. I propose to locate an impetus and origins for this shift from explanation to evocation within his criticism of Claude Monet dating from the later 1880s. In a letter thanking the critic for an article on his February 1889 solo exhibition at Boussod, Valadon et Compagnie, Monet credits Geffroy for his ability to improve upon and perfect his paintings through his flawless verbal renderings, "[C]haque toile est si bien faite qu'il n'y a plus un défaut, car vous les complétez en y ajoutant ce qu'il y manque."[9] Explanation of a visual work of art cedes to completing and distilling its significance through suggestive words. In my analysis of a lengthy two-part article dating from 1887 on Monet, I show how the critic's experience of Monet's art contributes substantially to his development of what Edmond de Goncourt characterized as "une langue à la fois poétique et technique."[10] Instead of replicating or transcribing the composition of Monet's canvases in a literal manner, Geffroy designed a language and method of description that emulates or evokes the procedures and effects of his painting. His art criticism emphasizes and mirrors the act of viewing a work of art. As we will discuss in Part Two of this study, Mirbeau observed this very phenomenon in operation in a review of Geffroy's *La vie artistique*: "Il faut le lire comme on regarde une très belle toile, et laisser courir son esprit entre les lignes charmeresses, de même que, entre les arabesque des toile aimées…."[11] Mirbeau urges us to read Geffroy's criticism in the same way as we look at a beautiful painting.

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[5] Mirbeau, “Claude Monet,” in *Vues de la Tamise à Londres*, 5.

[6] Ibid., 3.

[7] Geffroy, “Chronique: Les ‘Névroses,’” *La justice*, 1 March 1883, 1.

[8] See Paradise’s section, “The Critic,” in *Gustave Geffroy and the Criticism of Painting*, Diss. Stanford University, 1982 (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1985), pp. 107 – 127.

Most of Mirbeau and Geffroy's artwriting initially appeared either as a preface to an exhibition catalogue or in newspapers of varying political orientations and readership. In the rare instances when publishers included drawings or other forms of illustration, these images serve an ancillary purpose and bear only a minor relation to the content of their texts. Technological limitations of the later nineteenth and early twentieth century certainly account in large part for a dearth of reproductions within their texts. Mirbeau and Geffroy's era of criticism, however, differs drastically from Greenberg's in respect to a reader's minimal access to supplemental images in other contexts. In an age when reproductions were scarce, why would these critics minimize or depart from more literal or elaborated forms of description of works of art in their texts? What material aspects of Monet's paintings may have induced their hesitancy to forward a definitive or all-encompassing interpretation or explanation of his art? Spatial constraints imposed by writing in the popular press undoubtedly factor into the lesser importance placed upon these two methods of transforming visual works of art into words. But something beyond practical considerations informs Mirbeau and Geffroy's manner of depicting and elucidating features of Monet's art.

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[9] "Letter to Gustave Geffroy," [n.d.], Letter No. 2746 (912a) in Daniel Wildenstein, *Claude Monet: Biographie et catalogue raisonné*, 5 vols. (Lausanne and Paris: Bibliothèque des arts, 1974-1991; reprinted in 4 vols. and published by Taschen-Institut Wildenstein, Paris, 1997). In subsequent notes, I will abbreviate the citation format of Monet's letters in the following manner: "Letter to x," "Date," and "L. xx" (denoting the number assigned to a letter in the five-volume version of Wildenstein's catalogue raisonné). The republication of the catalogue unfortunately does not include Monet's letters.

[10] Edmond de Goncourt, "Préface," in Gustave Geffroy, *La vie artistique* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1892), 1:i.

[11] Mirbeau, "*La vie artistique*," *Le journal*, 31 May 1894, 1.

Geffroy and Mirbeau's interpretive, stylistic, and descriptive modes follow in the tradition of modern French art criticism founded by Diderot and enhanced with more poetic tendencies by Baudelaire. As Alexandra Wettlaufer argues within her study *In the Mind's Eye: The Visual Impulse in Diderot, Baudelaire and Ruskin*, these three critics formulated an energetic, evocative prose that prompted a reader to feel and reimagine their experience of a work of art.[12] Privileging their experience of a painting over a narrative of its contents, they sought to transfer some of the "immediacy" and expressive plenitude of visual art into their prose.[13] A reader then completes a process of signification through her own visualization of a critic's experience. Wettlaufer defines the visual impulse informing their art criticism as "the desire to transcend the limitations of language and make the reader *see*."[14] Cultivating a visual impulse in their texts, Diderot, Baudelaire, and Ruskin convey aspects of experience and feeling that customarily elude words.[15]

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[12] Alexandra K. Wettlaufer, *In the Mind's Eye: The Visual Impulse in Diderot, Baudelaire and Ruskin* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2003), 12.
[13] Ibid.

One of the more pronounced manifestations of a visual impulse within the criticism of Geffroy and Mirbeau relates to the way material and physical components of Monet's paintings disappear in their evocative verbal images of his art. Both critics instead present us with a series of unmediated views of the landscape motifs that inspired his paintings. In some sense, they translate their experience of Monet's art into prose as verbal tableaux based directly upon nature. This descriptive strategy derives from the very sensations they feel when they are standing in front of Monet's canvases: a divide between art and nature collapses. Mirbeau initially observes this phenomenon in a March 1889 article on Monet for *Le figaro*: "Et il nous arrive cette impression que bien des fois j'ai ressentie en regardant les tableaux de M. Claude Monet: c'est que l'art disparaît, s'efface, et que nous ne nous trouvons plus qu'en présence de la nature vivante…."[16] Meditating on the *Rouen Cathedral* series in 1895, Geffroy also intuits that Monet had transcended all of the technical barriers of the medium and thereby created dematerialized images of pure light:

> Cette fois, il semble que tout obstacle matériel ait disparu. Toute idée de peinture, de moyens employés, de couleurs mélangées, s'en va. Une mystérieuse opération s'est faite. L'art de Monet épuré, dépouillé, purifié, pourrait en dire, de tout alliage visible, conquiert un espace inconnu de lumière, et une nouvelle vérité nous apparaît.[17]

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[14] See the synopsis on the back cover of *In the Mind's Eye*. Wettlaufer elsewhere explains the visual impulse as "that desire to make the reader see" (p. 296) or as "the desire to render the act of reading a visual experience" (p. 21).

[15] Wettlaufer, *In the Mind's Eye*, 67.

[16] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," *Le figaro*, 10 March 1889, 1.

[17] Geffroy, "Claude Monet," *Le journal*, 10 May 1895, 1-2.

In viewing Monet's art, these critics momentarily forget they are looking at an image comprised of paint and canvas and are transported into nature itself. For Mirbeau and Geffroy, Monet transforms the language of painting in a manner so harmonious with nature that his art becomes an extension of it. As we read and visualize these two critics' images of his paintings, we in turn see nature filtered through their own eyes.

This study consists of two main parts, and each one of them features three sections. In the first section of Geffroy's 'Monet' (Part One) and Mirbeau's 'Monet' (Part Two), I seek to define both authors' conceptions of the critic, artist, work of art, and viewer-reader through examining an array of passages from their criticism and literature, as well as correspondence with and from Monet. In the initial section of Part One, I employ a few extracts from Edmond de Goncourt's preface to Geffroy's first volume of *La vie artistique* to establish the visual properties of his art criticism. I argue that Geffroy does not merely reproduce or replicate a painting in prose. Recognizing the imprecise nature of an exchange between visual and verbal expression, he instead develops a language that induces a reader to recreate an image of a work of art for herself. In the first section of Part Two, I begin with an analysis of passages from Mirbeau's 1907 interview with the journalist Paul Gsell to illustrate his skepticism about a critic's ability to translate visual experience into words. In his interview with Gsell, Mirbeau attributes the immediacy of the relay between a viewer's eye and a painting to the transparent and truthful nature of its expressive means. In contrast to the language of painting, words operate at a remove from vision and are subject to obfuscation; we feel their effects only through some form of mediation, transformation, and contextualization. At the conclusion of this section, I propose that Geffroy's criticism functions as his paradigm for how to overcome the intrinsic complexities of writing about a work of art.

The second section of Parts One and Two features a close reading of a single text from each author to assess how the visual impulse within their prose and their attitudes about criticism play out in practice. In the second section of Part One, I review Geffroy's two-part 'Hors du Salon' article on Monet from 1887. Before addressing the descriptive components in the second part of this exhibition review, I consider a few passages within the first half that provide a rationale for Geffroy's interpretation. I follow with an extensive meditation upon what the term "transcrire" entails in the second article on Monet's exhibition at Galerie Georges Petit. In the second section of Part Two, I reflect upon Mirbeau's 1891 essay in *L'art dans les deux mondes*. I devote most of my analysis to his development of a suite of verbal tableaux based on Monet's garden and a trio of highly poeticized meditations on Monet's figure paintings. These more lyrical forms of description enable him to circumvent some of the deficiencies he associates with art criticism and words in general. In both of these sections, I have assumed the task of the participatory reader-viewer to its fullest extent by engaging these two critical texts on virtually a sentence-by-sentence level. In adopting this approach, I hope to show how every word matters or at least vitally contributes to their distinctive constructions of a 'Monet.'

The third sections of Parts One and Two consider how Mirbeau and Geffroy's ideas about Monet and visual art in general permeate aspects of their literary projects. In section three of Part One, I inspect Geffroy's travelogue "Belle-Île-en-Mer" in *Pays d'ouest* and track the comparisons Geffroy establishes between painted and verbal images of this Breton island's massive boulders and tumultuous waters. I also observe him reflecting upon a set of representational challenges similar to the ones Monet articulates in his correspondence. By framing and composing "Belle-Île-en-Mer" as a compilation of 'notes,' Geffroy adapts the evocative, memory-inducing properties of Monet's sketches to his prose and offers a reader more immediate access to his primary sensations. In the third section of Part Two, I begin by tracing the pervasiveness of doubt and feelings of artistic impotence in the correspondence of Mirbeau and Monet. The remainder of the section focuses on meditations by Mirbeau's fictional painter Lucien in *Dans le ciel* about the complications and limitations of expression. In contrast to Monet's obsessive quest to paint impossible things, Lucien's own one devolves into madness and, ultimately, suicide. Lucien's patterns of language, aesthetic goals, and feelings of creative inertia, however, resonate profoundly with Mirbeau and Monet. I will demonstrate how certain aspects of this character's artistic disposition reflect an exchange of ideas between the painter and the author.

What will I be able to say about Claude Monet's art that has not been uttered on countless occasions in ever so slightly different fashions? Over one hundred years earlier, Mirbeau had betrayed a similar anxiety: "Que dire de Claude Monet qui n'ait été dit, répété mille fois, aussi bien en France qu'en Angleterre, en Belgique, en Amérique et en Allemagne?"[18] Richard Shiff offers in the preface to his book *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism* a beneficial notion to keep in mind when writing about canonical artists and their works, "As successive generations view an object of art, it acquires layers of interpretation."[19] Any attempt to peel away this interpretive patina and view Monet's paintings with the freshness and originality of Geffroy and Mirbeau would amount to an act of art historical fiction or fantasy. I undeniably will revisit passages of criticism, correspondence, and even literary texts that have received copious amounts of investigation in Monet, Geffroy, and Mirbellien scholarship. In addition to obtaining inspiration from Alexandra Wettlaufer's study, I have benefited from the contributions of four nineteenth-century specialists in particular. Steven Levine's *Monet and His Critics* serves as a foundational work for understanding the terms and conditions of the artist's reception by both hostile and sympathetic writers from his time. Though I deviate from his application of a psychoanalytical lens to Monet's art, Levine's more recent scholarship has revealed the significance of numerous pieces of Monet's correspondence I too will explore in this study. The extraordinary breadth and depth of JoAnne Paradise's dissertation *Gustave Geffroy and the Criticism of Painting* provides a rich historical, cultural, and intellectual context for his artwriting. Her penetrating analysis of Geffroy's texts on Monet also has influenced my own. Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet form the gravitational center of the Mirbellian universe, and the rest of us orbit around their bright stars. Michel and Nivet's meticulous biography on Mirbeau, their exhaustive recovery and documentation of his critical and literary texts, and their publications on every conceivable dimension of his oeuvre have facilitated a thriving discourse on the author. Without the extensive research of these scholars, the more narrow scope of this study would not have been possible. Though I will cover some rather familiar territory and establish a few similar points about this material along the way, I intend to deal on a more fundamental level with how Geffroy and Mirbeau modify their modes of describing to reflect and accommodate the more fluid grammar and syntax of Monet's paintings. Preceding studies on Monet and his critics have concentrated either on situating these texts within a larger historical context or on redefining or evaluating the terms of the artist's reception. I have abandoned any ambition of comprehensiveness in favor of an intensive examination of the rhetorical and linguistic components of a handful of critical and literary works. My presentation differs methodologically and thematically from my predecessors in three key areas: (a) its more exclusive focus on the descriptive elements of Geffroy and Mirbeau’s art criticism; (b) its integration of visual analysis of Monet’s paintings in relation to these texts; (c) its examination of how Mirbeau and Geffroy’s experience and understanding of Monet’s art potentially shapes aspects of their literary practice. The seemingly infinite nuances of Monet’s art and the critical writings it inspired assuredly will support yet another layer of thought.

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[18] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," *L'art dans les deux mondes*, 7 March 1891, 184.

[19] Richard Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism: A Study of the Theory, Technique, and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), xiii.

Part One: Geffroy's 'Monet'

SECTION ONE: "UNE LANGUE À LA FOIS POÉTIQUE ET TECHNIQUE": GUSTAVE GEFFROY'S CONCEPTION OF THE CRITIC, ARTIST, WORK OF ART, AND VIEWER-READER

In 1892, Gustave Geffroy released the first of eight volumes of recently published art criticism under the title, *La vie artistique*.[20] For the initial installment of these collected works, he solicited a preface from his friend and literary mentor, the eminent novelist, publisher, and critic of eighteenth-century French and Japanese art Edmond de Goncourt.[21]

Goncourt launches his foreword with a recollection of a conversation with Geffroy regarding a proposal to pen this introductory text for *La vie artistique*. While Geffroy presumably stands before him in his salon at *la maison d'Auteuil*, Goncourt poses a question to the critic, and, by extension, for a reader of his preface to ponder. The elder critic inquires of his friend with apparent skepticism about his suitability for the task of commenting authoritatively about a collection of writings on modern art:

> A quoi pensez-vous, mon ami, de me demander une préface pour *La vie artistique* ?… (ellipses in original) Je suis au fond un critique vieux jeu, un amateur de la peinture au bain d'huile, … de la peinture Rubens, de Watteau, de la peinture transparente, de la peinture avec des profondeurs… et je ne vois, pour

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[20] In some cases, Geffroy made revisions to his articles when he republished them in the volumes of *La vie artistique*. Instead of quoting from the versions of the texts that appear in *La vie artistique*, I will rely upon the language, paragraph order, and complete contents of the original articles for my analysis of his writings on Monet. For brief passages in texts not dedicated solely to Monet, I will quote from versions of the articles in *La vie artistique*, when applicable.

[21] Geffroy, along with Mirbeau, regularly appeared at Goncourt's social and literary gatherings, including his weekly *Grenier* salon. For a thorough account of Geffroy's biography, see among other sources: JoAnne Paradise, *Gustave Geffroy and the Criticism of Painting*; and Robert Denommé, *The Naturalism of Gustave Geffroy*. For a discussion of Geffroy's personal and professional relationship with Edmond de Goncourt, see Debora L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 217-219.

> ainsi dire à l'heure qu'il est, que de la peinture plâtreuse, dartreuse, qui s'efforce d'imiter la peinture à la détrempe…[22] [23]

The 'old-fashioned' critic's preliminary hesitation essentially stems from distaste for the materiality and techniques of modern painting.

As Goncourt's statement underscores, he instead champions the paintings of a Rubens or a Watteau for their luminosity and illusions of depth developed in part through their glossy surfaces and delicate glazes. Even in the 1890s, modern paintings, including those of Claude Monet, still were subject to disapproval or incomprehension for their superabundance of impasto ("plâtreuse"); the coarseness of their execution ("dartreuse"); and, reminiscent of medieval tempera painting, the matte and illusionistically flat quality of their unvarnished surfaces ("la peinture à la détrempe"). Though Goncourt conceivably had in mind a pastiche of Monet's technique from a third-rate academician as the primary target of his discontent, his reluctance to credit impressionist painters with producing anything beyond a sketch (and a derivative one at that) is well documented.[24] Like the impressionists, Goncourt professes his fondness for Japanese painting in these remarks, but he questions the ultimate value of emulating "un procédé inférieur, incomplet, insuffisant, un procédé de peuple primitif."[25] Goncourt proceeds to qualify his misgivings about the techniques of modern artists by factoring in his experience as "un amateur de la peinture au bain d'huile." He attributes his inability to relate to the manner of painters who benefit most immediately from Geffroy's critical perspicuity to his overall absorption within eighteenth-century art: "[J]'ai trop vécu dans la peinture du dix-huitième siècle …; je me suis tenu trop à l'écart de la peinture moderne…."[26]

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[22] Edmond de Goncourt, "Préface," in *La vie artistique* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1892), 1:i.

[23] All ellipses are my own unless otherwise noted.

[24] Responding to a passage from George Moore's *Confessions* published in *La revue indépendante*, Goncourt wrote in a journal entry dated 8 May 1888: "Ah! les bons impressionnistes! Il n'y a qu'eux, d'artistes! De drôles d'artistes qui n'ont jamais pu *réaliser* quoi que ce soit…Or la difficulté de l'art, c'est la réalisation: l'œuvre poussée à ce degré de fini qui la sort de la croquade, de l'esquisse, et en fait un tableau… Oui, des esquisseurs, des faiseurs de taches, et encore des taches qui ne sont pas de leur invention, des taches volées à Goya, des taches volées aux Japonais… (ellipses in original)" In Goncourt, *Journal: Mémoires de la vie littéraire, 1851-1896*, Ed. Robert Ricatte (Monaco: Les éditions de l'imprimerie nationale de Monaco, 1956), 15:110. For further commentary on the relationship between Goncourt's *l'écriture-artiste* and impressionist painting, see David Weir, "Decadence and Naturalism: The Goncourt's *Germinie Lacerteux*," in *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), pp. 42-58.

[25] Goncourt, "Préface," 1:ii.

According to Goncourt's narrative, Geffroy remained fundamentally undeterred from hearing his mentor's reservations about contributing a preface to *La vie artistique*. Only the subtle emergence of "une moue d'enfant contrarié" at the corners of the younger critic's mouth belied "la tendresse sourieuse" of his expression.[27] So what was Goncourt to do? If his frank admission of skepticism about the techniques of modern painters would not dissuade Geffroy, then perhaps the most expedient means to evade the task at hand would be to obviate it: "Une préface, une préface…Mais qu'a besoin d'une préface d'un quelconque, *La vie artistique*!"[28] The contents of *La vie artistique* conceivably spoke best for themselves, and a critical statement on them would function as an unnecessary embellishment or would even run the risk of misrepresenting them – especially, "une préface d'un quelconque."

Beyond deriving from sentiments of inadequacy or superfluity, Goncourt's self-deprecating tone extends from technical considerations, but the medium in question in this particular instance is linguistic rather than pictorial. In addition to defining himself as a critic at odds with "la peinture plâtreuse, dartreuse," Goncourt diminishes his capability to speak or ultimately to write about modern painting with the requisite language: "Et vous parlez de Rodin, de Carrière, de Whistler, de Jongkind, de Monet, de Renoir, de Puvis de Chavannes, de Pissarro, de notre ami Raffaëlli, beaucoup mieux que je ne peux en parler."[29] In Goncourt's estimation, what qualities does Geffroy's criticism possess that enable him to speak about Monet and other contemporary artists with considerably greater fluency? To seal his argument for the volumes of *La vie artistique* to be unencumbered by the words of an author perhaps too deeply ensconced in Watteau's *Cythera*, Goncourt distinguishes Geffroy's writing as exceptionally suited to the task of describing and evaluating modern painting:

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[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

> Vous êtes l'écrivain – je le dis tous les jours – qui avez la plus admirable langue picturale, une langue colorée juste au point qu'il faut, une langue à la fois poétique et technique, et une langue charriant des idées dans de la clarté: – enfin le plus beau français moderne qui soit.[30]

A beautifully modern French capable of conveying ideas with clarity: Such language accords more naturally with the spectral colors and the emphatic and improvisatory brushwork of impressionism than anything Goncourt could formulate.

Consistent with Goncourt's characterization of Geffroy's French, "clarté" forms an essential component of modern verbal and visual means of expression. While Goncourt employs the word *clarté* in this context chiefly to denote the clearness of Geffroy's language, *clarté* also may refer to lightness or brightness, or metonymically, light itself. As we will examine further in our analysis of Geffroy's criticism and literature, light is the language that nature itself speaks, and Monet imbues his painted landscapes with a radiance of prismatic colors equivalent to the ones emitted from the rays of the sun. In a concluding paragraph written on an exhibition of Monet's series of *Grainstacks*, Geffroy observes the pervasiveness and consistency of Monet's painterly means of diffusing natural light throughout his canvases: "Ce même langage que parle la lumière dans les paysages des meules, la lumière le parle encore dans ces quelques toiles ajoutées ici par Claude Monet à cette série significative."[31] Whether Monet paints one or two conically shaped grainstacks in a barren agrarian field or a young woman gracefully stepping through a windswept meadow (W. 1076 and 1289; figs. 1 and 2),[32] he communicates the transient qualities of atmospheric light through variegated hues of pigment. Light *speaks* in all of Monet's paintings, and the components of its language are colored brushstrokes.

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[29] Ibid., 1:iii. Geffroy's and Goncourt's "ami Raffaëlli" painted Edmond's portrait in 1888.

[30] Ibid., 1:ii-iii.

In his short story "Les ombres," Geffroy enumerates the material means that enable a 'magical' transformation of words into images: "les objets familiers de la magique opération: l'obscur encrier, la plume conductrice des idées et des mots, le papier blanc imprégné de lumière où doivent venir se fixer les images."[33] Substituting a dark inkwell for a palette and a pen for a paintbrush, the author, like his impressionist counterpart, engages the play of light as an active ingredient in the composition of images. Whether the support is white canvas or white paper, light dances off its surface and envelops the world surrounding painter and author with its brilliance. Geffroy also reveals a principal aspiration of his writing in this brief inventory that further supports a notion of correspondence between the language of painting and prose: "[L]a magique opération" has a visual orientation to it. Paralleling the aims of the impressionist painter, Geffroy aspires to apply the tools and forms of verbal language to arrest fugitive images on light-drenched paper. Words and ideas flowing from the author's mind elicit pictures through a confluence of ink, pen, paper, and ambient conditions, including light.

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[31] Geffroy, "Chronique: Les 'Meules' de Claude Monet," *La justice*, 6 May 1891, 2. This essay was simultaneously published as an introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Gustave Geffroy, *Exposition d'œuvres récentes de Claude Monet dans les galeries Durand-Ruel* (Paris: Imprimeur de l'Art, 1891). I unfortunately have been unable to obtain a copy of the essay in the original exhibition catalogue, so I will reference the text as it appears in *La justice*.

[32] "W. xx" refers to the number assigned to Monet's works in Daniel Wildenstein, *Claude Monet: Biographie et catalogue raisonné*, 5 vols. (Lausanne and Paris: Bibliothèque des arts, 1974-1991; reprinted in 4 vols. and published by Taschen-Institut Wildenstein, Paris, 1997).

[33] Geffroy, "Les ombres," in *Le cœur et l'esprit* (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1894), 11-12.

Clarté is but one facet of Goncourt's 'daily' adulation for the critic's talents. His superlative declaration largely revolves around the eidetic properties of Geffroy's writing. Having developed a specifically modern idiom of French prized by Goncourt for its clarity, the critic crafts a verbal analogue to previously inscrutable marks within contemporary paintings. Geffroy cultivates "la plus admirable langue picturale" to translate the visual effects of a painting into words that in turn form a mental image in the reader's mind. His pictorially inspired language lends a degree of literal and metaphorical depth that Goncourt finds lacking in modern paintings by appealing to them on more comparable or suitable terms. Geffroy transforms the sketchily rendered features of "la peinture plâtreuse, dartreuse" into more fully resolved pictures by maximizing the visual potential of words.

Geffroy's language moreover succeeds in evoking the effects of an image for his readers by approximating one of painting's most fundamental technical means – color. Goncourt lauds him for relying upon "une langue colorée juste au point qu'il faut" to represent a broad range of works from the history of art in the pages of *La vie artistique*. From describing a carving of the night goddess Nephthys on the interior walls of an Egyptian sarcophagus at the Louvre to chronicling "une originale histoire philosophique de la chair parisienne" of Manet's *Olympia*, his words enliven features of art that would remain opaque to a reader of a less visually attuned critic.[34] Goncourt uses "colorée" namely in its figurative sense to connote the vivid, picturesque, and energetic nature of Geffroy's language. The adjective also brings to mind the capacity of material color to animate an image through its diversity of hues and values and its associations with emotive or symbolic effects. In composing verbal complements to modern visual art,

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[34] Goncourt, "Préface," 1:iii.

Geffroy searches for a vocabulary that captures the material and metaphorical properties of ‘local’ color – a theme we will witness him exploring in his collection of short stories, *Pays d’ouest*.

From Goncourt’s perspective, the author of *La vie artistique* has devised a form of artwriting flexible and expansive enough to encompass a full range of modern painting’s technical and representational means and its expressive and evocative ends. The language Geffroy applies to describing his experience of art’s form and content is “à la fois poétique et technique.” In order to impart the plastic qualities of painting to words, the critic develops a language that respects, amplifies, and attends to the way a picture is made. An author lacking a vocabulary for and a sensitivity to the formal aspects of painting hardly can account for a kind of picture making in which the brushstrokes and color combinations are no longer veiled beneath “[un] bain d’huile.” This style of painting demands a critic who unabashedly embraces its frankness of means with equal candor about his own technical procedures and linguistic constraints. As Geffroy affirms in his art criticism, Monet’s abstracted painterly structures resist descriptive language, and words, at times, threaten to impoverish or compromise the experience of viewing the actual work of art.

In his discussion of “originality” and how it is encoded and signified within nineteenth-century French painting, Richard Shiff observes metaphorical procedures embedded within representational techniques: “It is as if any given technique operates as a metaphor, not only transferring the meaning of the ‘original’ to its representation, but also transforming the original by giving it a new representational context.”[35] As Geffroy (or any other critic for that matter) converts pictures into words, he depends upon the grammar and syntax of one medium to translate the contents of another.[36] Painting and writing have their own techniques, their own morphology. Pictorial language functions in metaphorical terms in the sense that it may rival or evoke the procedures and effects of a painting, but it never can create an absolute equivalent or exact duplication of them. In "transferring" a picture into words, a work of art is "transformed" both as it takes shape by way of a new system of signs, and as it assumes altered dimensions from the imaginative faculties and temperament of an author, and eventually, a reader. Geffroy's meditations on Monet's paintings cannot and do not operate as identical or interchangeable substitutions for works of visual art. In reading Geffroy's criticism, we are invited to look at a painting through the lens of another viewer. It is Geffroy's 'Monet' we see.

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[35] Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism,* xv.

In her consideration of the manner in which Denis Diderot's *Salons* constitute "efforts to render prose a visual experience,"[37] Alexandra Wettlaufer affirms a reciprocal relationship between painting and language: "If painting is a language, language can be a painting, or at least the seeds of a painting that may be synthesized in the mind of each reader as she or he deems fit."[38] Equipped with "une langue à la fois technique," Geffroy similarly aims to narrow a gap between painting and writing through a form of art criticism that emphasizes and mirrors the act of viewing. Put another way, I will argue that Geffroy does not seek merely to reproduce or replicate a painting in prose. Recognizing the imprecision and processes of conversion intrinsic to an exchange between the visual and verbal, he instead adopts a language that induces a reader to recreate an image of a work of art for herself.[39] In receiving Geffroy's image of 'Monet,' we extend this dual operation of transferal and transformation through our synthesis of the critic's words into mental pictures and experiences of our own.

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[36] For an illuminating discussion on the metamorphosis of the implications of translation, see Kurt Heinzelman, "'The Grail of Origin': Translation and Originality," *The Writer's Chronicle* 47, no. 6 (May/Summer 2015): 92-102. For further consideration of changing attitudes and approaches to translation in the nineteenth century, see Dominique Julien, "Translation as Illustration: The Visual Paradigm in Mallarmé's Translations of Poe," *Word and Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* 30, no. 3 (July – September 2014): 249-260.

[37] Wettlaufer, *In the Mind's Eye*, 94.

[38] Ibid., 120.

An accomplished technical vocabulary deft enough to convey the material and emotive particularities of modern painting compromises only half of Geffroy's linguistic acumen. According to Goncourt, Geffroy's real feat derives from the fact that his critical language is "*à la fois* poétique et technique" (my emphasis). The coinciding infusion of poetic effects into a form of prose sensitive to the techniques of modern painting prevents Geffroy's criticism from becoming dry and clinical analysis. The imagistic potential of this poetic language encourages a reader to visualize Geffroy's encounter with works of art and to participate actively in the production of meaning through engaging with the more allusive and multisensory qualities of his texts. As Wettlaufer explains in her discussion of Diderot's theory of the *trait*:

> But due to the individual and associative nature of language, the poet can only suggest, and the *reader* becomes a creator, a painter and an integral part of the artistic process. In this way, Diderot comes to identify poetry's *advantage* over the work of visual art, which is tied to a single and concrete image.[40]

Similar to his Enlightenment predecessor, Geffroy introduces poetry's and poetic language's power to distill an idea or an image down to a few essential, evocative words or short phrases into his art criticism and literature as well. Instead of attempting to describe paintings in exhaustive and laborious detail, the critic allows for a series of carefully selected elements expressed in energetic, suggestive terms to stimulate a reader's imagination. A reader then synthesizes certain effects or impressions into an image of her own design.[41] By simultaneously importing painting's appeal to vision and poetry's affinity for suggestion, Geffroy's "langue à la fois poétique et technique" encourages a reader to become a viewer who produces a personal conception of a work of art through her imagination.

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[39] As discussed in the prelude to this study, this study derives inspiration from Alexandra Wettlaufer's book, especially from its attention to the strategies and solutions Diderot and Baudelaire conceive of in bridging the divide between seeing and saying, between thought and language. In particular, see Chapter 2, "Diderot's Visual Impulse: Gesture, Hieroglyph and the Visual Imagination," pp. 69-120.

[40] Ibid., 119.

Goncourt's recognition of the "poétique" nature of Geffroy's language complements the critic's own ascription of lyrical qualities to paintings, especially those of Claude Monet. Beginning with his 1891 catalogue introduction to the *Grainstacks* exhibition, Geffroy frequently compared Monet himself to a poet and the painter's series to visual poems. In that essay, Geffroy characterizes Monet as "un grand poète panthéiste" and underlines the synthetic qualities of his art with his capacity to "résumer la poésie de l'univers dans un espace restreint."[42] In a chapter on the subsequent *Peupliers* series in his 1922 biography on Monet, he relates the pictorial structure and exhibition presentation of these canvases to a form of visual poetry: "Ainsi se développe ce poème changeant et harmonieux, aux phrases nuancées, si étroitement suivies et unies que l'on a la sensation, par ces quinze toiles, d'une seule œuvre aux parties inséparables."[43] His statement introduces a desired dimension of permanence to Monet's assemblage of the series, for the single works form "parties inséparables." The absence of one of the fifteen paintings in the ensemble of the *Peupliers* series conceivably destroys an opportunity to discern their proper or intended effect. A lamenting about the inevitable fragmentation of

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[41] Ibid., 118.

[42] Geffroy, "Chronique: Les 'Meules' de Claude Monet," 1-2.

[43] Geffroy, *Claude Monet: Sa vie, son temps, son œuvre* (Paris: Les éditions G. Crès et Compagnie, 1922), 299. Geffroy's notion of the paintings as "si étroitement suivies" remains problematic in its implications of a consecutiveness or sequence to the series. Monet does not explicitly advocate a sequential viewing or interpretation of his series in any surviving remarks from letters or published interviews. Including Geffroy, the critics of Monet's era and beyond have persisted, however, in representing or treating the individual canvases as chronologically ordered moments in time.

Monet's series and the adoption of poetic metaphors and lyrical language to describe them represented two of the most prevalent aspects of a discourse that privileged the effects of the ensemble over individual paintings.[44] Why do Monet's series paintings elicit associations with poetry and poetic effects? Linking the ensemble to a poem could derive from a need to provide an interpretive framework that accentuates the more ineffable or transcendent qualities of a series. Equating Monet's series with the linguistic devices and structure of poetry in addition to employing "une langue poétique" allows for the evocation of synaesthetic or sensual qualities that may elude prose or resist explanation. An analogy to poetry furthermore provides Geffroy and other critics with a metaphor to express an intuitively perceived slippage between mimesis and abstraction in Monet's paintings. The further Monet pares down the readily nameable components of his representational vocabulary, the more complicated it becomes to assign words that adequately portray his effects. Abstracted painterly structures resist language's confinement. In certain passages of paintings from the second *Nymphéas* series produced between 1903 and 1908, for instance, a combination of brushstrokes could stand for water, reflections, or tangled weeds beneath the surface (W. 1697, fig. 3). Monet's marks retain a high level of opacity; they are polysemous.

After his extended compliment-laden rejoinder to Geffroy's invitation, Goncourt inserts the younger critic's voice into this dialogue for the first and only occasion in the preface simply to ask, "Enfin, vous me refusez?"[45] Having expended his entire arsenal of reservations about his own capabilities and assertions about the superiority of Geffroy's

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[44] Another example contributing to this discourse of the ensemble and its poetic properties includes Louis de Fourcaud's observation in his review of the 1909 *Nymphéas* exhibition, "Je ne pense pas sans tristesse à la dispersion prochaine de ces œuvres de ravissement, qui ne constituent qu'une seule œuvre, faites pour se compléter, elles n'auront étés réunies qu'une seule fois, et peu de temps, pour donner la notion entière et l'entier sentiment du poème qu'elles développent." In Fourcaud, "M. Claude Monet et le lac du jardin des fées," *Le gaulois*, 22 May 1909, 1.

[45] Goncourt, "Préface," 1:iv.

"plus beau français modern qui soit" for the task of writing about contemporary art, Goncourt acquiesces and assents to rounding out the remainder of his preface with "un petit bout d'étude sur Carrière (fig. 4)."[46] In keeping with Geffroy's propensity to reserve his most original criticism for those artists among his acquaintances and friends, Goncourt justifies his selection of Eugène Carrière as the focal point of his preface on the basis of his personal connections with the painter: "[L]es hasards des rencontres de la vie m'ont fait connaître un peu plus que vos autres peintres…."[47] A resolution to devote the remainder of his preface to the biography and work of Carrière also reinforces the critic's contention that an author's verbal language should align with the style and techniques of the visual art he chooses for his subject.[48] Goncourt feels most secure in directing his eye and pen toward the one modern artist among Geffroy's cohort who "continue le plus habilement la tradition de la grande peinture ancienne."[49] Though indisputably innovative and modern in their own right, both Goncourt and Carrière express themselves in a form of visual language more firmly rooted in their respective artistic traditions than a Geffroy or a Monet. Goncourt implies that his *écriture artiste* more readily accommodates

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[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid. Geffroy apparently introduced Carrière to Goncourt, and the painter completed a portrait of him in 1896. In a journal entry from 19 October 1889, Goncourt lavishes some lofty praise on Carrière after viewing one of his paintings at the Exposition Universelle of that year: "J'ai enfin trouvé la vraie définition du talent de Carrière: c'est un Velasquez crépusculaire." In *Journal*, 16:159. In a later entry from 5 June 1890, Goncourt recalls a visit to Carrière's home where he witnessed the artist in the process of painting a portrait of Gustave Geffroy: "Après la lecture de la pièce, Ajalbert m'entraîne chez Carrière, qui habite tout près à la *Villa des Arts*, une triste villa aux murs d'un gris demi-deuil et aux petites portes d'un rouge pompéien. Je trouve Carrière en train de peindre d'après nature un grand portrait de Geffroy, qu'il doit réduire pour mon volume." In *Journal*, 17:62.

[48] My singular use of male gender pronouns here is deliberate. For a discussion of the misogyny and female fetishism in the writings of the Brothers Goncourt, see Emily Apter, "Mystical Pathography: A Case of Maso-fetishism in the Goncourts' *Madame Gervaisais*," in *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 124-146.

[49] Goncourt, "Préface," 1:iv.

Carrière's "clair-obscur de la vie" than the scintillating palette of one of Monet's Mediterranean landscapes (W. 877, fig. 5).[50]

At some point likely during the spring of 1889,[51] Monet sent a letter to Geffroy thanking him for his review of the painter's February exhibition at Boussod, Valadon et Compagnie.[52] Simply titled *Monet*, this intimate exhibition of nine canvases showcased both the artist's return to publicly displaying figure painting after an almost exclusive concentration on landscape throughout the 1880s along with his exploration of the Normandy countryside around his home in Giverny.[53] In his article "Paysages et figures," Geffroy applauds the artist's 'inevitable' resumption of a challenge preoccupying avant-garde nineteenth-century French painting from Courbet's *Young Ladies of the Village* to both Manet's and Monet's versions of *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* – an integration of modern figures into an outdoor landscape [figs. 6, 7, and 8 (W. 63)]:

> Forcément, il devait donc se préoccuper de la silhouette et de la tache produites par la figure humaine sur le ciel, l'eau et les verdures, il devait désirer faire passer

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[50] Ibid., 1:ix.

[51] Geffroy's letter bears no date. See "Letter to Gustave Geffroy," [n.d.], L. 2746 (912a).

[52] The exhibition review earning Monet's admiration is the critic's "Chronique: Paysages et figures," *La justice*, 28 February 1889, pp. 1-2. Though this article contains some lovely and rich descriptive passages, it does not support the breadth of analysis afforded by Geffroy's two-part "Hors du Salon" essay on Monet from 1887 that will become the object of consideration in the second section of Part One. See Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: V. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 25 May 1887, pp. 1-2 and "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors due Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, pp. 1-2.

[53] In 1887, Monet painted one canvas of his son Michel and future stepson Jean-Pierre Hoschedé near the tree-lined banks of the River Epte (W. 1127); seven with some combination of his future stepdaughters Suzanne and Blanche engaged in painting, reading, or taking a stroll either beneath poplar trees or near the river (W. 1131 – 1136 and 1149); another with his future wife Alice Hoschedé, Jean-Pierre, and Michel in a meadow at Limetz (W. 1148); and, finally, four with a mixture of the two aforementioned Hoschedé sisters and their younger sibling Germaine in Monet's rowing boat, the *Norvégienne* (W. 1150 – 1153). With the exception of the Musée d'Orsay's *En Norvégienne* (W. 1151), these paintings were not exhibited publicly and remained within Monet's home at Giverny or in the possession of his children until a considerably later date. It appears somewhat probable that Monet painted these canvases as souvenirs for private consumption or for testing out ideas that he would subsequently resolve in those 1888 works exhibited publicly at Boussod, Valadon et Compagnie, including W. 1203 and 1204.

> sur des étoffes et sur des visages les vibrations et les frissonnements de l'atmosphère."[54]

This particular sentence foreshadows a major area of emphasis in Geffroy's lyrical descriptions of the figure paintings on view. The paintings of Monet's sons Jean and Michel, future stepson J.P. Hoschedé, and stepdaughters Germaine and Suzanne *en plein air* extend and elaborate upon the artist's overarching concern with representing perpetually changing color sensations produced by light, shadow, reflections, and the atmospheric *enveloppe* (W. 1204, fig. 9). The outwardly casual arrangements of Monet's children in an open field essentially serve as pretexts for creating a new set of effects for the artist to observe. As the children cast lengthy shadows across the green pasture and form bold silhouettes against the trees and mist-covered hills in the distance, Monet responds to the way varying conditions of weather, light, and atmosphere tints their faces and the textures of their garments.

According to Monet's letter, Geffroy's article has arrived at an opportune point since the artist had intended to forward the critic words that would have had a familiar ring by this point – an outpouring of his hopes and troubles. Instead, Monet uses his note as an occasion to offer profuse and heartfelt gratitude for his review and, even more importantly, to identify what distinguishes Geffroy as a critic:

> Merci de tout cœur. Vous n'écrivez que ce que vous pensez et [je] suis heureux que mes toiles vous inspirent de telles joies, ce que je savais déjà, mais Rollinat a bien raison quand il vous trouve doué comme personne pour arriver à faire de pareils articles au milieu de ce Paris et de la politique. Il est bien d'un bout à l'autre cet article et [vous] devez en être content, je pense. Chaque toile est si bien faite qu'il n'y a plus un défaut, car vous les complétez en y ajoutant ce qu'il y manque. Merci encore en attendant que je vous serre la main, bientôt j'espère.[55]

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[54] Geffroy, "Paysages et figures," *La justice*, 28 February 1889, 2.

[55] "Letter to Gustave Geffroy," [n.d.], L. 2746 (912a).

Monet begins by commending Geffroy both for the integrity and candor of his writing and the exceptional nature of his journalistic achievement among all Parisian *hommes de lettres* in the fields of art and politics. Interestingly enough, he substantiates his own estimation of Geffroy's critical gifts by echoing the sentiments of the decadent poet, musician, and member of the literary group *Les Hydropathes* Maurice Rollinat.[56]

Geffroy had published a lengthy piece of literary criticism on Rollinat's dolorous verses in *Les névroses* in March 1883 – a mere two weeks before his first article dedicated to Monet.[57] Within this analysis of Rollinat's poetry, he presents one of his earliest and most concise statements on the role of a critic: "La critique a pour rôle d'expliquer les œuvres originales, elle n'a pas mission de les refaire."[58] In this sentence, Geffroy imposes a firm division between creative and critical writing. When writing about "les œuvres originales," a critic operates singularly as explicator; she must exercise care not to venture too far into the territory of a poet or a novelist who conceives and produces the work of art under consideration. A critic otherwise runs the risk of straying from her task of elucidating the recurrently opaque language, symbolism, and intentions of an author. She can wind up remaking the work in her own image, with the inflections of her temperament. This statement encapsulates the central tenets of what JoAnne Paradise has characterized as Geffroy's "scientific" criticism – an attitude and method issuing out of Hippolyte Taine's positivist *Philosophie de l'art* and the literary naturalism of Joris-Karl Huysmans and Émile Zola.[59]

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[56] Geffroy had recently introduced Monet to Rollinat on a February 1889 trip the two friends had taken along with fellow journalist Louis Mullen and architect Frantz Jourdain to Fresselines on the Creuse River. When he returned on his own to paint the ravine located at the juncture of the Petite Creuse and Grande Creuse later in March, Monet would stay in Rollinat's Fresselines cottage. See Paradise, *Gustave Geffroy and the Criticism of Painting*, pp. 282 – 284.

[57] Geffroy published his initial article on Monet in *La justice* on March 15, 1883 under the rather pedestrian and straightforward title, "Chronique: Claude Monet." This text has received ample consideration in Paradise, *Gustave Geffroy and the Criticism of Painting*, pp. 252-258 and in Steven Levine, *Monet and His Critics*, Diss. Harvard University, 1974 (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1975), pp. 58-59.

[58] Geffroy, "Chronique: Les 'Névroses,'" *La justice*, 1 March 1883, 1.

As Paradise contends, by the time Goncourt characterizes his language as "à la fois poétique and technique" in the 1890s, Geffroy's approach has markedly evolved to accept and emulate some of the more lyrical, imaginative, and evocative qualities embodied within Baudelaire's criticism:

> Although admirable in their own way, the virtuoso descriptions of Gautier and the philosophical reveries of Baudelaire, by Geffroy's reckoning here, have been superseded by the new scientific criticism. Such avid endorsement of the method of accumulating facts and of appealing to external, determining forces to explain works of art is a constant of his criticism in the 1880s. By the 1890s, as we shall see, he will come to embrace Baudelairean generalities as well.[60]

I maintain that Paradise posits a slightly sharper contrast between Geffroy's critical philosophy of the 1880s and 1890s than the two texts of primary concern in the following section ultimately will reveal. I would argue that viewing and writing about Monet's paintings of the 1880s played a crucial part in the transformation of Geffroy's stance on and approach to criticism from a more analytic or "scientific" to a more synthetic or poetic form of artwriting. Linking this shift from critic as explicator to critic as a vital and lively participant in the creation and completion of a work of art with his exposure to the 1880s paintings of Claude Monet will allow us to trace more substantively the inception of a visual impulse within Geffroy's art criticism and literature.

Returning to Monet's letter, we will notice that the artist recognizes the comprehensiveness of Geffroy's article "Paysages et figures" as one of its chief attributes: "Il est bien d'un bout à l'autre cet article et [vous] devez en être content." Rather significantly, the reasons for which Geffroy not only should be pleased with the results of his text but also deserves a hearty handshake perhaps conform to Monet's personal outlook on the role of a critic: "Chaque toile est si bien faite qu'il n'y a plus un défaut, car vous les complétez en y ajoutant ce qu'il y manque." Approximately six years earlier, we observed Geffroy cautioning his fellow authors about the inanity and impertinence of an undertaking to remake ("refaire") original works of art in critical prose. By Monet's own report, the critic had not earned the artist's admiration on the basis of *explaining* the paintings within his recent exhibition; instead, he had *made* and *completed* them and had done so in a manner consistent with the intentions and means of the painter.

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[59] See Paradise's section, "The Critic," in *Gustave Geffroy and the Criticism of Painting*, pp. 107 – 127.
[60] Ibid., 109.

And why from the painter's perspective was each canvas "si bien faite" in the critic's article? Geffroy's verbal translations of Monet's paintings remove any residual flaws in them: "[I]l n'y a plus un défaut." The artist does not go on to specify precisely what he deems faulty or deficient in his canvases. Perhaps we can attribute these imperfections in the impressionist's paintings to some inherent limitation in the medium of expression. In a subsequent letter to Geffroy about his nascent series of *Grainstacks*, we can obtain a glimmer of how profoundly the gap between perception and pictorial representation troubles Monet. This lacuna possibly contributes to the flaws he perceives in his own canvases:

> Je deviens d'une lenteur à travailler qui me désespère, mais plus je vais, plus je vois qu'il faut beaucoup travailler pour arriver à rendre ce que je cherche: "l'instantanéité," surtout l'enveloppe, la même lumière répandue partout, et plus que jamais les choses faciles venues d'un jet me dégoûtent. Enfin, je suis de plus en plus enragé du besoin de rendre ce que j'éprouve….[61]

In this letter, Monet enunciates the obstacles impeding his ability to render fully his experience of instantaneity and its visual index – the atmospheric *enveloppe*. The

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[61] "Letter to Geffroy," 7 October 1890, L. 1076.

slowness entailed in capturing a unifying effect of ambient light with oil paint and brush scarcely corresponds the fugitive duration of sensation. In order to arrest the continuity of life through the additive and segmented process of painting, a method of cursory notation of the effects that Monet previously relied upon no longer would suffice. Monet's ultimate solution for diminishing yet never entirely circumventing the constraints of pictorial representation took the form of working in series. Rendering the effect of instantaneity through a set of interrelated canvases involved a procedure of calibrating the palette, brushwork, and composition of individual paintings to produce a harmoniously coordinated ensemble.

In an author's preface to a revised edition of his acclaimed novel *L'apprentie,*[62] Geffroy describes an analogously vexing separation between forever-mutable thoughts and their translation into words:

> Devant la page blanche, la plume en main, l'écrivain tire de son encrier, peut-être la même façon de penser, mais à coup sûr une forme, une nuance, un développement différents de ceux qu'il en aurait tirés un autre jour, ou à une autre heure du jour. Combien de pages projetées ont été perdues, combien de pages insoupçonnées sont subitement écloses?[63]

Just as Monet seeks to render his experience of instantaneity by applying somewhat resistant brushes and paint to a white canvas, Geffroy sits in front of the blank page, dips his pen into the inkwell, and transfers his thoughts onto paper. Though he conflates drawing a pool of ink into a pen's nib with a form of extracting thought from the brain, the two actions never will coincide fully or duplicate one another – hence, the qualifier of "peut-être." Time builds an irreconcilable lag between thought and its representation.

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[62] Originally published in 1904, the novel revolves around a Parisian working-class family and its travails before and after the ravages of the Franco-Prussian War. *L'apprentie* has been regarded as Geffroy's one bona fide critical success in fiction, and it was adapted into a drama for the stage in 1908. For an analysis of the novel within the context of nineteenth-century French naturalist literature, see Denommé, *The Naturalism of Gustave Geffroy*, pp. 56-98.

[63] Geffroy, *L'apprentie*, Revised ed. (Paris: Les éditions Georges Crès et Compagnie, 1919), iii.

Sensations multiply and change from hour to hour, from day to day. Though likely recorded with the same pen and ink employed yesterday, today's thoughts invariably will have "un forme, une nuance, un développement différents." In similar fashion within the context of his *London* series, Monet rummages in vain through his stack of some one hundred canvases for the one sketch that most closely resembles the present effects of the sky he observes from his balcony at the Savoy Hotel. Will the same conditions ever return?[64] Like the painter, Geffroy must accept the painful loss of "pages projetées" and be artistically nimble and observant enough to harness the serendipity and spontaneity of the present. Neither painting nor writing comes without restrictions or inevitable defeats. Both must confront the continuity of experience; time's progressive march is the enemy. The hand perpetually chases the mind and the eye.

However insignificant these purported flaws may be, Monet's admission of their existence in his canvases allows for critical writing to compensate for painting's expressive and technical shortcomings. Monet's letter explicitly signals that a critic has a license and a facility for bringing a work of art to its fullest state of realization: "[V]ous complétez en y ajoutant ce qu'il y manque." Geffroy does not merely polish the rough imperfections of Monet's canvases through an interpretive gloss; his prose *adds* ("ajoutant") something to them. The critic's words complete a circle of meaning. Without them, the paintings remain dormant, unfinished. In closing this preliminary consideration of the linguistic attributes of his artwriting, let us briefly turn to two final examples that enunciate Geffroy's attitudes on the roles of a viewer, critic, and reader in the signification of a work of visual art.

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[64] When the same effect did not return, Monet did not hesitate to alter his canvases to reflect different weather and light conditions. In his discussion of the *pentimenti* within the *Grainstacks* series, Paul Hayes Tucker calls attention to the modifications to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Grainstacks, Winter Effect*, 1891 (W. 1279) as a prime example. Monet appears originally to have conceived of this canvas as a view of the grainstacks in light snow conditions, but the finished painting receives a thicker layer of opaque paint to suggest hoarfrost. See Tucker, *Monet in the 90s* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 79-84.

In a short article from 1896, Geffroy admonishes the journalists, caricaturists, and even the casual passerby along the Boulevard des Capucines who are all too quick to trivialize the display of moralistic posters ("les affiches morales") featuring a lithograph of Puvis de Chavannes's *Sainte-Geneviève*.[65] He defends the efforts of the journalist, intellectual, and co-founder of *la Ligue pour l'Union morale* Paul Desjardins to capitalize upon the didactic potential of the visual arts in the public sphere: "En réalité, c'est à cela qu'ils [M. Paul Desjardins et ses adeptes] se réclament de l'art, qui est la plus libre, la plus grande, la plus vraie des religions humaines."[66] Art can liberate humanity from its reliance upon ideologically fraught and spiritually bankrupt institutions of organized religion for obtaining a moral education. Geffroy maintains that art constitutes "la plus vraie des religions humaines" because it speaks directly to its viewers without the interference or mediation of sanctimonious preachers. Inspired perhaps by coming into chance contact with these posters, those who visit museum galleries can commune straightforwardly with works of art and can unlock moral truths within themselves. They begin to understand and communicate with the ways of the world through absorbing an artist's vision and thought: "Ils [les passants aux musées] pourront y apprendre à se connaître eux-mêmes en apprenant à connaître tous les artistes qui leur présentent l'univers, réfléchi par leur esprit."[67] The moral and ethical lessons that a viewer can glean from a painting or a sculpture far surpass anything she could learn from a preacher's sermon because works of art necessitate vigorous engagement with an artist's mind. To arrive at the real essence of its meaning, a spectator cannot passively absorb a piece of visual art like a platitude or a homily. Its mode of address transcends words; it speaks most profoundly to those who welcome the difficulties of inventing a personal interpretation.

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[65] Geffroy, "L'affiche morale," 28 September 1896; rpt. in *La vie artistique*, 5:110-119.
[66] Ibid., 5:119.
[67] Ibid.

Beyond art's moral implications, the premium Geffroy places upon the *collaborative* nature of its experience in this article has tremendous relevance to his outlook on the role of a viewer, critic, and reader:

> Jouir de l'œuvre des artistes, c'est collaborer pour sa part à cette œuvre, puisque c'est lui donner une extension, puisque c'est la création qui est en germe en elle. Si ce que l'on a dit de la nature est vrai, qu'elle n'existerait pas si nous ne la voyions pas, si nous ne la réfléchissions pas en nous-mêmes, cela est vrai aussi de l'œuvre d'art, qui ne peut vivre, c'est-à-dire agir, que par le contact humain.[68]

Whether we look at or write about a work of art, a painting or sculpture lives on only through its impression upon the eyes and mind of a viewer. Regardless of any possible theological or pantheistic associations in the concept, Geffroy's reference to "la création" underscores a need for a viewer to serve in part as a maker.[69] An artist embeds the seeds of an idea within a painting or sculpture, but a viewer gives a voice to an object or brings it to fruition by means of her communing with the work. Geffroy's notion of a viewer's enjoyment of a work of art as an extension ("une extension") recalls Monet's understanding of criticism as a vehicle for completing a work of art. A viewer's experience detaches a static painting from the wall and transports its contents into her imagination; her vision and thought become a crucial agent in the realization of a work.

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[68] Ibid. I credit Paradise's study for introducing me to this passage. See *Gustave Geffroy and the Criticism of Painting*, p. 101.

[69] For a discussion of the relationship of Geffroy's philosophical pantheism to his art criticism, see Nina Athanassaglou-Kallmyer, "Le Grand Tout: Monet on Belle-Île and the Impulse toward Unity," *The Art Bulletin* 97, no. 3 (September 2015): 323-341. For the connection between pantheism and Geffroy's notion of "la vie universelle," see Paradise, pp. 76-79.

Without the perception and internalization of its visual components, a work of art remains materially and conceptually inert.

Perhaps a critic's words can offer an enduring testimony to this encounter, to this transfer of image into thought. But does criticism constitute a definitive or absolute statement on a work of art according to Geffroy? Probably not. Each viewer has a set of eyes and a mind of her own. No single accumulation of words can encompass the complete content of a painting. Reflections vary. Like a painting, a piece of criticism promotes an active dialogue between a work and its audience.

In assessing the public's process of coming to terms with an influx of new artists within both private commercial galleries and state-sponsored Salons of the 1890s, Geffroy refutes the role of critic as professor and judge.[70] The critic views an invasion of 'les Barbares' onto the art scene as a means of renewing the vitality of tradition, but he diminishes the weight of his own opinion in favor of the capacity of his writing to induce others to connect with works of art:

> Accord ou désaccord de l'écrivain avec ses lecteurs, qu'importe, si la curiosité et le désir de ceux-ci sont éveillés: c'est là l'essentiel, et l'œuvre d'éducation ne peut se faire que par cette silencieuse discussion du lecteur en dialogue avec une feuille de papier imprimée.[71]

Agreement with a critic's views barely matters if her words stimulate a reader's curiosity and desire to experience and consider a work of art. A quiet yet dynamic conversation ensues between critic and reader. The dialogue between a critic's printed words and a reader's mind extends a chain of signification. The visual becomes verbalized through writing, and the verbal becomes visualized through reading. The process of transfer and translation repeat in a continuous loop. In the pages that follow, we will examine how

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[70] Geffroy, "Les barbares," 30 May and 6 April 1896; rpt. in *La vie artistique*, 5:1-22.

[71] Ibid., 7.

Geffroy's critical writing stimulates and appeals to the visual sensibilities of his readers, how his 'Monet' becomes our own.

SECTION TWO: 'TRANSCRIRE'

After his foundational thoughts on the artist in 1883, Geffroy would not publish another article concerning Monet's paintings for another four years. His second piece of criticism came in the form of a lengthy two-part review of the artist's submission of approximately eighteen canvases to the sixth *Exposition internationale de peinture et de sculpture* held at the fashionable Galerie Georges Petit from May 8 through June 8 in 1887. Paired with another double-issue text devoted to the sculptures of Monet and Geffroy's mutual friend Auguste Rodin, these articles functioned as a sort of interlude within his fifteen-part appraisal of the *Salon de 1887*.[72]

The first of Geffroy's two "Hors du Salon" reviews on Monet covers extensively traversed territory at this point within nineteenth-century art criticism. The article relays the plight of imaginative artists who flout commonly accepted ideas and well-entrenched conventions and techniques. Expressing their observations "en un langage qu'ils employaient naturellement," these artists are repeatedly met with incomprehension and hostilities from critics, commercial and educational institutions, and the viewing public at large.[73] Like Jean-François Millet, the by-then canonized hero of Barbizon painting, Monet was one of the rare beneficiaries of "un hasard de circonstances" that enabled him to survive against an unrelenting barrage of attacks – "une guerre de railleries et d'injures."[74] As he had already done in part in 1883, Geffroy applauds Monet's artistic fortitude and integrity for not making any concessions in either form or content in the face of "les jugements lourds des prétentieux, le persiflage des boulevardiers, la colère des arrivés troublés dans leur négoce…."[75] Refusing to temper "la rudesse de sa manière, l'âpreté d'observation et l'ivresse de lumière," the painter eventually triumphs by dint of preserving the originality of his artistic language, and the formerly skeptical critics follow suit by modifying their tone and reception of his work.[76] According to Geffroy, a change of venue from Durand-Ruel's exhibition space to the "murs de la salle mondaine" of Galerie Georges Petit may partially explain the appreciable shift in Monet's critical and commercial fortunes. He still adamantly refutes any whispers of "des atténuations" in the artist's manner or of any greater degree of exhibition polish in his canvases: "On répond qu'ils se sont 'faits.'"[77] Instead, Geffroy maintains the level of finish in Monet's canvases has not changed in the slightest. In accord with Jules Laforgue's remark that the impressionist painter succeeded "à se refaire un œil naturel," Geffroy implies that the eyes of critics have been remade or refashioned to enable them to value and to accommodate Monet's original paintings in their writings:[78] "Ce sont plutôt les yeux qui se sont faits à cette peinture de franchise et de séduction…."[79] Since the first of his two "Hors du Salon" articles on Monet does not specifically address any of the paintings on view within Petit's exhibition, we principally will focus our discussion on the second part that appeared on June 2. Before visiting the descriptive components of his second text, let us dwell on a few passages within the first one that amplify Geffroy's approach to translating Monet's paintings into prose.

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[72] See Gustave Geffroy, "Salon de 1887," *La justice*, 1, 7, 19, 20, 25 May, and 2, 5, 7, 9, 13, 22, 24, 26, 29, 30 June 1887. The two articles on Rodin appeared in the 19 and 20 May 1887 issues of *La justice*.

[73] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: V. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 25 May 1887, 1.

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[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid., 2.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid.

[78] See Jules Laforgue, "L'impressionnisme" in *Mélanges posthumes* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1903), pp. 133-145; rpt. in Jules Laforgue, *Œuvres complètes: Édition chronologique intégrale*, eds. Jean-Louis Debauve, Mireille Dottin-Orsini, Daniel Grojnowski, and Pierre-Olivier Walzer (Lausanne: L'âge d'homme, 1986-2000), 3:329-336. Letters to his patron and mentor Charles Ephrussi reveal that Laforgue had composed a draft of this text in 1883. Since it was first published posthumously in 1903, Geffroy would have been unfamiliar with its contents in 1887. See Debauve et al., 3:335.

[79] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: V. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 25 May 1887, 2.

Aside from a general conservatism in relation to artistic innovation and anxieties about any disruptions to the prevailing collective beliefs advanced by *salonnards* and *salonniers* alike, what is it specifically that had prevented critics from writing intelligibly about Monet's paintings before they appeared in the more chic confines of Petit's gallery? Monet had become a frequent target of insults from journalists largely because his means of expression were incompatible with those of the critical establishment. His artistic methods had not been derived from "les procédés en usage." Similar to every author and artist who sought to convey a synthesis of his or her observations and dreams ("leur observation et leur rêverie") with sincerity ("cette peinture de franchise et de séduction"), Monet independently discovered his personal artistic language: "[I]ls le trouvaient en eux-mêmes pour exprimer leur individu et les rapports de leur individu avec le monde extérieur."[80] Faced with canvases that represent a confluence between internal perceptions and external phenomena through highly original artistic means, critics previously became enraged and resorted to a series of stammering insults to rebuke Monet:

> Quand il était question de lui, la blague facile s'aggravait de fureur. On eût dit que la rage troublait les yeux qui regardaient ses toiles, faisait trembler la main de ceux qui exerçaient sur lui leur critique.[81]

A loss of coordination ensues between the eye and hand. Anger clouds the eyes of refractory critics, and they no longer can see clearly. Charged with putting words on paper to convey their bewildered vision, their hands betray them as they shake with rage. On some level, a critic relies upon the same corporeal means as the painter to create a work of art – the eye and the hand. They both must look at the world with a sharpness of vision and need to express themselves with a steady grip of their instruments of choice in their hands. When either of these faculties falls out of tandem, the outcome is failure and fury.

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[80] Ibid., 1.

[81] Ibid.

To ensure a harmonious relay between eye and hand, between perception and communication, Monet forever searches for novel means of expression that respond to the particularities of his experience: "Comme tous les forts, il [Monet] est perpétuellement en éveil, en défiance de lui-même, il exerce sur ce qu'il produit le plus attentif examen, il souffre de ne pouvoir se satisfaire davantage."[82] Refusing to settle into complacency or habit, Monet remains continuously alert to the changing conditions of nature. While other critics have faulted the painter for an "ivresse de lumière," Geffroy regards his unremitting quest for new ways to attend closely to the vicissitudes of light and atmosphere as a virtue of an artist in full command of his goals and technique. Monet never becomes satisfied with prior achievements or some fixed conception or convention for experiencing the world and representing his vision. A critic must ostensibly bring a comparable level of clear-sightedness and a reluctance to rely upon formulas of the past to 'see' genuinely and make sense of his paintings. Remarking on the hypocrisy of those critics who now claim to understand and praise the same canvases they used to revile, Geffroy will implore his readers (and presumably those authors) who consult his second review to look with "des yeux attentifs" at the landscapes that Monet has put on display in Petit's exhibition.[83] Do Geffroy's descriptions in this subsequent article function more as demonstrations or as exemplars of this kind of attentive observation? If we consider the sentiments expressed in Monet's letter about the "Paysages et figures" article and Geffroy's stated views on the role of the critic in the reception and signification of a work of art, could we infer perhaps that his words have an even more integral relation to the paintings on view? Do his descriptions directly facilitate or contribute to a viewer's ability to see, to comprehend, and perhaps to 'complete' Monet's canvases?

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[82] Ibid., 2.

[83] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 1.

And how do we as readers or viewers learn to see? How do we measure the merit of either a visual or a verbal representation of the act of careful looking? According to Geffroy's interpretation and construction of 'Monet,' the most valid testimony to the fidelity of the artist's vision does not reside in the affirmative or reproachful words of the critic; nature itself is the one and only witness and judge of import:

> Ces témoins, auxquels il [Monet] confronte perpétuellement, les œuvres qu'il crée dans une perpétuelle fièvre de production, sont les objets et les éléments qu'il voudrait reproduire avec leur grâce ou leur horreur, les fleurs, les arbres, les pierres, les falaises, les rocs, les lames, les nuages, le sol, la lumière, l'espace. Confrontation perpétuelle, puisqu'il vit en plein air, toujours en marche, toujours à la recherche d'une nature qu'il ignore….[84]

The critic's evaluation pales in comparison to what actual flowers, trees, clouds, ocean waves, and sunlight can reveal to the artist in their manifold conditions ranging from the beautiful ("leur grâce") to the sublime ("leur horreur"). In order to recreate nature faithfully, Monet develops artistic processes that evoke fecundity and a constant state of regeneration and renewal. In the following analysis, we will observe a reciprocity between nature and artist through Geffroy's endowment of creative or mimetic faculties to the elements.

As a way of demonstrating the artist's conformity with nature's course, Geffroy underlines the role of continuity in Monet's artistic procedures. We should notice here the repetition of *perpétuelle* in its adjectival and adverbial forms throughout this passage and others. A large portion of Monet's frustrations and persistent unrest ("il souffre de ne pouvoir se satisfaire davantage") appears to extend from his struggle to represent the fluidity of the phenomenological world within the confines of a static frame. By refusing to adhere to any prevalent patterns of experience, the artist remains steadfastly alert in his attentive examination of nature's constant changes: "[I]l est perpétuellement en éveil." Simultaneously living and painting *en plein air*, Monet seeks to narrow the divide between observing and representing nature ("confrontation perpétuelle, puisqu'il vit en plein air …"). Like the endlessly mutable cycle of seasons, Monet is always on the move ("toujours en marche") as he embarks upon an unending quest for unknown vistas and climates. He confronts nature's unpredictability head-on and relishes its capriciousness to protect himself from developing habits that would inevitably dull or tarnish his "peinture de franchise et séduction." And, finally, resembling fertile nature itself, Monet creates works of art at a fevered pace, and his productivity knows no boundaries ("il crée dans une perpétuelle fièvre de production …").

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[84] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: V. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 25 May 1887, 2.

In his review of the *Nymphéas* exhibition more than twenty years later, Geffroy will excoriate critics for failing to use nature as the standard for ascertaining and measuring "la poésie grandiose" inscribed within Monet's paintings: "On peut croire aussi que ces personnages [les critiques], si prompts à rendre leurs arrêts, n'avaient jamais regardé un paysage à aucune heure, en aucune saison…."[85] According to Geffroy, artist and critic must study nature assiduously to discern and express the poetry of visual representation.

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[85] Geffroy, "Causeries: Les 'Paysages d'eau' de Claude Monet," *La dépêche de Toulouse*, 15 May 1909, 1.

At the end of this first “Hors du Salon” article devoted to Monet, Geffroy lays out the agenda for the next one: “Un prochain article essayera de transcrire et d’apprécier les paysages différents peints par Claude Monet à Bordighera, à La Haye, à Belle-Île-en-Mer.”[86] At first glance, this sentence appears relatively clear-cut in terms of its delivery of the critic’s intent: Geffroy sets out to transcribe (“transcrire”) and to assess (or appreciate) (“apprécier”) the diverse landscapes Monet has painted of Bordighera, The Hague, and Belle-Île-en-Mer. Closer scrutiny exposes some latent obscurity in the critic’s execution of these plans. Geffroy’s readers are left to ponder the specific form this approbation and appraisal will assume. We conceivably could interpret the phrase “apprécier les paysages différents peints par Claude Monet” from at least two different perspectives. Is Geffroy referring exclusively to the *painted images* that Monet created of these regions? Is he implying that his text may include a consideration of the *actual landscapes* that inspired Monet’s paintings? Or is he suggesting his descriptions will address both Monet’s painted landscapes and their referents in nature? In the article that follows, we will encounter a pronounced slippage between the critic’s descriptions of Monet’s canvases and the natural motifs that stimulated the artist. In certain cases, Monet’s paintings threaten to drop altogether out of view as Geffroy uses this exhibition almost as a pretext for meditating upon his intensely personal memories of these landscapes in nature.[87] Does appreciation occasion imitation? In other words, does Geffroy’s most effective strategy for conveying his experience of Monet’s painted landscapes involve crafting a verbal equivalent of them through adopting analogous or even identical representational procedures? If nature itself is the true “témoins,” then perhaps the critic most faithfully encapsulates the painter's achievement by writing as if he too were in front of the motif. Monet's landscapes effectively transport Geffroy beyond the walls of Petit's galleries; they act as portals to the critic's unmediated contemplation and depiction of nature.

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[86] Geffroy, “Salon de 1887: V. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet,” *La justice*, 25 May 1887, 2.

[87] JoAnne Paradise has observed this effect particularly in relation to Geffroy’s paragraphs on the Belle-Île landscapes in the 2 June 1887 article. See *Gustave Geffroy and the Criticism of Painting*, p. 268.

The set of ambiguities I have infused into Geffroy's statement perhaps has its origins in the particular mode of writing the critic has designated to apply to the task at hand – transcription. By using the verb *transcrire*, Geffroy arguably has insinuated that his descriptions of Monet's paintings will involve some degree of exactness and precision, or even an almost literal transference of the complete contents of a picture into words. We might begin to anticipate an exceedingly detailed, mark-by-mark transmission of paintings into prose based upon Geffroy's stated aims, but our discussion of this text will disclose virtually no evidence of such an approach. As I already have suggested in the preceding paragraph, Geffroy's criticism sometimes bypasses or severely restricts explicit reference to the material conditions and qualities of the paintings in front of him at Petit's exhibition.[88] Though Geffroy will construct an insightful narrative of Monet's artistic process toward the end of the second article, he essentially brackets technical considerations and any allusion to the physical existence of frames, canvas, and paint from his descriptions of these landscapes. Like Diderot before him (but with substantially greater economy in his mode of presentation), Geffroy repeatedly eliminates the "intermediary" presence of Monet's landscapes and substitutes his own "verbal tableaux" as a way of rivaling or replicating the experience both of the painter himself and his pictures for the readers of this text.[89] So what could *transcrire* entail in the context of this article? How does this undertaking both vary in its degree of literalness and depend upon Geffroy's sense of the overall cohesiveness of the paintings on view? Put another way, when Geffroy wishes to accentuate the interrelated nature of the effects produced from a group of works like the ten Belle-Île paintings on view, he tends to diminish their material conditions as his immediate source of inspiration and opts for a more evocative style of description. In these instances, he seems primarily concerned with suggesting the overall mood or qualities that are common to an entire group of paintings, and he represents these effects by composing his own landscapes in a poeticized and decidedly imagistic prose. When Geffroy represents a work in isolation, his prose more directly and concretely reference Monet's paintings and tend to resemble a much more conventional form of description. Even in these cases, it is curious to note Geffroy's areas of emphasis and exclusion within his descriptive efforts.

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[88] For a robust analysis of Diderot's development of a comparable strategy within the context of his descriptions of Claude-Joseph Vernet's paintings in the *Salon de 1767*, see Wettlaufer, *In the Mind's Eye*, pp. 113-118. For some discussion of the critic's affinity for Diderot, see Denommé's account of Geffroy's article "Le pornographe" in which he rebukes accusations that his Enlightenment predecessor had engaged in a form of obscene or pornographic writing. Denommé posits the following: "Geffroy's defense of Diderot against these charges was undoubtedly motivated by his personal admiration for the eighteenth-century writer. In many ways, the two were kindred spirits, the journalist at *La justice* inheriting from the philosopher a substantial portion of his own beliefs." In *The Naturalism of Gustave Geffroy*, pp. 115-116.

With the remainder of this section, I will attempt to perform a thorough analysis of the contents of the second half of this two-part article. In adopting this approach, I hope to show how every word matters or at least vitally contributes to the construction of Geffroy's 'Monet.' My reading of this article will function as a sort of paradigm case. I will adopt a similar strategy again in the second part of this study pertaining to Octave Mirbeau's art criticism and literature. Sustaining this level of analytical depth throughout multiple texts of art criticism or literary works may yield impractical results and burden the reader with too much detail. I have attempted to assume the task of the participatory reader-viewer to its fullest extent by engaging this particular text on virtually a sentence-by-sentence basis. In my assessment of Geffroy's literary project, I will slightly scale back this intensive approach but still delve into the linguistic and syntactical elements of selected passages to show how the critic aims to bridge a gap between seeing and saying with an evocative and visually oriented form of prose.

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[89] Wettlaufer, *In the Mind's Eye*, 113.

Preliminary study of the descriptions of individual paintings at the opening of this article will prove instructive in terms of determining a level of overlap and divergence in rhetorical strategies between those works considered in isolation and those characterized as a cohesive group or ensemble in the latter parts of this text. Perhaps to establish some sort of chronological framework, this exhibition review begins with a rather terse and ordinary description of the earliest painting on view in this show – *Un coin d'appartement* from 1875 (W. 365, fig. 10).[90] Far from an encyclopedic enumeration of the contents of this work, Geffroy's account more faithfully adheres to the format of a quick sketch than a conventional mode of meticulous transcription:

> Dans le premier, *Un coin d'appartement*, deux pièces en enfilade garnies de rideaux, de vases, de plantes, a été surtout étudiée l'entrée de l'air et de la lumière dans un intérieur. L'enfant, debout, reflété dans le parquet ciré, est enveloppé de l'atmosphère bleue d'un jour de chaleur. Sûrement, il y a du soleil et un ciel d'azur dehors. L'effet, pourtant, est excessif.[91]

Geffroy begins his consideration of *Un coin d'appartement* by listing the principal decorative objects contained in this depiction of two adjoining rooms in Monet's Argenteuil home: curtains, flowerpots, and plants. The main focus of his description though quickly shifts to the more intangible, transitory features of Monet's painting – an infusion of air, sunlight, and the blue atmosphere of a warm summer's day into this interior space. Geffroy curiously does not include among his inventory of objects in the room the presence of the artificial light potentially coming from either the chandelier framed by the two floral-pattern curtains in the foreground or the oil lamp overhanging the table in the rear. His omission seems deliberate as the absence of these objects reinforces an idea that the primary illumination for this picture emanates from the natural light pouring through the window. Though the second sentence introduces the presence of a young boy (presumably Monet's youngest son Jean) and his blue-tinted reflection in the glossy wax of the herringbone-pattern parquet floor, it makes no mention of the seated lady veiled in shadow in the background (quite possibly his soon-to-be deceased mother Camille). Even when Monet paints an indoor scene, Geffroy's description implies that the artist accentuates the outdoor effects of sunlight and blue skies – in this case, with somewhat distortive or overstated consequences.[92] The human figures and the decorative interior merely serve as another motif for Monet to explore his chief interest in representing sensations of light and atmosphere. The priority the critic gives to the play of ambient light, reflections, and atmospheric conditions in this painting quite significantly prefigures Geffroy's assertion in his "Salon de 1890" that, "Il [Monet] ne veut pas représenter la réalité des choses, il veut fixer la lumière qui est entre lui et les objets…."[93] Assimilating Geffroy's interpretation into his own aesthetic, Monet will reaffirm the critic's understanding of his goals in the context of an 1895 interview given to the Norwegian journalist Hjulmar Johsen: "Le motif n'est pour moi qu'une chose insignifiante, ce que je veux reproduire est ce qu'il y a entre le motif et moi."[94]

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[90] Public collections frequently apply alternative titles to many of Monet's paintings. For the sake of consistency, I will adopt the French version of the titles that Wildenstein supplies in his catalogue raisonné throughout my discussion of paintings referenced in both Geffroy's and Mirbeau's articles.

[91] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 1.

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[92] Paradise notes that this line of unfavorable criticism ("L'effet, pourtant, est excessif") represents the last occasion Geffroy will disapprove of any aspect of Monet's technique in print. In *Gustave Geffroy and the Criticism of Painting*, p. 262.

[93] Geffroy, "Salon de 1890," in *La vie artistique*, 1:186.

[94] Monet's stepson Jacques Hoschedé translated a portion of this article into French from the original Norwegian. The translation appears in his brother Jean-Pierre Hoschedé's book *Claude Monet, ce mal connu* (Geneva: Pierre Cailler, 1960), 2:110.

Geffroy additionally stresses the importance of atmosphere and light in the painting by paying virtually no attention to the mood projected by the figures or the interior design, nor does he speculate on what the young boy and his mother may be doing or thinking. Though we can make out some aspects of the boy's facial features, including his light brown hair, the dark pupils of his eyes, his nose, lips, and rosy cheeks, nobody would confuse him or his mother for the crisply modeled, linear figures typical of Bouguereau's paintings. The flat execution of the boy's torso, legs, and stockings in an almost uniformly dark brown and the loosely scrubbed-in dress, hands, and face of Camille in the background give the two figures an almost spectral or immaterial quality. The pinks, browns, grays, and whites used to render Camille so closely echo the palette of the surrounding curtains, door panel, and table that she seems almost capable of completely blending into or merging with her surroundings.

Geffroy's focus on the less tangible effects in the painting corresponds with a diminishment in the illusion of solidity in Monet's human figures. The entire scene is bathed in an *enveloppe* of blue atmospheric light. Various tones of blue serve as prominent hues within Monet's palette. We may observe these blues incorporated into the Japanese flowerpots, leaves of plants, and curtains in the foreground. In the middle and deeper recesses of the picture, they occur on the parquet floor, in the shadows cast on the boy and his mother, and within the general décor. In his summary description of the painting, Geffroy underscores this prevalence of blue in Monet's palette both by restricting his mention of color to just this single one and by alluding to it twice in synonymous forms ("l'atmosphère bleu d'un jour de chaleur" and "un ciel d'azur dehors.") The visual effect created by this diffusion of sunlight and blue sky into the home's interior thereby becomes the dominant note in Geffroy's description. He further conveys an impression of lightness and airiness through the abundance of rhyming long

A sounds: “a été surtout étudiée,” “reflété dans le parquet ciré, est enveloppé,” and “du soleil.” Even the most seemingly commonplace examples of Geffroy’s descriptions may occasion poetic effects and devices.

Geffroy proceeds to describe in a similarly abbreviated fashion the second early impressionist painting believed to have been included in the show, *La Gare Saint-Lazare, le train de Normandie* (W. 440, fig. 11):

> Le second tableau appartient à une des séries les plus curieuses qui aient été réalisées par le peintre. C’est une locomotive en gare. Des ombres se silhouettent et passent dans la fumée, des lumières courent en lignes fines sur le mouillé de rails, on a l’impression de la trépidation qui fait bruire les sonores verrières. [95]

We will readily notice that the critic refers to this picture not only as belonging to a series but also as one of “les plus curieuses” of the artist’s forays into this painterly procedure to date. Geffroy’s characterization of Monet’s twelve paintings of *La Gare Saint-Lazare* as being among his most curious series suggests a level of precedence for categorizing other groups of related works in this manner. Paul Hayes Tucker has offered a convincing argument for regarding these paintings as “only tangentially related to the *Belle Isle* or later series paintings of the 1890s.”[96] His reasons include substantial alterations in points of view from the interior to the exterior of the train station; a lack of any internal sense of sequentiality among the moments depicted in the canvases; dramatic differences in canvas formats and size; and minimal formal cohesion in terms of the level of finish, the palette, brushwork, and overall compositional complexity.[97] Even if we classify the Gare Saint-Lazare paintings only as some sort of proto-series, Geffroy’s use of the term in connection with this work permits us to infer that the critic considered the Belle-Île canvases as a series as well.

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[95] Geffroy, “Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet,” *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 1.

[96] Tucker, *Monet in the 90s*, 26.

[97] Ibid., 26-27.

Though Geffroy summarizes the painting's subject as a locomotive arriving at the platform of a railway station, his eye and pen remain firmly focused on the more ephemeral effects of the motif just as they had in his preceding account of *Un coin d'appartement*. His description makes no direct mention of the presence of human figures or other components of the urban architecture in the background of the picture. Shadows, light, and atmospheric effects from the misty weather and smoke belching from the locomotive constitute the main event. Perhaps to emphasize the way smoke obscures everything in the painting, Geffroy's sentence leaves open the source of these shadows. Monet's sketchy rendering not only of the human figures but also of the locomotive and surrounding architecture in *La Gare Saint-Lazare, le train de Normandie* enhances the dematerializing effect of the smoke and misty atmosphere. We as readers are left to imagine the scene as a compilation of silhouetted and shadowy forms and objects passing in and out of the smoke of a bustling train station. Perhaps to highlight even further the insubstantial and fugitive effects of *La Gare Saint-Lazare, le train de Normandie*, Geffroy closes his description with an auditory rather than a visual impression emanating from the picture. The painting evokes the noise of the vibrations ("la trépidation") or rattling of the glass ceiling of the train station as the engines grind to a halt.

Following this sentence, Geffroy will pause from his discussion of individual paintings in this article to note the duplicitous nature of the change in the critical establishment's judgment of Monet. Occasioned by their liberation from the "murs des salles d'expositions impressionnistes," Monet's paintings no longer threaten to invoke a riot; they and the artist instead earn adulation from those critics who "ne souviennent plus qu'ils ont dénigré."[98]

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[98] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 1.

In the concluding sentence of this same paragraph, Geffroy not only establishes the order in which he will structure his successive narrative but also crucially injects a didactic tone or edifying aspirations into this article: “Qu’ils essayent donc de devancer les temps et de regarder avec des yeux attentifs les paysages peints d’hier au nord, au midi et à l’ouest.”[99] Geffroy implores critics and the public at large who previously dismissed Monet’s art to assume a vanguard role by looking attentively at recently finished works. He also designates the sequence in which a reader, and by extension, an exhibition viewer will or could encounter these paintings. Geffroy’s grouping of Monet’s landscapes according to these three unique geographic regions begins with an image of the tulip fields of Holland (“au nord”), follows with a glance at the canvases of the Italian and French Riviera (“au midi”), and concludes with a panoramic view of his sublime Belle-Île seascapes (“à l’ouest”). Having made this initial plea for careful looking, Geffroy commences with a series of descriptions that effectively *teach* a viewer and reader how to see and how to experience Monet’s art.[100]

The *Exposition internationale de peinture et de sculpture* featured a single painting from Monet’s brief tour of The Hague from late April to early May in 1886 – *Champs de fleurs et moulins près de Leyde* (W. 1068, fig. 12). Even when Geffroy turns his attention to an individual painting that is not displayed in conjunction with a larger group of related works, we may detect the emergence of some slippage between the specific canvas and a more totalizing view of the actual landscape motif. Though Geffroy’s description primarily derives from this one canvas, he neither references its specific title in his article, nor does he provide any other concrete indication of the work's existence as a painted image.

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[99] Ibid.

[100] The didactic aims of Geffroy’s art criticism also may be traced to Diderot. See Wettlaufer, *In the Mind’s Eye*, pp. 92-93.

Before addressing the more evocative contents of his description, let us first examine how the critic engages *Champs de fleurs et moulins près de Leyde* as his point of inspiration. His discussion of the springtime tulip fields and lowland windmills between Leiden and Haarlem leads off with two sentences that correspond closely to the coloristic and painterly effects observable in Monet's painting.[101] He emphasizes the dominant hues in Monet's palette – especially those employed to construct the tightly packed rows of tulip blossoms in the foreground: "verts violents," "jaune d'or," and "rouges de pourpre et de vermillon."[102] Beyond his desire to convey a radiance and diversity of these vibrant blooms as they "resplendissent en éclosions bigarrées," the critic displays a particular penchant for evoking the density of the tulip fields – an effect Monet produces with thickly impasted diagonal strokes of purples, golden yellows, scarlet reds, and medium greens:

> Chacun fleur perd sa forme précise dans ces prodigieuses agglomérations, contribue seulement à former ces traînées de couleurs, ces sillons illuminés qui s'en vont courir au loin, qui s'arrêtent au bord du canal paresseux, plat comme une grande route, pour recommencer de l'autre côté, au-delà des lourds bateaux, autour des moulins dont les ailes virent lentement sur tous les points de la plaine placide.[103]

Underlining the thick and summary nature of Monet's paint application, Geffroy observes a dissolution of individual petals or distinct parts of flowers in favor of more homogenous bands of richly saturated colors. He reinforces Monet's palpable imposition of geometry within this image of cultivated rows of flowers in his characterization of these rigidly ordered zones of color ("ces traînées de couleurs, ces sillons illuminés"). Geffroy's likening of these fields to "ces traînées de couleurs" also introduces the language of textiles. The tightly packed rows of flowers resemble a long, flowing train of a brilliantly colored gown. He will round out his description of this painting with another allusion to fabric or garments by suggesting that these striped patterns of tulips look like a cutout from an Oriental robe ("ces fleurs étranges, rayées, tachées, qui semblent découpées dans des robes orientales").[104] Geffroy's image of a cutout corresponds with the flatness of these rows of flowers in Monet's picture. In *Champs de fleurs et moulins près de Leyde*, Monet reinforces the flat, linear effect of these colorful bands of flowers with his rendering of the canal as an equally sharp and boldly painted diagonal band of purple-blue paint. Geffroy emphasizes the planarity he senses in Monet's painting by comparing the idle waters of the canal to a flat highway stretching infinitely into the distance ("du canal paresseux, plat comme une grande route"). As the critic notes, the canal functions as a prominent line of demarcation between these stretches of "prodigieuses agglomérations," but its utterly uniform and dormant appearance also echoes the orderly rhythms of these bands of tulips. Accentuating the relative calm and stasis of the painting, Geffroy observes how the heavy boats and slow turn of the windmill do little to interrupt the stillness and order of the "plaine placide."

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[101] Wildenstein, *Claude Monet: Biographie et catalogue raisonné* (Paris: Taschen-Institut Wildenstein, 1997), 3:403.
[102] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 1.
[103] Ibid.

With his subsequent consideration of more ineffable atmospheric effects, Geffroy's focus slightly deviates from a detailed accounting of the painting's contents to incorporate a more sweeping image of The Hague:

> L'atmosphère du pays, atmosphère blonde, chargée d'eau, embrumée par la vapeur qui s'exhale des ruisseaux et des marais, propre à faire reluire les carreaux de faïence dans les villes, est aussi pour faire resplendir dans la campagne ces

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[104] Ibid.

> fleurs étranges, rayées, tachées, qui semblent découpées dans des robes orientales.[105]

The delicately pale and vaporous atmosphere that saturates Monet's painting of the Holland countryside has emanated from streams and marshes ("des ruisseaux et des marais") and extends all the way to the terracotta tiles of the village's architecture beyond the boundaries of the picture's frame. The moisture-laden, blonde atmosphere harmonizes the contents of Monet's painting and serves as the representative feature of this region's landscape. It spreads from the brightly colored fields of flowers with their canals and windmills in the countryside all the way to the glimmering rooftops of the bustling cities. Geffroy's use of the word *découpée* has particular significance in this respect as well. Monet's image of a countryside brimming with tulips compares to a cutout extracted from a larger continuum. We can intuit or imagine on the basis of the pale, mist-filled atmosphere that permeates every centimeter of the canvas that which exists outside of the frame. Similar to the way Monet will rely in his later *Grainstacks* paintings upon the unifying qualities of "l'enveloppe, la même lumière répandue partout"[106] to convey a sense of instantaneity in his series paintings, Geffroy highlights the pervasive atmospheric effects observed in this canvas as a means of conjuring a broader image of The Hague in a reader's mind.

At the lead of the next paragraph, Geffroy reminds his readers of the sequence he had previously established for his narrative with a transitional sentence that directs the focus away from Monet's painting of the Holland tulip fields and canals and toward three distinctive images of "la nature méridionale."[107] In contrast to the previous passage in which the painted image at times hovers more elusively in the background as the referent for his description, he explicitly calls attention to Monet's canvases by providing titles for the second and third works he will discuss: *Vallée de Sasso* and *Via Romana* (W. 859 and 855; figs. 13 and 14).[108] Though the apparent exclusion of a title from the accompanying exhibition catalogue ostensibly prevents Geffroy from supplying one for the first painting, he clearly asserts its presence "parmi les toiles exposées" and confers a degree of singularity and importance upon it as "le résumé de la corniche comprise entre Nice et San-Remo" (W. 854, fig. 15).[109] This canvas will receive many years later an all-encompassing title of *Bordighera* within Wildenstein's catalogue raisonné – a bold affirmation of Geffroy's identification of the work as a *résumé* painting. In the following analysis of *Bordighera*, we will examine how Geffroy utilizes the features of this *résumé* painting as the basis for conveying a unified impression of the three works on view of the Mediterranean coastal terrain. These three paintings retain their separate identities as painted images and unambiguously serve as the referent for Geffroy's descriptions. We still can discern a conscientious attempt on the part of the critic to elide together their cumulative effects so that the images can be *conceived of* and *seen* as three indissoluble components of an ensemble of paintings. Geffroy's prose binds together this group of Monet's paintings as a series even before the painter will adopt an almost exclusive commitment to working in this manner as a pictorial strategy with the inception of the *Grainstacks* of the 1890s. This passage arguably serves as a prelude to or a more tentative version of a descriptive strategy the critic will deploy in a fuller form to represent the ten *Belle-Île* paintings on display in Petit's exhibition. The main distinction between Geffroy's treatment of the Bordighera and Belle-Île paintings stems from the degree to which the canvases serve as a recognizable and explicit referent. As we shall see in his treatment of the *Belle-Île* paintings, the critic abandons an unequivocal or positively identifiable connection to individual paintings in favor of a more evocative treatment of Monet's works as an ensemble.

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[105] Ibid.

[106] "Letter to Geffroy," 7 October 1890, L. 1076.

[107] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 1.

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[108] Wildenstein labels catalogue no. 859 with the title *La vallée de Sasso, effet bleu* and no. 855 as *Strada Romana à Bordighera*.

[109] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 1.

In his discussion of *Bordighera*, Geffroy highlights the active role the fig trees assume in shaping our view as we look through the meandering curvature and delicate interlaced pattern of their trunks and branches to observe the sun-bleached façades of the white houses and the brilliant blue sea beyond them:

> Un groupe de figuiers aux feuilles luisantes enchevêtre le dessin de ses troncs et de ses branches souples comme des lianes, et c'est à travers cet entrelacement que s'aperçoivent, bien loin, bien bas, dans un fond d'abîme, la mer bleue et les maisons blanches d'une ville endormie dans la chaleur.[110]

Within Geffroy's description and the painting itself, nature essentially becomes the artist as the tangled network of the trunks and branches of the fig trees traces a design across the surface of the canvas and frames the principal features occupying the deeper zones of the composition: the choppy blue sea and the white houses of the sleepy town baking in the sun's heat. One chief example of the framing role of the sinuous trunks in the painting occurs in the way the central fig trees form a set of graceful arabesques that encloses and isolates the tall church spire near the dead center of the composition. Monet has delicately calibrated this focal area of the painting so that one slender curling branch of the fig tree on the left stops just short of crossing and potentially obscuring the top of the tower.

Prime evidence of the critic's ability to evoke the leading notes of Monet's palette with precision and economy occurs with the blue and white color patterns Geffroy introduces in his description of the sea and houses. This blue-white pairing is echoed throughout the painting. Monet repeats this color contrast with the combination of white highlights applied to the yellow-green "feuilles luisantes" and the deep blue shadows interspersed among the crowns of the fig trees. The slender trunks and curving branches also are blanched with an array of radiant whites similar to those that comprise the masonry of the village houses, but their contours are modeled with prominent strokes of cobalt blue paint.

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[110] Ibid.

Geffroy's description also evokes tensions between movement and stasis, between curvature and straightness that Monet exploits in his composition. His comparison of the intertwining tree trunks and flexible branches of the fig trees to liana ("des lianes") underscores their dynamism. Like teeming vines, the trees appear to crawl up the surface of the picture – their advance halted only by the upper limit of the canvas. Geffroy juxtaposes this image of curving vine-like trees against the stillness and stasis of the sleepy town. With its emphasis on rigid lines and angularity, the architecture of the town sharply opposes the lithe coils of the fig trees in Monet's picture.

After terminating his first sentence with an image of the white houses and a blue sea lodged deeply in the abyss of the picture ("dans un fond d'abîme"), Geffroy pulls us back into the foreground by directing our attention to the lushness of the sun-drenched vegetation and foliage: "Toile extraordinaire, emplie d'une pousse de végétation inouïe, embrasée de lumière, qui fait tout pâlir autour d'elle, qui éclate comme un subite apparition du soleil."[111] Geffroy repeats the sequence of his description of *Champs de fleurs et moulins près de Leyde* in the preceding passage by following with an evocation of the region's light as its characteristic or consummate feature. The treetops, branches, and trunks are kissed with the sun's intense light ("embrasée de lumière"). The critic highlights surprise revelations afforded by this all-encompassing light. Bleaching every component of the picture from the gleaming leaves of the fig trees to the masonry of the sleepy town in the distance, the brilliant sunlight explodes upon the scene like a sudden apparition and produces a verdant mass of vegetation that is unheard of ("inouïe").

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[111] Ibid.

Light again becomes the element that unites these three canvases on view and ostensibly any other ones Monet produced from his Bordighera painting campaign of 1884. Regardless of the particular angle or point of view from which the artist may observe and represent this Mediterranean landscape, the critic discerns a consistent impression of fecundity and blazing sunlight: "Deux autres toiles donnent la même impression avec des aspects différents."[112] In Geffroy's description of *La vallée de Sasso, effet bleu* (W. 859, fig. 13), the warm mist saturating the air takes a lead role in structuring his presentation of the composition: "Dans la *Vallée de Sasso*, une brume chaude erre aux flancs des montagnes, met ses fumées délicates parmi les palmiers et les pins étagés, les citronniers ponctués de fruits d'or."[113] We may infer from Geffroy's statement that this "brume chaude" produces a unifying effect within this painting comparable to the harmony created by the interlacing branches of fig trees in *Bordighera*. Resembling the way the fig tree branches frame a view of a sun-drenched Bordighera village silhouetted against dark blue seawaters, this trail of warm mist brings together all three zones of Monet's image of the Valley of Sasso. Geffroy guides us to follow the path of this enveloping atmospheric effect from the depths of the picture to the threshold of the foreground: The warm mist wanders along the edges of the mountains and then covers the valley with deposits of gentle vapors among the palm, pine, and citrus trees that appear artfully arranged in orderly tiers. Rather fittingly, Geffroy does not mention the lone manmade structure (presumably a house) on the right side of the picture since the lush palm trees and profusion of lemons virtually engulf it.

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[112] Ibid.

[113] Ibid.

According to the critic, Monet possesses superior visual and expressive powers that enable him to depict aspects of nature that would go overwhelmingly undetected by a casual observer: “Il faut bien accepter la vérité et la subtilité de vision du peintre, tant il emploie d’art à montrer en suspension dans l’atmosphère les vapeurs vertes et bleues, les rayons épars, les reflets des choses.”[114] From Geffroy’s point of view, the ultimate measure of the truth and subtlety of Monet’s vision extends from his capacity to feel and to represent the most evanescent phenomena in his art: the green and blue tints of vapors, the scattered rays of the sun, and the reflections of the elements of nature off one another. Using the truthfulness of his vision to perceive the subtle vagaries of light and shadow suspended in the atmosphere, Monet imparts a material form to these transient effects. Those who look carefully at his art in turn will be able to detect these scarcely observable phenomena in nature. If we view the dominant color of each region of the picture in concert with the syntax of the preceding description, we move from the blues of the sky and mountains in the background, to the greens of the pine and palm trees in the middleground, to the proliferation of yellows in the lemons hanging from the citrus trees in the foreground. Consistent with the behavior of colored rays of light in nature, the background blues and foreground yellows appear to blend together to produce the greens of the trees in the middleground. The predominant blue and green tints of the vapors that Geffroy sees within this image derive from the mixture of these colors as the sun’s penetrating rays are reflected and refracted in the enveloping atmosphere.

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[114] Ibid.

Geffroy concludes his discussion of the Bordighera paintings with an outwardly simple description of the main components of *Strada Romana à Bordighera* (W. 855, fig. 14). These features include a road partially blocked by a mass of palm trees and flowers. This road leads to green-tinted mountains in the distance:

> La rue de Bordighera, *Via Romana*, est obstruée par des palmiers et des fleurs. Dans le fond s'élèvent des montagnes verdâtres et comme transparentes dans l'embrasement du milieu du jour.[115]

In *La vallée de Sasso, effet bleu*, even the mountains seem to advance toward the surface of the picture, thereby compressing an illusion of pictorial space to some degree. In contrast, *Strada Romana à Bordighera* projects an ampler sense of pictorial space by means of the diagonal of the road and Monet's rendering of the surrounding buildings with some form of intuitive perspective. In accord with the more substantial illusion of depth in this painting, Geffroy's description directs a reader from the foreground to the background of the picture.

Though Geffroy's account of this picture appears simple on the surface, a closer examination of its contents reveals an attempt to rival the 'subtlety' and 'truth' he ascribes to the painter's eye. As we have seen, Monet's ability to perceive and represent the nuances of the atmosphere serves as a primary demonstration of the acuity of his vision. Geffroy expresses the clarity and penetration of his own vision through his translation of the atmospheric effects in this painting. In his characterization of the mountains as "verdâtre," Geffroy has picked up on an understated brushing of light greenish paint that Monet has applied to their rocky facets. An insertion of these green strokes amid pastel pinks creates a complementary contrast and intensifies the overall luminosity that Geffroy observes in the mountains and in the painting in general. By highlighting a component of this delicate color contrast, the critic matches the painter's sharpness of vision and calls attention to the extremely subtle ingredients that go into representing the clearness and transparency of midday atmospheric conditions under intense sunlight.

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[115] Ibid.

This progression from Monet's northern to his southern to his western landscapes reaches its final destination in Geffroy's account of the artist's paintings of Belle-Île-en-Mer – a rocky island located off the southern coast of Brittany in western France. The critic first underscores the breadth of Monet's vision by reminding his readers of the artist's exceptional ability to paint a diversity of terrains and climes: "Enfin, voici que Monet achève de se montrer apte à peindre toutes les configurations du sol, tous les états de l'atmosphère, toutes les tranquillités et toutes les fureurs de l'eau."[116] Geffroy leaves no doubt that Monet's capacity to render faithfully the topographical particularities of the spectacular and diverse landscapes he explores constitutes an important aspect of his innovation. The significant majority of the artist's achievement, however, derives not so much from his representation of different regions of solid earth scattered throughout the continent but instead from his facility for giving form to more fleeting, less tangible elements within his pictures, including the different atmospheric conditions and the ebb and flow of waters. Monet's sensitivity to variations in atmospheric states, the intensity of light, and the momentary reflections operates as the fundamental criterion Geffroy associates with "la vérité et la subtilité de vision du peintre" in the former paragraph. With water's propensity to change substantively in appearance based on fluctuating conditions of weather and light, it serves as an ideal medium for Monet to register nature's mutability. Gray skies and stormy weather can transform the calm and still blue-green waters of Belle-Île into a roiling mass of dark fury.

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[116] Ibid.

Belle-Île holds particular significance for Geffroy as it marks the spot where he and Monet had initially met in October 1886. Along with the engraver Victor-Louis Focillon and his wife, Geffroy was vacationing at Belle-Île at that time and conducting research on the imprisonment of Auguste Blanqui for a biography he was preparing about this utopian socialist.[117] The critic had grown familiar with the customs and terrain of Brittany over the years. His parents were natives to this region, and he had spent most of his holidays there.[118] Contrasting his depth of personal knowledge of the island and its environs with the artist's, Geffroy emphasizes the novelty of this corner of nature for Monet. The painter had previously ventured no farther than the agrarian fields of Vétheuil and the cliffs of Normandy in terms of his travels through the western regions of France: "Les dix toiles peintes à Belle-Île montrent l'artiste aux prises avec une nature nouvelle pour lui, puisqu'il avait borné jusqu'à présent ses courses vers l'ouest champs de Vétheuil et aux falaises normandes."[119] The critic's stress on the newness of this landscape for Monet provides further justification for the originality and the abstention from predictable formulas he credits to the artist within the first half of this two-issue article.[120]

Geffroy's characterization of this new geography for the artist with the language of struggle and combat also reinforces the sentiments and general tone of his May 25 article: "On peut dire qu'il est sorti triomphant de la bataille qu'il est allé livrer aux lames de l'Océan et aux rochers de Bretagne, son talent s'est trouvé de force et a pu vaincre cette terre granitique et ces eaux redoutables."[121] Though critics and other members of the artistic establishment had provided formidable resistance to Monet's paintings before acquiescing, the legitimate battle and ultimate barometer of the truthfulness of his sensations would always extend from nature itself.[122] The thirty-eight canvases Monet produced from his experience on the Breton island provide concrete evidence of a battle with the elements of epic proportion. We may point to Geffroy's capitalization of "l'Océan" which effectively personifies the artist's 'opponent' as a compelling example. Monet's challenge to paint the movement of waves as they pounded against the rocks and cliffs of this island becomes an effort to represent the totality or the essence of *The Ocean* and its indomitable force.

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[117] Paradise, *Gustave Geffroy and the Criticism of Painting*, 23-24.

[118] Ibid., 266.

[119] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 1.

[120] For a discussion of primitivism and origins in the context of Monet's Belle-Île paintings, see Kallmyer, "Le Grand Tout: Monet on Belle-Île and the Impulse toward Unity."

In painting Belle-Île, Monet's artistic talents were charged with transforming the most intractable components of nature ("terre granitique" and "eaux redoutables") into supple images that would encapsulate an entire history of a perpetual encounter between the rocky coastline and stormy sea: "Pour la première fois, la terrible mer de là-bas a trouvé son historien."[123] The history of the terrible sea's invasion upon and gradual erosion of Belle-Île's coastline is *visually* inscribed upon the landscape – a trope Geffroy will further develop at a later point in his narrative. Who better to serve as the first historian of this sublime confrontation of earth and water than a painter who can represent it without the mediation and reductive tendencies of verbal language? Nature reveals its history, its geological progression most directly through our eyes. Monet's exceptional vision and expressive capabilities allow him to convey the history of Belle-

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[121] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 1.
[122] Paradise, *Gustave Geffroy and the Criticism of Painting*, 267.
[123] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 1.

Île without changing the original terms or language of its presentation. To understand fully the history of this region, we need not read a lengthy narrative that inevitably will fall short in terms of its comprehensiveness; we would be better served by looking at one of Monet's canvases.

As a result of Geffroy's viewing of this set of Belle-Île paintings at the *Exposition Internationale de peinture et de sculpture*, he develops a visual narrative that imitates the continuity between successive phases of the tides. His text seeks to transcribe this history into prose without disrupting the immediacy, totality, and fluidity of Monet's visual expression. As a means of accomplishing this task, Geffroy departs from a more literal transcription of the contents of individual paintings and composes a unified history that integrates multiple and competing circumstances and temporalities, including but not confined to: (1) the timeless history of the elemental transformation of the Belle-Île landscape by the ferocities of the ocean; (2) the history of Monet's 'battle' with the rocks and sea at Belle-Île; (3) the canvases as a material record of that history; (4) Geffroy's personal history with Monet; (5) Geffroy's own history with the landscape and customs of Belle-Île; and (6) Geffroy's experience and history with Monet's paintings and this exhibition in particular.

Did the newness of the landscape of Belle-Île for Monet perhaps occasion the critic's more innovative approach toward these ten paintings? As previously mentioned, Geffroy's discussion of the ten Belle-Île canvases possesses an appreciably more lyrical quality with its combination of less explicit or direct reference to individual paintings and a greater emphasis on the effects of the works as an ensemble. In the following analysis, I will build upon JoAnne Paradise's premise that the paintings on view do not appear to function as the exclusive source of inspiration for Geffroy's meditation. Geffroy instead has substituted a confluence of his personal memories of Belle-Île with the multitude of sensations drawn from viewing Monet's canvases. With its incorporation of the critic's personal memories of Belle-Île, Geffroy's verbal seascapes contain some of the immediacy we associate with Monet's execution of these paintings *en plein air*.[124]

As we already have seen, the preceding descriptions and analysis of paintings contained in Geffroy's article at times may deviate slightly from the specific content of the individual works and allude to their collective effects. His narrative related to the Belle-Île landscapes represents the critic's most unequivocal attempt to date to foreground an experience elicited from viewing a group of paintings as an ensemble. Eliminating any indication of specific titles and virtually all references to the material aspects of particular painted images, Geffroy constructs a series of verbal tableaux based on the cumulative effects of viewing both Monet's canvases and the motifs that inspired them.[125] Within the body of his narrative, Geffroy provides minimal indication of the canvases themselves. In their place, he constructs a seemingly unmediated view of the rugged coastal area of western France. As Paradise has observed, the primary and decisive instance of any overt discussion of the paintings as an intermediary source comes in the context of the critic's extended contemplation of the sea waves "qui apparaissent, qui déferlent depuis le haut des cadres."[126]

Steven Levine has noted that Daniel Wildenstein made use of Geffroy's article to identify the particular Belle-Île canvases on display at the *Exposition internationale* of 1887 for the purposes of his catalogue raisonné.[127] My analysis of Geffroy's treatment of Monet's Belle-Île paintings will show that we as readers cannot definitively equate particular phrases or blocks of sentences to a single canvas. In fact, certain passages more likely evoke the general mood or the overall qualities that are common to several or even the majority of the paintings produced within Monet's 1886 campaign on the Breton island. With that said, I will adopt the set of paintings Wildenstein has proposed for inclusion in Petit's exhibition as the basis of my own analysis, for they seem as reasonable and as pertinent as any others which Geffroy's descriptions may call to mind.

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[124] Paradise, *Gustave Geffroy and the Criticism of Painting*, 268.

[125] See Alexandra Wettlaufer's discussion of Diderot's verbal tableaux. See *In the Mind's Eye*, p. 113.

[126] Paradise cites this passage in *Gustave Geffroy and the Criticism of Painting*, p. 268.

[127] Steven Levine, *Monet, Narcissus, and Self-Reflection: The Modernist Myth of the Self* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 71.

In addition, Levine initially posits and Paradise advances a notion that Geffroy's presentation of the Belle-Île canvases "establishes a critical paradigm." The critic's narrative emulates or parallels the painter's conception of the works as a closely interrelated group of canvases by treating and writing about them as an *ensemble*.[128] In order to convey their collective effects, Geffroy develops what Levine has termed a "serial syntax" in which the differences among the single canvases are largely diminished to create an amalgamated image of Belle-Île.[129] I mostly support Levine and Paradise's interpretations of Geffroy's treatment of these works as an attempt to produce a literary equivalent to the effects of Monet's serial method of painting. Art historians, however, have long debated whether the Belle-Île canvases constitute a proper series. Grace Seiberling, for one, has maintained that Monet did not necessarily regard these paintings as a formal series in the same manner as the *Grainstacks* and subsequent ensembles created and exhibited throughout the 1890s and 1900s.[130] But as Paul Hayes Tucker has noted, Monet's thirty-eight paintings of Belle-Île exhibit a dramatic reduction in the range of colors, canvas formats, motifs, and compositional choices in comparison with his previous landscape campaigns of the 1880s. These self-imposed parameters place considerable demands on the artist's attentiveness to subtle progressions in the movement of the ocean's waves, the variations in light and atmospheric conditions, and the way these more volatile elements affect the appearance of the rocks.[131] These relatively narrow differences both enhance the cohesiveness and interconnectedness of the canvases and precipitate dialogue among them. The closely related nature of the palette and compositional choices in these works plus the fact that Monet displayed an unprecedented number of them within a single show signal a fundamental shift in respect to the painter's technical and exhibition procedures.[132] I concur with Tucker's categorization of these paintings as a full-fledged series comparable to those produced in the 1890s and onward. I aim to demonstrate that Geffroy's mode of description supports this assertion.

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[128] See both Levine's discussion in *Monet and His Critics*, p. 88 and Paradise's comments in *Gustave Geffroy and the Criticism of Painting*, p. 268.

[129] Levine, *Monet, Narcissus, and Self-Reflection*, 71.

[130] Seiberling, *Monet's Series*, Diss. Yale University, 1976 (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1981), 69.

In both the display of these paintings and Geffroy's verbal rendition of them, the individual works are subsumed within the formation of a cumulative image. To what extent does this image derive at least in part from the critic's firsthand experience of the motifs that Monet painted? How much of what Geffroy says about these works can we relate to a certain painting or a grouping of them? These two questions have no definitive answers, but examination of his text may bring about a clearer understanding of the ways in which the critic's aims parallel the painter's in terms of stressing the totality of the effects of the Belle-Île canvases. Regardless, the image produced by both the paintings themselves and Geffroy's descriptions requires a viewer's or a reader's active participation in the process of signification. A viewer proceeds from canvas to canvas and accumulates a succession of visual and other sensory phenomena that subsequently can be distilled into a unified image in her mind. In similar fashion, a reader processes and visualizes a succession of verbal images to form a composite mental picture of the effects that these works produced on the critic. Geffroy's presentation of the Belle-Île works as an ensemble serves an exemplary role in instructing fellow critics and ordinary viewers how to look at and how to make sense of both an exhibition of and a verbal account inspired by Monet's paintings.

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[131] Tucker, *Monet in the 90s*, 26.
[132] Ibid., 25-28.

So what happens when we attempt to compare Monet's paintings with Geffroy's narrative? How would an exercise of correlating the referent of Monet's painted images with components of Geffroy's text benefit our understanding of its meaning and structure? In the following analysis, I will assess the extent to which we can attach specific works that Wildenstein proposes to have been on display in Petit's exhibition to Geffroy's narrative. To repeat, this examination does not assume that the critic absolutely had just one particular canvas in mind when he was composing individual clauses, groupings of sentences, or even full paragraphs. A process of relating certain components of Geffroy's descriptions to specific paintings likely featured in this exhibition will allow me to identify particular points of exclusion and inclusion in his narrative. I will seek to determine some of the possible features that Geffroy extracts from these works in his effort to produce a comprehensive record and image of the diversity of his experiences. A portion of the last section of Part One will address the way in which the critic grapples with similar issues deriving from a verbal representation of visual phenomena in his account of this same trip to Belle-Île within his travelogue *Pays d'ouest*.

Geffroy begins his meditation on Belle-Île with a cataloguing of its diverse rock formations and then follows with a series of images that portray how the waves of the sea shape these solid masses by means of their brute oppositional force. He first names three specific rock clusters associated with Belle-Île that we can identify rather effortlessly within nine of the ten paintings on view:[133]

> Port-Coton (W. 1084, 1100, 1101, and 1119; figs. 16 through 19), Port-Goulphar (W. 1093, 1096, and 1097; figs. 20 through 22), Port-Domois (W. 1104 and 1106; figs. 23 and 24), ce sont les noms que l'on trouve à chaque instant au-dessous de ces caps, de ces blocs, creusés en grottes, agglomérés en fortifications.[134]

Providing no indication of titles or any other concrete allusion to the actual canvases, he does not make it readily clear whether he is referencing these clusters of rock as they appear in nature itself, as they are depicted in Monet's paintings, or as they look in both situations. Like Geffroy, a reader presumably can situate herself either *sur le motif* at Belle-Île or in front of Monet's suite of canvases on view in Petit's gallery and spot these rock formations. But what exactly is the benefit of knowing and applying these names to either aspects of the site itself or the paintings? They may serve as a convenient form of verbal shorthand either for providing labels beneath the paintings or for categorizing certain mental images accumulated by surveying "ces caps, … ces blocs, creusés en grottes, agglomérés en fortifications." Yet considered in isolation, these geographical signifiers accomplish little in terms of encapsulating and suggesting experience elicited from Monet or Geffroy's representations of these rocky clusters and the surrounding sea. With each canvas, Monet expresses particularities that the names Port-Coton, Port-Goulphar, and Port-Domois hardly register. Geffroy's task in a sense becomes a quest for a mode of verbal description that can convey far more vividly than these reductive labels the effects engendered by Monet's paintings. In doing so, he takes the approach of minimizing explicit reference to the material aspects of Monet's images in favor of a method that emulates a painter's reliance upon immediate and direct experience. In reading this passage on Belle-Île, we are encouraged to process and synthesize the sensations Geffroy derived from both nature and art into an image of our own design.

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[133] The tenth painting Monet's Belle-Île campaign included in this exhibition is a sketch of the Breton fisherman who served as Monet's reliable porter, *Portrait de Poly* (W. 1122, fig. 25).

[134] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 1.

As both Paradise and Levine previously have noted, Geffroy introduces the language of combat and battle into his treatment of the paintings to evoke an image of an everlasting confrontation between the sea and these rocky outcroppings.[135] An introduction of combat imagery into this context extends the battle leitmotif that Geffroy had developed in his May 25 text to characterize Monet's conflict with the critical establishment and with nature itself. These clusters of rocks assume a defensive role as they accumulate into fortifications ("agglomérés en fortifications"); the crashing waves attempt to tear down these fortresses ("ces solides remparts, ces fiers bastions"). The waves maneuver as the opposing troops ("les adversaires") against these unflinching fortifications ("ces immobiles combattants"). They rush up against the rocks in tightly assembled ranks ("ces rangs pressés"), and these prominent military formations ("des perceptibles formations") brandish and ultimately shatter their swords ("des glaives") against the unbreakable defensive walls ("les parois inflexibles") formed by these massive clusters of stone. As a triumphant record of Monet's battle against the elements, the canvases produced at Belle-Île reenact a continuous struggle to represent nature's ever-changing forces by means of resistant painterly materials.

In developing his narrative on Belle-Île, Geffroy constructs a panoramic view of the capes and mammoth blocks of hollowed stone that comprise and dot its rugged shores:

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[135] Paradise, *Gustave Geffroy and the Criticism of Painting*, 267; Levine, *Monet, Narcissus, and Self-Reflection*, 72.

> Ce sont des côtes désertes, des rochers déchiquetés, des pyramides dressées solitairement en avant des falaises, striées par l'écume, engluées par les mousses et les lichens, – des creux de grottes qui s'ouvrent comme des cryptes mystérieuses, – des mamelons pelés, jaunis et rougis par la végétation d'automne, arrondis et épais comme des bêtes mal dégrossies, des pachydermes à croûtes épaisses, – des rocs percés comme des arches, – des promontoires couleur de fer et de rouille, hauts, carrés et massifs comme des cathédrales, qui s'en vont au loin tomber tout droit dans la mer. La mer entoure ces solides remparts, ces fiers bastions, ces monstrueuses pierres qui donnent ici, à l'œil qui les regarde, l'impression même de la dureté et de la pesanteur. [136]

It is worth noticing that Geffroy begins the former sentence with an existential *there* ("Ce sont …"). Is he referring to what he could see in his own view of the Belle-Île coastline from atop a cliff? Or is he describing a composite of the different rock formations perceived by way of a glance across Monet's exhibition of paintings? In the latter sentence from this quotation, he creates another level of ambiguity or slippage between the painted image and nature itself as the primary referent of his description. In transitioning from the effects of the rocks to extended depictions of various states of the sea, he calls attention to the eye ("l'œil") that looks here ("ici") at "ces solides remparts, ces fiers bastions, ces monstrueuses pierres." The oblique wording of this sentence raises all sorts of questions. First, *whose* eye? Monet's? Geffroy's? A viewer's? Second, *where* is here ("ici")? At Belle-Île? At the gallery in the presence of Monet's paintings? Third, *which* monstrous stones convey "l'impression de la dureté et de la pesanteur"? The painted ones or the actual ones observed '*sur le motif*'? When analyzed from this perspective, Geffroy's use of "Ce sont" and "ici" appears to leave open the possibility that Monet's paintings do not necessarily serve as the complete source for the composition of his verbal tableaux.

The substantial length of the former sentence in the above passage demonstrates how Geffroy's descriptive language can assume an advantage over its painted counterparts. Instead of needing to rely upon a set of multiple and discretely painted canvases to convey the appearance of the rocky outcroppings of Belle-Île from different points of view, Geffroy can evoke the totality of these effects within a monolithic sentence. It seems particularly fitting that Geffroy would compose a descriptive sentence of colossal length and magnitude to portray the immense scale of these imposing heaps of dark volcanic rock near and on the shores of Belle-Île. Through a combination of commas and recurrent dashes, Geffroy elides together the array of shapes, colors, textures, and daunting effects of these rocky clusters as they are depicted within at least six paintings. His presentation of these features is too open-ended to pinpoint with any level of certitude the exact painting or group of paintings the critic had in mind. It is even conceivable that none of Monet's canvases fully correspond with the contents of Geffroy's characterization of the rocks of Belle-Île. An attempt to link these clauses with distinct works hypothetically yields the following sequence of images: We find desolate coasts and ragged rocks in paintings like *La Côte Sauvage* and *Pointes de rochers à Port-Goulphar* (W. 1100 and 1101; figs. 17 and 18). With an assemblage of needle rocks boldly silhouetted against a turbulent blue-green ocean, the *Pyramides de Port-Coton, mer sauvage* (W. 1084, fig. 16) shows the frothy sea spume as it beats against the pyramidally shaped rocks. Over time, an accumulation of waves similar to those represented in this picture has etched a network of striations and has deposited mosses and lichens along the craggy surfaces of these rocks. In a painting such as *Grotte de Port-Domois* (W. 1114, fig. 23), a hollowed, rust-colored grotto receives a calm flow of emerald and blue-gray ocean waters into its mysterious, crypt-like opening. Geffroy's description then transports us to the yellows and reds of the autumnal vegetation that covers the bare hillocks in paintings such as *Bloc de rochers à Port-Goulphar* or *Bloc de rochers, Belle-Île* (W. 1096 and 1097; figs. 21 and 22). The rounded and thick shapes of these rocky formations suggest the rough-hewn edges of grisly wild beasts, and their texture resembles the thick, crusty skins of elephants. In *La Roche Guibel*, *Port-Domois* (W. 1106, fig. 24), the ebb and flow of the waters has pierced an arch-like opening within the iconic rock that is situated near the right side of the picture. Geffroy's last image of the rocks of Belle-Île within this sentence recalls *Entrée de Port-Goulphar, Belle-Île* (W. 1093, fig. 20) with its rust- and iron-tinted promontories receding into the far distance of the picture. As these cliffs trail into the far recesses of the picture, they seem to drop off suddenly into the depths of the sea. With their steep, squared-off shapes, these rocks tower above the waters and compare with the enormity of Gothic cathedrals.

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[136] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 1.

Traversing through this panoramic view, we arrive at the overall impression Geffroy associates with these rocky formations – "de la dureté et de la pesanteur." In order to evoke visual analogues for the effects of hardness, durability, solidity, and heft he has observed, the critic compares these rocky outcroppings with architectural elements, animals, and metals. Since Paradise previously has called attention to some of these metaphors in play, I will not dwell on them too long except for the purpose of elaborating upon her observations a bit more.[137] The allusions to architectural members and human-built structures range from some with spiritual or transcendent connotations or functions ("des pyramides," "des cryptes," and "des cathédrales") to others with military or defensive connotations ("des arches," "ces solides remparts," and "ces fiers bastions"). The animals he references suggest the irregularity, wildness, and roughness of the shapes of the rocks ("des bêtes mal dégrossies"), along with the bumpiness, crustiness, and thickness of their texture ("des pachydermes à croûtes épaisses"). His comparison to elephants also underscores the enormous scale and size of these rocks.

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[137] Paradise, *Gustave Geffroy and the Criticism of Painting*, 267.

Their deep reddish colors resemble oxidized or rusted metals ("rouille"), particularly durable and solid iron ("fer").

Though we can feasibly link Geffroy's rock imagery with a number of Monet's Belle-Île canvases, his subsequent descriptions of the sea become increasingly evocative and even less overtly tied to specific paintings on display. As the critic shifts his focus from the rocks to the sea, he reminds his readers of the presence of the paintings before him at the exhibition, but he limits his references to one or possibly two instances. I will reserve the second probable allusion to Monet's painted images for a later point in my discussion. The initial one, however, occurs rather abruptly in the course of Geffroy's narrative after positively no mention of Monet's paintings in his description of the rocks. Unfolding from the upper boundaries of Monet's framed canvases, waves emerge as forbidding rivals against the immobile fortresses formed by these massive rocks: "Mais les vagues qui apparaissent, qui déferlent depuis le haut des cadres, sont bien les adversaires qui convienne à ces immobiles combattants."[138] Instead of a more concentrated presentation of the rocks of Belle-Île within a single imposing sentence, Geffroy's treatment of the vicissitudes of the surrounding waters assumes a more dilated or protracted form with multiple vignettes woven together throughout the balance of this lengthy paragraph. Geffroy provides a verbal equivalent to this pictorial accumulation of views of Belle-Île into a unified ensemble by presenting a suite of verbal tableaux as a progression of waves and weather.

Adopting the present tense within the following narrative of changing states of water along the rocky coasts of Belle-Île, Geffroy appears to stress the continuity of time. In other words, his account of the sea captures the fluidity of its motion in a manner that a group of individual paintings can accomplish only when they are accumulated in the mind of a viewer. If we as viewers were to consider the Belle-Île paintings in Petit's exhibition as a coordinated ensemble, a physical and mental progression from one canvas to another would reveal not only different points of view but also the characteristic appearance of the waters under a variety of weather conditions. Geffroy's translation of the sea's movement into words performs or reenacts this procedure and essentially operates as a synthesis of Monet's series of related paintings into a composite image.

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[138] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 1.

The composition of that synthetic image departs substantially from a mode of literal transcription. With no provision of specific paintings as points of immediate reference, his meditation on the combat between the sea and the rough-hewn formations of striated volcanic rock advances on the basis of shifting atmospheric and tidal conditions. In addition to supplying no titles, the critic does not make use of any other syntactical devices or punctuation aside from a conventional deployment of periods to divide his narrative into a readily identifiable group of individual paintings. In contrast to the aforementioned sentence on the rocks of Belle-Île, no recurrent dashes are inserted to imply a transition from one painted image to another.[139] We conceivably can infer that the changes in the water and weather assist in marking the passage or movement from canvas to canvas. Regardless of this conclusion, Geffroy's narrative largely deviates from an exact or exhaustive translation of the contents of individual works on view in the exhibition into prose. No verifiable or reliable method surfaces for establishing a one-to-one correspondence between a group of sentences and a particular canvas or set of related paintings.

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[139] Steven Levine has interpreted the employment of this grammatical feature as a means of both transitioning from one work to another *and*, quite critically, of linking together individual canvases, especially within the context of Geffroy's article of the Antibes paintings from 1888. See Geffroy, "Chronique: Dix tableaux de Claude Monet," *La justice*, 17 June 1888, and Levine's discussion of the article in *Monet and His Critics* on pp. 91-92.

The critic possibly removes direct reference to individual canvases to emphasize how the *ensemble* of the Belle-Île paintings embodies a totality of the sea's conditions. By transporting his readers to a more unmediated view of the motif, Geffroy can conjure the effects of multiple painted images in a single phrase or collection of sentences with little need for a precise transcription of the individual works on display. With the remainder of my consideration of this paragraph, I will attempt to analyze four separate blocks of Geffroy's sentences of my own design in part by relating them to four paintings possibly included within the exhibition. I do not seek to imply that Geffroy intended for these groups of sentences to correspond only with the four paintings I have selected. I also do not assume that the divisions I have put forward are any more serviceable or accurate than any other permutations. I instead regard this exercise as one of many modes of completing a process of signification. Consistent with Geffroy's appeal to "regarder avec des yeux attentifs," I will create and then articulate my own mental images of Monet's paintings on the basis of the critic's synthesis of his collective experience of them into a suggestive form of prose. By engaging the eidetic qualities of Geffroy's criticism, we as readers may observe, contribute to, and advance a continual cycle of translation and transference from the visual to the verbal to the visual and back.

Geffroy's Belle-Île narrative sets up a tension between the perpetual flux of its surrounding waters and the static, inflexible nature of these formations of black volcanic rock, but even these outwardly "solides remparts" and "immobiles combattants" become subject to transformation under the cumulative onslaught of the sea's waves over time. My preliminary grouping of sentences concentrates on a dense and rapid progression of the waves from the edges of the calmer waters of the open sea in the distance to their point of frenzied contact with the rocks along the coast:

> Mais les vagues qui apparaissent, qui déferlent depuis le haut des cadres, sont bien les adversaires qui conviennent à ces immobiles combattants. Elles accourent en rangs pressés et l'on est stupéfait de l'infini de leur nombre, elles remplissent l'espace de leurs larges bonds, elles se brisent comme des glaives contre les parois inflexibles, elles se dissolvent en ruissellements. On a à la fois l'impression de l'eau lointaine, immobile à l'horizon livide, et des espaces d'eau frissonnant sous le ciel, et des perceptibles formations de vagues, et de leur arrivée tumultueuse et pressée, et des mouvements incessants et tout proches qu'elles font pour mordre et desceller les assises des rochers.[140]

The contents of this passage recall certain qualities of the sea waves in paintings similar to *La côte sauvage* (W. 1100, fig. 17). With an unconventionally high horizon line and just a thin band of sky to prevent them from consuming the entire upper region of this composition, the multitudinous patterns of waves do indeed appear to unfurl from nearly the top of this picture. It is worth noting here that Geffroy introduces the plural form of frames ("des cadres") in describing this arrangement of the waves in relation to the picture plane. Even in this case when the critic reinserts an explicit referent to the physical boundaries of Monet's painted images by mentioning the top edges of the canvas, his use of "des cadres" implies a recognition of this compositional feature across multiple canvases. An absence of any colors in this particular block of sentences also allows for a correlation of Geffroy's description with either an array or an aggregate form of Monet's paintings. Whether the painter selects a wider horizontal landscape or a narrower, vertically oriented portrait format, we may notice a significantly high placement of a horizon line throughout many of the images that are regarded to be part of this exhibition – especially W. 1084, 1101, 1114, and 1119 (figs. 16, 18, 23, and 19 respectively).

With full acknowledgement of the ability of these sentences to encapsulate effects of the sea waves within multiple paintings, let us return to comparing this passage with some of the features of *La côte sauvage* as a sort of exemplary case. Represented from a plunging point of view atop a cliff, the choppy sea waves in this picture travel in tightly arranged clusters until they crash against the rocks of Radenec – a functional line of demarcation between Port-Goulphar and Port-Domois.[141] The tipped-up perspective Monet devises for this painting enhances the frontality of its presentation and gives the sea an immediacy that resonates well with Geffroy's evocation of rushing waves: "Elles accourent…." With virtually nothing to constrain the briskly flowing waters coursing along the left and bottom edges of the picture, these waves threaten to break free from the illusionistic boundaries of the frame and pour into our own space. Monet conveys the compactness and density of these wave formations ("rangs pressés") and their infinite profusion ("l'infini de leur nombre") through a complex interplay of brushstrokes. The artist weaves together long horizontal squiggles of emerald, blue-gray, and white paint with a combination of short vertical dots and rounded comma-like strokes of white, gray, and cobalt blue colors. Though they may fill much of the pictorial space ("elles remplissent l'espace"), the waves in *La côte sauvage* do not completely consume the entirety of any of these jagged rocks. An abundance of white and blue swirls of thick, crusty paint along the most distant rock toward the center of the composition suggests the potential of the waves to overtake "ces immobiles combattants" with their large leaps ("de leurs larges bonds"). As the waves make contact with the hard stone, they lose some of their force. Consisting of clusters of short, stabbing vertical strokes of deep browns, greens, and reds, these ragged rocks of Radenec form unyielding barriers against the continued march of the waves in tightly composed ranks. Though the dense deposits of opaque blue, green, and white paint impart a degree of solidity to the sea, the waves ultimately break like shattered swords in their encounter with the rocks ("se brisent comme des glaives"). Thinner filaments of white and blue-gray paint interspersed among the lower regions of these "parois inflexibles" coupled with the dots and swirls of emerald and blue-gray pigment in the channels between the rocks evoke the splintering or dissolving of the intensity of these waves into calmer streams: "[E]lles dissolvent en ruissellements." Geffroy also picks up on the divide between the stillness of the waters in the open sea in the distance and the turbulence of the waves as they reach the coastal rocks in a picture like this one. Applying a comparatively uniform band of blue-gray paint at the horizon with broader and less inflected brushstrokes, Monet conveys an impression of calm waters below a pale, cloud-filled sky: "On a à la fois l'impression de l'eau lointaine, immobile à l'horizon livide…." In *La côte sauvage*, Monet incorporates a similar range of colors in the sky to convey this cooler effect. He represents the sky with a combination of soft touches of white and gray along with overlays of blue-gray pigment. The diversity of colors and brushstrokes alluded to above to depict the incessant movement of the waves ("mouvements incessants") starkly opposes this more harmonious zone of calm waters shivering beneath the sky ("des espaces d'eau frissonnant sous le ciel").

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[140] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 1.

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[141] The identification of this particular area of Belle-Île and its rocks comes from Wildenstein, *Claude Monet: Biographie et catalogue raisonné* (Paris: Taschen-Institut Wildenstein, 1997), 3:417.

As a point of contrast to this image of a tumultuous and densely packed progression of waves approaching the rocks of Radenec ("leur arrivée tumultueuse et pressée"), Geffroy's next sentence directs us to the calm waters surrounding an opening of a hollow cave-like formation along the coast at Port-Domois: "Au contraire, à l'entrée de cette grotte, cette eau agitée se fait calme, la traitresse effleure la pierre, la baise, la caresse, devient transparente, se fige en ses profondeurs vertes et bleues."[142] The waters in a painting like *Grotte de Port-Domois* (W. 1114, fig. 23) call to mind the colors and tranquil conditions of the sea as they are portrayed in Geffroy's sentence. Monet renders the stillness of these waters with a relatively unvarying series of long horizontal strokes of deep cobalt blue and shorter curved marks of lighter blue-gray and turquoise paint. The transparency and shimmering quality of the sea ("devient transparente") possibly extends from the small touches of white that the painter has scattered throughout his composition. In conjunction with the blues Geffroy associates with the depths of the water ("ses profondeurs"), a prominent network of green, blue-green, and yellow-green zigzag strokes occurs in the area of sea near the entry to the grotto. Does this abundance of green hues in this part of the sea derive from a reflection of mossy growth on the upper part of the rock formation? Since Monet has cropped the top portion of this grotto, we only can speculate about the source of these green hues. Emphasizing the deceptive and fickle nature of the still seawater, Geffroy personifies it as "la traitresse." The present lull of the sea in this picture belies the violent forces of the waves that have carved this cavernous opening into the rock formation over thousands of years. For now, the waters play a serene and loving counterpart to the sunlit rocks comprised of lemon yellows, violets, reds, oranges, and pale greens. In *Grotte de Port-Domois*, the tender sea foam kisses and caresses ("la baise, la caresse") the edges of these rock clusters in the form of soft curls and dashes of white paint. Geffroy also stresses the gentle nature of the water's contact with the rocks with his use of the verb *effleurer*. If we translate *effleurer* as "to brush against" in this sentence, we achieve a correspondence between the actions of the water and those of the painter. Like the water's gentle embrace of the stones that interrupt its flow, Monet's brush deposits delicate strokes of white paint on the surface of the canvas to portray the placid point of contact between the rocks and the sea.

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[142] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 1.

Within the following segment of sentences, Geffroy builds upon this theme of calmer conditions and evokes features of the water, weather, and rock formations redolent of those depicted in *La Roche Guibel, Port-Domois* (W. 1106, fig. 24):

> Le long de ces côtes sauvages, par une journée de beau temps qui ressemble à une accalmie, la mer est rigide, des remous et des cercles reproduisent encore très loin vers le large la forme du cap, les lames qui se déroulent lentement se brisent avec des cassures de marbre, l'écume qui ourle cette avancée de la terre est d'un bleu de pierreries. Entre les rochers, dans les chemins encaissés qu'ils construisent, s'établissent des cascades réduites, des cours d'eau minces comme des rigoles, un va-et-vient de flots apaisés dont les filaments de mousse dessinent des lignes tremblées et des losanges. Toutes les heures de la marée sont écrites à l'étiage de ces murailles qui surplombent l'abîme, on peut noter les phases des envahissements et des reculs.[143]

This passage as a whole conjures an image of a day of beautiful weather with the sort of peaceful waters that sometimes serve as signs of an eerie calm before an impending storm – the final image in Geffroy's narrative. Monet's painting illustrates similar conditions with its pale blue sky, puffy cumulus clouds, and the large flood of sunlight gleaming off the gently lapping waves and the jagged rock clusters in the distance. Geffroy's provision of a temporal marker ("par une journée de beau temps") also establishes a clear division between this passage and the preceding ones. Within the previous two images of the waters and rocks of Belle-Île that I have extracted from my supplementary divisions of this paragraph, Geffroy does not designate their occurrence at a particular time, nor do we have any decisive reason to assume their coexistence on the same day. His inclusion of "par une journée de beau temps" in this group of sentences establishes a firm separation from the preceding ones and paves the way for a final distinctive image of a dramatic storm at the close of this paragraph. In that last block of sentences, Geffroy will attach an even more specific point in time to his portrayal of the tempestuous waters.

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[143] Ibid.

Further allusion to a correspondence between the procedures and processes of the artist and nature occurs by means of Geffroy's anthropomorphizing of the sea within the passage quoted at length in the preceding paragraph. In the course of describing the movement and flow of Belle-Île's waters, the critic transforms the sea into a painter, sculptor, and an author in its own right.[144] Before we turn to Geffroy's comparison of the tides to a kind of historical writing, let us first consider the metaphors relating the activity of the sea to some of the forms and means of visual art, including drawing, painting, sculpture, and textile manufacture. Throughout this discussion, I will show how Geffroy's allusions to creative practices within his narrative of the sea enable a reader to visualize certain aspects of Monet's paintings, particularly an image like *La Roche Guibel, Port-Domois*.

As the slowly rolling waves break against the large cape, they enact a process of mimesis as they *reproduce* eddies and circles ("des remous et des cercles reproduisent"). In *La Roche Guibel, Port-Domois*, Monet similarly curves the blue, emerald, and white strokes associated with the water closest to the coastal rock formations in the background. The circular rhythms of these marks generate a whirling or swirling effect, and their seemingly immeasurable number implies their capacity for endless expansion or duplication. Perhaps to underscore the intensity of the combat between the waves and rocky coast of Belle-Île, the critic also imparts a similar degree of resilience or firmness to the sea that he had formerly associated with its daunting opponent: "La mer est rigide…." In the course of their slow uncoiling, the rigid sea waves lose some of this solidity as they break against the coastal rocks. Geffroy's portrayal of the broken waves as cracks of marble ("des cassures de marbre") connects the sea to a finer, more plastic stone commonly used for making sculpture – a marked contrast to the coarseness of the rugged volcanic rock of the coast. The fractured forms of these waves resemble fragments of marble produced as a sculptor carves away at a thick block of stone with a hammer and chisel. In *La Roche Guibel, Port-Domois,* Monet applies soft strokes of blue paint along the face of the rocks to convey the boundless trajectory of the breaking waves. The pattern of these slender blue lines on the rock situated on the left edge of the foreground assumes an appearance similar to the delicate veining of marble. In essence, the waves transform or sculpt the rough rock into marble-like forms over time.

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[144] Steven Levine has preceded me in characterizing the sea's movement in these sentences as a form of "painting and drawing." His primary interests reside in situating this passage and Monet's project within the context of the development of the psychoanalytic theory of sublimation. As an alternative to Levine's interpretation, my own highlights the creative agency of the sea as a visual and literary artist or as a maker and marker of time and images. In calling attention to Geffroy's personification or anthropomorphizing of the elements, my intention is to emphasize the parallel nature of the activity among the sea, the painter, and the critic in the construction of images. See *Monet, Narcissus, and Self-Reflection*, p. 72.

Geffroy then compares the blue hue of the sea foam ("écume") to the color of gemstones ("d'un bleu de pierreries"). As he seeks to translate the palettes of nature and art into prose, the critic relies upon an image of glimmering jewels to communicate the intensity of their respective colors.[145] Geffroy also may have made this allusion to precious stones to confer qualities of solidity or durability to these waters. Here again, this radiant blue water has a constructive or artistic capacity as it hems in the encroachment of the rocky cape into its expanses ("l'écume qui ourle cette avancée de la terre"). Like a seamstress stitching a border or a fringe around the edges of a garment, the fluid water reins in and becomes a container or boundary for the cliffs and rock formations lining the coast. In Monet's painting, swirls of blue and white pigment signify waves that invade the periphery and impede upon or erode the advancement of these formerly solid, inflexible rocks.

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[145] Monet would report similar challenges in converting the intense colors of nature into pigment within the context of his Antibes paintings of 1888. In a letter to Rodin, Monet determines that he would need a palette of gold and precious gems to depict the light effects he was experiencing: "Il faudrait peindre ici avec de l'or et des pierreries." See "Letter to Rodin," 1 February 1888, L. 825. For both critic and painter alike, nature tests the limits of the representational materials and means at their disposal, and only precious metals and gemstones potentially could approximate its effects.

Geffroy completes his characterization of the sea's visual artistry by comparing its movements with the marks of an accomplished draftsman. The frothy filaments of sea foam produced by the back and forth motion of these subdued waves *draw* a network of trembling lines and diamond patterns: "[U]n va-et-vient de flots apaisés dont les filaments de mousse dessinent des lignes tremblées et des losanges." The diversity and expressive quality of the brushstrokes Monet employs to represent the sea in *La Roche Guibel, Port-Domois* appear to support Geffroy's linkage of the movement of the waves with a form of drawing. Whether the waves meander through the arch-like opening of La Roche Guibel or steadily roll below and between the plunging paths ("dans les chemins encaissés") formed by these rocky outcroppings, their constant movement produces an energetic pattern of lines and shapes. Monet captures this dynamism in his picture with his intricate weave of long curls, short commas, dashes of intermediate length, diagonal accents, slender threads, and dots in a range of colors from white to blue to emerald green.

The uninterrupted phases of invasions and retreats of the waves ("les phases des envahissements et des reculs") are inscribed upon the surfaces of these rocky formations: "Toutes les heures de la marée sont écrites à l'étiage de ces murailles qui surplombent l'abîme…." Employing representational techniques comparable to those of the painter, the tides write ("écrites") their history upon these walls of coastal rock ("ces murailles") in *visual* rather than *verbal* form. In *La Roche Guibel, Port-Domois*, the various white striations and scrawls on these rocks convey the impact of the waves beating against their surfaces throughout the hours of their existence. The flecks of blue paint interspersed among these white marks perhaps indicate a fresh and continual deposit of seawater upon the rocks. At the varying levels of these steep, rocky walls that overlook the gulf of water, we may notice ("on peut noter") a history of the tides written over the span of hundreds and thousands of years. The erosion and transformation of this rock stems from the continual passage of the waves. The variegated forms, textures, colors, and densities of these rock formations reflect the incessant ebb and flow of the sea. The battle between the tides and the rocks of Belle-Île both predates and transcends the limits of human history and its verbal recording. As Geffroy has confirmed with the rhetorical strategies adopted in this passage, Monet's representation of natural phenomena in visual form can convey the cumulative effects of time with a degree of directness and fullness that may often elude the discursive nature of written language. Visual inspection of either the motif itself or one of Monet's paintings theoretically can offer a far more comprehensive history of nature than one afforded by writing. By harnessing the evocative and eidetic potential of criticism, Geffroy seeks to capture some of the immediacy and depth of Monet's translation of nature into painted images. The critic implicitly recognizes that words never could encapsulate entirely the continuity or complete duration of time or even the total content of a single painting. As a way of amplifying the effects of Monet's paintings, Geffroy synthesizes a multiplicity of sensations and perspectives into a form of prose vivid and capacious enough both to convey his own experience and to inspire a unique image in the minds of his readers.

Geffroy's last image of the sea leads us away from beholding an inscription of "toutes les heures de la marée" upon the rocks of Belle-Île to a picture of a more finite moment in time, and this closing variation recalls aspects of Monet's *Tempête sur la côte de Belle-Île* (W. 1119, fig. 19):

> Enfin, voici le paysage de mer dans toute son horreur, pendant la tempête du dernier octobre. Toute l'étendue de l'eau est dans le même mouvement. La vague

> inconsciente semble se jeter vers un but qu'elle aperçoit, les rochers disparaissent sous les trombes, vont se désagréger sous l'effort furieux de cette meute qui griffe et qui morde, l'écume savonneuse et liliacée est crachée vers la côte par les vents du sud. C'est le règne de l'ouragan et de l'eau.[146]

His use of the temporal adverb *enfin* not only serves to separate these sentences from the preceding ones but also establishes some sort of sequence or progression to his views of Belle-Île. As I have sought to demonstrate, we can discern and create multiple images from this entire paragraph through dividing its sentences into groups, and then we can associate certain paintings from Monet with a particular unit. The suggestiveness and somewhat amorphous quality of Geffroy's images prevents or discourages a reader from establishing any sort of absolute equivalency between a group of sentences and a singular canvas. And prior to this final descriptive cluster, the divisions seem less definitive with the possible exception of the penultimate image I have isolated and proposed of "ces côtes sauvages, par une journée de beau temps." A relative absence of explicit transitional markers from image to image reinforces the fluidity and synthetic nature of the critic's portrayal of Belle-Île. So why does Geffroy seem to interrupt this temporal flow by announcing to his readers that we at last have arrived at a seascape of Belle-Île in all of its horror ("Enfin, voici le paysage de mer dans toute son horreur….")? Perhaps such a transition allows him to introduce or to bring about some sort of crescendo to his narrative. Geffroy has composed an almost symphonic arrangement of the weather and water conditions of Belle-Île: He begins with the waves on a stormy day before less agitated waters prevail. A day of beautiful skies and more tranquil conditions ensues and essentially operates as a tableau of calm before the storm. Finally, a violent tempest enters the scene in all of its sublime glory to subsume and vanquish the previously indomitable rocks. No archival materials exist to confirm the order or manner in which

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[146] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 1.

Monet's paintings were displayed in this 1887 exhibition, nor can we conclusively determine which works the critic had in mind at any particular point in his narrative. In spite of these uncertainties and lack of documentary evidence, the sequence of Geffroy's arrangement of images leaves no doubt about his intent to heighten drama in his presentation. In this concluding seascape, the sea and the stormy weather have collaborated to deliver a decisive blow and now reign victorious over the previously "parois inflexibles" of Belle-Île: "C'est le règne de l'ouragan et de l'eau."

The initial sentence of this passage raises several other ambiguities. Can we determine with any degree of assurance where Geffroy has directed us with this announcement? His insertion of "voici" into this sentence once again infuses some of the aforementioned didactic aspirations into his narrative as if he is guiding or demonstrating to his readers where and how to look, but the destination or object of his vision ultimately remains indeterminate. *Here* is a seascape in all of its horror, but which "paysage de mer" has Geffroy represented for us? Is the critic reintroducing an overt reference to one of Monet's painted images on display in Petit's gallery? Or is he constructing a verbal seascape based on a blending together of Monet's paintings with his personal experience of the motif at Belle-Île? Does his directional cue accommodate both possibilities? The following clause of "pendant la tempête du dernier octobre" does little to mitigate the overall opacity of the referent for this description. Far more overtly than any preceding group of sentences, this passage situates Geffroy's sublime seascape at a precise and identifiable historical moment – the storm of October 1886. Despite the critic's provision of an explicit period of time, we still may ask ourselves to what extent we are reading either Geffroy's recollection of the tempest at Belle-Île on that specific date or a verbal representation of Monet's depiction of these conditions. On one hand, his continued use of the present tense throughout this paragraph may signal a direct recording of observations from a specific series of paintings. On the other hand, an absence of titles, the modest insertion of transitional adverbs or temporal markers, and the minimal incidence of references to the physical presence of Monet's canvases allow for a fusion of a panoramic view of multiple painted images with Geffroy's personal experience.

Granted these ambiguities, let us return to observing correspondences between the effects Geffroy produces in his narrative and the tempest depicted in one of Monet's seascapes. Geffroy's description of the terrible October storm at Belle-Île emphasizes the coordination of the water's motion across the entire expanse of sea in front of his eyes: "Toute l'étendue est dans le même mouvement." The critic further develops this idea of consistent movement throughout the stormy waters by characterizing the sea as a solitary "vague inconscient." This metaphor consolidates and unifies the entire force of the sea into one gargantuan wave. But why does Geffroy define this monolithic, tempestuous wave as "inconscient"? "Inconscient" can imply reckless. The boldness, aggressiveness, and directness of brushstrokes in Monet's *Tempête sur la côte de Belle-Île* likewise elicit an impression of violent waters heedlessly pounding against the rocks. "La vague inconscient" also relates to Geffroy's anthropomorphizing of the elements as the sea becomes a colossal, terrifying wave driven by some unconscious internal force. The same sea waves with a power to create through drawing, sculpting, and writing alternatively can destroy with a force and mission of their own design. While propelled forward by some sort of unconscious or immanent energy, "la vague" assumes a degree of agency as it *perceives* a target ("un but qu'elle aperçoit") for its collective fury. In *Tempête sur la côte de Belle-Île*, Monet accentuates the pervasiveness of the sea's turbulent waves by using a consistent range, concentration, and size of marks throughout his composition. He thickly applies a combination of long curling strokes and more abbreviated swirls of sea green, cobalt blue, and white to represent these raging waters. Even the rocks contribute to this sense of dynamism throughout the composition by echoing the coiled shapes and dramatic sweeps of the waves. Monet merges the rhythms of the waves and rocks with curved strokes and slashes of reds, browns, and blue-grays throughout the animated surfaces of these boulders.

The storm has aggravated the sea waves to such an extent that they threaten to disintegrate ("désagréger") the unbreakable masses of sharp, volcanic rock. This immense, utterly reckless accumulation of waves swarms the coasts of Belle-Île like a pack of wild dogs or beasts ("cette meute") and claws and bites away at its massive stones. At the beginning of Geffroy's meditation on Belle-Île, the critic likens the shapes, textures, and surfaces of the rocky formations to wild beasts; the sea itself now assumes a similarly primal and unfettered appearance as its rabid torrents devour everything in their path. In *Tempête sur la côte de Belle-Île*, the rocks almost disappear beneath the furious effort ("l'effort furieux") of these enormous and tumultuous waves in a manner redolent of Geffroy's description. Even the imposing cliffs of Port-Domois in the background of this picture fade away as Monet covers much of their surfaces with thick strokes of white paint.[147] The softening of the jagged contours of the rocks of Port-Goulphar in the foreground along with an overlay of white impasto and deeper blues upon their surfaces suggest a dissolution of their solidity under the brutal force of the tumultuous waves. A calligraphic reddish-brown line surrounding the rock in the middleground possibly signals its impending disintegration. The force of these waves almost appears to have severed this loose contour from the rock it is meant to enclose.

Geffroy also highlights a paradoxical relationship between the ferocity and viciousness of the actions of the waves and the delicacy and softness of their appearance as lathery, lily-white sea foam: "[L]'écume savonneuse et liliacée est crachée vers la côte par les vents du sud." The southern winds lend a beastly quality to the waters as their intense force provokes a spitting ("est crachée") of this pure white sea foam upon the coast. In *Tempête sur la côte de Belle-Île*, a profusion of thick white impasto deposited with a diverse array of curved and swirling strokes resembles soft, soapy bubbles atop the surface of a bath. We may detect the wind's propulsion of "l'écume savonneuse et liliacée" in the background of Monet's picture where white marks appear to travel above the rocky cliffs and into a turbulent sky comprised of vigorously brushed gray and blue paint.

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[147] In the catalogue raisonné, Wildenstein identifies the cliff of Port-Domois in the background and three rocks of Port-Goulphar in the foreground of Monet's picture. In Wildenstein, *Claude Monet: Biographie et catalogue raisonné* (Paris: Taschen-Institut Wildenstein, 1997), 3:421-422.

In the next paragraph of his essay, Geffroy directs the focus away from his own images of Belle-Île that he has developed from a mixture of his contact with nature and Monet's art. He resumes a more direct discussion of Monet's artistic procedures before closing this passage with another synthetic or panoramic image inspired by the suite of paintings on display in Petit's gallery. From the critic's perspective, the fidelity and efficacy of Monet's seascapes inevitably depends upon the painter's attentiveness to the atmospheric and light conditions of Belle-Île: "Ce peintre de la mer est en même temps le peintre de l'air et du ciel. Il ne saurait en être autrement."[148] The intrinsic value of these paintings derives simultaneously from the primary motif itself ("la mer") and the role of the *enveloppe* ("de l'air et du ciel") as the essential and unifying characteristic of a particular region or climate. Geffroy proceeds to define the terms in which Monet's Belle-Île paintings are intended to be seen and experienced: "Ces tableaux sont vus d'ensemble."[149] His decision to prescribe in explicit terms a manner for viewing these paintings *after* his own synthetic presentation of the works appears rather deliberate. As we have just witnessed in the preceding paragraph, the critic elides the effects of multiple paintings together into a fluid series of verbal tableaux. By removing overt references to individual canvases from his account, he emphasizes the collective impression of the paintings viewed as an ensemble. The amalgamated nature of his descriptions reaffirms and aligns with the proper viewing conditions for the paintings. In keeping with the didactic aspirations of this article, Geffroy's text functions as a demonstration to a reader of how she should relate to and visualize Monet's paintings. Since Geffroy compels his readers initially to encounter the Belle-Île paintings as an ensemble through his verbal representation of them *before* he specifies their apparent intended viewing conditions, we essentially absorb and assimilate this concept through our own experience as readers.[150] He then reinforces the collective and cumulative effects of these works with a host of reflexive verbs that suggest a dialogue among the forms and flashes of light from one painting to another: "Toutes ces formes et toutes ces lueurs se commandent, se rencontrent, influent les unes sur les autres, s'imprègnent mutuellement de leurs couleurs et de leurs reflets."[151] A diversity of aspects of the motif or effects of light and weather does not impede the paintings from operating as a cohesive unit. In fact, the reverse scenario occurs as the individual paintings cooperate and control ("se commandent") the effects of one another. The full gamut of lights and colors from the Belle-Île paintings plays off and collides against ("se rencontrent") one another, and this contact or collision occurs in the eye and mind of a viewer as she synthesizes the totality of these effects into a unified image. Though lacking a reflexive verb, the next clause of "influent les unes sur les autres" underscores the interchange among the works as they actively shape the appearance and qualities of one another. This notion of interdependence also respects the behavior of light in nature; as light bounces off of one object or form, it informs the way we observe another. As we have seen, Geffroy stresses fluidity in the construction and reading of his verbal tableaux. In Monet's images of Belle-Île, a similar degree of permeability or porosity exists as the paintings collectively absorb or soak up ("s'imprègnent") colors and reflections emanating from the entire suite of works. As Geffroy intimates in his subsequent description of Monet's methods, the painter induces this effect through his procedure of working on and comparing multiple canvases at once. The artist brings an individual canvas to a collective state of finish by calibrating its palette, brushwork, and composition with the entirety of paintings comprising a particular series.

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[148] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 1.
[149] Ibid.

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[150] As early as 1882, Monet expresses a preference for his paintings to be viewed and appreciated as a collective unit. While still working in Pourville, Monet writes a letter to his dealer Paul Durand-Ruel. The artist informs his dealer that he hopes to have completed all of his paintings from this campaign by the point of his arrival in Paris for Easter. He then makes the following request: "J'en ai déjà de finies, mais si cela ne vous fait rien, je préférais vous montre toute la série de mes études à la fois, désireux que je suis de les voir toutes ensemble chez moi." Though his use of the word "ensemble" in this sentence pertains to a desire for Durand-Ruel to view his paintings in his company, Monet still implies that these studies are best experienced as a series or suite of works all at once (i.e., *as* an ensemble). See "Letter to P. Durand Ruel," 25 March 1882, L. 260.

[151] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 1.

After elaborating upon the manner in which the Belle-Île paintings should be viewed, Geffroy composes a brief narrative of Monet's procedure for creating this ensemble effect in his paintings:

> C'est que ce rustique alchimiste, ce Monet vivant toujours en plein air, actif au point de commencer dans la même après-midi dix études du même aspect, a acquis une singulière aptitude pour voir immédiatement les dispositions et les influences des tons. Hâtivement, il couvre sa toile des valeurs dominantes, en étudie les dégradations, les oppose, les harmonise.[152]

As a "rustique alchimiste," Monet possesses capabilities and qualities similar to those he seeks to represent in his painted images of Belle-Île; a close bond develops between the artist's temperament and nature. Like the wild and rugged coasts of the Breton island he paints, Monet projects a hardiness or rusticity ("rustique") that accords with this rural, less cultivated pocket of nature. Geffroy correlates the process of making these paintings with Monet's way of existence as the artist lives constantly in the open air ("vivant toujours en plein air"). Monet's images of Belle-Île seem to depend upon a strong interrelation between his life and his art; with nature as his studio, the artist is never too far from the source of his inspiration. The hardiness of his disposition affords him the vitality and energy to begin ten studies of the same motif in the span of a single afternoon. In order to convey the continuity, specificity, and ephemerality of nature's phenomena, Monet adopts an active ("actif") approach by coordinating his canvases with the evolving conditions of the motif he studies.

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[152] Ibid., 1-2.

Geffroy endows Monet's transformation of nature into pigment with a magical quality; his canvases reflect the enchanted expression of a rustic alchemist. His complete immersion within the rhythms of nature allows him to refine his continually exceptional visual aptitude: "[C]e Monet … a acquis une singulière aptitude pour voir immédiatement les dispositions et les influences des tons." Unlike the sensory organs of a normal spectator or perhaps those of any other artist in front of nature, Monet's eyes immediately see the overall distribution and intersection among the tones within a motif. Like a magical power, the artist's extraordinary vision enables him to process the principal colors in a landscape instantaneously or immediately ("immédiatement"). Monet's instantaneous recognition of the distribution and interaction of colors in the landscape also lends a synthetic quality to Monet's vision. In extracting and integrating together the dominant notes of Belle-Île in his verbal tableaux, Geffroy in a sense seeks to imitate the painter's capacity to see and to represent the essence of the colors and sensations produced by the rocks and sea. As a way of preserving the immediacy of his perceptions, Monet works rapidly or possibly hastily ("hâtivement") to transfer these dominant color values ("des valeurs dominantes") onto the surfaces of his canvases. This seamless and quick transition from apprehending color relationships in nature to converting them into marks on a canvas operates as a form of painterly prestidigitation. Though the adverb *hâtivement* unquestionably refers to the speed of Monet's transfer of the colors of nature to the canvas in pigment, it also connotes some of the special intuition, precocity, or intelligence we may associate with magical powers.[153] According to Geffroy's portrayal of Monet's technique, a replication of color supersedes the identification and elaboration of specific forms – an outwardly secondary process. The critic suggests that Monet has built in a massive level of complexity into this rapid and direct notation of essential color relationships. Emphasizing the immediacy and speed of Monet's technique, Geffroy includes no temporal or transitional markers between the covering of his canvases with "des valeurs dominantes" and the study of them ("en étudie"). In real time, a study of the diminishment or degradation of these values ("les dégradations") would occur in all likelihood after their placement on the canvas. As further substantiation of the magical powers of "ce rustique alchimiste," Geffroy's syntax suggests an almost simultaneous or at least uninterrupted calibration and retention of the intensity of these values through a process of harmonizing and contrasting them ("les oppose, les harmonise").

Monet's procedure of synthesizing and transposing the primary tonal relationships in nature onto the canvas engenders a unity between color and the ensuing forms:

> De là l'unité de ces tableaux qui donnent, en même temps que la forme de la côte et le mouvement de la mer, l'heure du jour, par la couleur de la pierre et la couleur de l'eau, par la teinte de la nue et la disposition des nuages.[154]

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[153] *Le trésor de la langue française* includes the adverb *précocement* or precociously as a synonym within its entry for *hâtivement*. In Bernard Quemada, ed. *Le trésor de la langue française: Dictionnaire de la langue du XIXe et du XXe siècle, 1789-1960* (Paris: Institut de la langue française, 1971-1994), 9:707.

[154] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 2.

Every form depicted within the Belle-Île canvases becomes inextricably bound together by virtue of Monet's harmonization of his palette. The directness and coherency of Monet's translation of the colors of the rocks, water, and sky full of floating clouds, allows him to express the most solid and evanescent components of these pictures in a unified manner. Color provides the expressive vehicle for a harmonious and synchronized arrangement of the durable form of the rocky coastline in relation to the more ephemeral movements of the waves and the passage of the hours of the day ("en même temps que la forme de la côte et le mouvement de la mer, l'heure du jour").

So how does Monet impart this unity to the ensemble of paintings? How do the forms, colors, and light effects of the entire suite of Belle-Île canvases enter into a collective dialogue as Geffroy indicates in this paragraph? The comparative nature of Monet's technical procedure certainly contributes to a linkage of the canvases, but it is ultimately a viewer's, reader's, or author's experience and translation of these paintings that completes this process of unification and significance. Underscoring the unity of Monet's paintings, Geffroy ends this paragraph with a panoramic presentation similar to his description of the rocks at the beginning of his Belle-Île narrative:

> Observez ces minces bandes de ciel, ces clartés, ces assombrissements, ces soleils fatigués, ces horizons de cuivres, ces mers violettes, vertes, bleues, tous ces états si différents d'une même nature, et vous verrez devant vous se lever des matins, s'épanouir des midis, tomber des soirs.[155]

A transition to the imperative mood in this sentence again reinforces the didactic undercurrents in this text. Geffroy speaks directly to his readers and, quite critically, tells us to look at or to observe ("[o]bservez") the following visual elements. In other words, he instructs his readers to imagine or to *see* a composite of all of these variations on a single theme of nature ("tous ces états si différents d'une même nature") in our mind's eye. With no allusions here to the multiplicity of textures, shapes and colors of the rock formations, the critic's focus turns to the more transitory components of the pictures: the weather and atmosphere emitted from the sky, the rise and fall of sunlight, and the changing colors of the waves of the sea. In most cases, we can associate the features Geffroy evokes in this sentence with not just one, but rather, many of the Belle-Île paintings included in the exhibition. We discover brightness or clear atmospheric conditions ("clartés") in paintings like *Entrée de Port-Goulphar, Belle-Île*; *Bloc de rochers, Belle-Île*; *La Roche Guibel, Port-Domois*; and *Grotte de Port-Domois* (W. 1093, 1097, 1106, and 1114; figs. 20, 22, 24, and 23 respectively).

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[155] Ibid.

Observing this assemblage of thin bands of sky; illumination; darkness; setting suns; copper-colored horizons; along with the purples, greens, and blues of the sea creates a temporal sequence spanning from morning to afternoon to evening: "[V]ous verrez devant vous se lever des matins, s'épanouir des midis, tomber des soirs." Can we accurately discern in Monet's paintings this progression from the early light of the rising sun, to the blossoming of intense daylight at the peak of the afternoon, to the impending darkness of the evening? Or are we instead supposed to imagine this sequence as the product or outcome of a cumulative viewing of fluctuating oceanic states and different rock formations throughout this ensemble of Belle-Île paintings? On the surface, the particular time of day depicted within Monet's canvases appears to be one of the most difficult things to measure with any degree of certitude or clarity. Out of all of the paintings ostensibly included within this exhibition, *Pointes de rochers à Port-Goulphar* serves as the primary exception since the colors in its sky plainly relate to a setting sun (W. 1101, fig. 18). As we already have discussed, we do not know the precise order or manner in which these works were installed in Petit's gallery, nor do we have any indication from Monet about his intention to suggest some sort of temporal sequence.

This lack of documentary evidence turns out to be somewhat irrelevant if we consider Geffroy's panoramic and evocative presentation as a synthesis of his experience of Monet's paintings with his memories of seeing firsthand the rocks and waves of Belle-Île. Regarded in isolation, Monet's Belle-Île paintings may serve to represent particular moments of time, however indeterminate they might be. If we absorb the shifting points of view, water conditions, states of weather, and intensities of light collectively, we can interpret this accumulation of individual moments as an allusion to the continuous passage of time. By directing our attention as readers toward those components of Monet's pictures that are subject to the quickest and most readily observable changes, Geffroy teaches us to imagine or to embed a progression of time in our vision of the ensemble.

Having begun his article with two paintings containing manmade objects and the presence of human figures, Geffroy provides some symmetry to his text by concluding with a discussion of the single figure painting created within the span of Monet's Belle-Île campaign:

> Voilà le pays, voici l'habitant, *Poly, pêcheur de Kervillaouen*, un être inculte et bon, courageux et lent, rêvasseur et décidé. Portrait à l'état d'ébauche, mais d'ébauche superbe où revit l'homme avec son teint de brique, sa barbe éparse et rude comme une touffe de varech, sa bouche serrée, ses regards aigus qui voient les poissons et les coquillages au fond de l'eau et au creux des rocs, son chapeau déteint, son tricot vert et bleu, couleur de la mer.[156]

Exhibited and forever preserved in its sketchy state ("portrait à l'état d'ébauche"), *Portrait de Poly* features the likeness of a fisherman who assisted Monet with the daily transport of multiple canvases around Kervillaouen (W. 1122, fig. 25). Monet completed this painting indoors on a single day of terrible weather at Belle-Île, and it remained in the artist's possession for the rest of his life.[157] The fact that Monet held on to this sketchy portrait and attached his signature to it in addition to the location and date of its creation in the upper-right corner of the picture points to its dual function as a talisman and souvenir for the artist. Geffroy similarly underlines the portrait's memory-inducing capacity in the sentence following his brief representation of the work, "Poly fait retourner la pensée en arrière…."[158]

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[156] Ibid.

His description of this painting establishes an affinity between the character and appearance of the Breton island and its inhabitants: "Voilà le pays, voici l'habitant…." Like Belle-Île, this "être inculte et bon" possesses a certain wildness and coarseness in his physiognomy and his attire. Due to the poignancy of its sketchy condition, Monet's portrait proves capable of reanimating the essence of this "courageux et lent" fisherman for the critic ("mais d'ébauche superbe où revit l'homme"). We should take note of the fact that Geffroy will use the verb *revivre* twice in the context of this passage to suggest a painting's ability to permit a viewer to relive or revive the memory of a person. How does the revivifying quality of the sketch manifest itself materially in the portrait of this Belle-Île fisherman? Recalling the manner of brushwork used to construct the dynamic waves and the ragged surfaces of the volcanic rock, the energetic strokes in *Portrait de Poly* lend a certain level of vitality to the painting. The roughness and ruggedness of the marks endow an immediacy or freshness to this rendering as if Monet had just put down his brush a few minutes ago. The ruddiness and weathered appearance of Poly's complexion ("son teint de brique") reminds us of some of the brick-red or ferrous tones infused into the massive rocks of paintings, including *Entrée de Port-Goulphar, Belle-Île* and *Grotte de Port-Domois* (W. 1093 and 1114, figs. 20 and 23). The curled and pointy strokes of black and white impart a disheveled and rough appearance to Poly's beard ("sa barbe éparse et rude"). The unruliness and scruffiness of his dark beard, eyebrows, and hair beneath his faded wide-brimmed hat ("son chapeau déteint") resemble tufts of kelp ("une touffe de varech") propelled along by the vigorous motion of the sea waves. Though Geffroy does not venture this far in his comparison of Poly's features to the landscape of Belle-Île, we perhaps could be tempted to link his tightly closed mouth and the sharpness of his vision ("sa bouche serrée, ses regards aigus") to the jaggedness and angularity of the needle rocks in a painting like *Pyramides de Port-Coton, mer sauvage* (W. 1084, fig. 16). The critic does relate some of his garments to the elements. The greens and blues of his pullover ("son tricot vert et bleu") remind him of the colors of the sea. Would it have been too remote from the critic's thoughts to detect any resemblance between the shape and texture of the choppy strokes within Poly's pullover and those used to give the rigid sea waves their sculptural solidity? Along similar lines, the diversity of patterns formed by these faceted strokes also brings to mind the trembling lines and diamond shapes ("lignes tremblées et des losanges") that Geffroy previously observes in the waves.

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[157] Paul Hayes Tucker, *Claude Monet: Life and Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 113.

[158] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 2.

Viewing this exhibition of Monet's Belle-Île landscapes in addition to his portrait of "un être … rêvasseur et décidé" stimulates the critic's own form of rêverie:

> Autant que les admirables paysages dont il vient d'être essayé une description, Poly fait retourner la pensée en arrière, fait revivre les jours vécus à Belle-Île en compagnie de Monet, à travers les chemins des grèves, les sentiers des champs, dans la petite salle d'auberge où circule silencieusement une fine et douce bretonne à coiffe monacale. Elle sera souvent regrettée, cette trop courte existence de travail, de promenades et de causeries. Qu'un souvenir en soit du moins fixé

> ici, en même temps qu'un hommage est rendu à l'œuvre incomparable de l'un des maîtres paysagistes de siècle.[159]

Geffroy's close look at *Portrait de Poly* and Monet's sublime landscapes ("les admirables paysages") induces memories and images far beyond the content depicted on the surfaces of these canvases. His experience of these paintings permits him to relive ("fait revivre") the days he spent in Monet's company at Belle-Île. Neither Monet's paintings nor Geffroy's preceding descriptions of them overtly represent their walks along rocky beach roads or through pathways in the agrarian fields. We find no traces among them of the clever and pleasant Breton man with a monk's hairdo. There is no representation of his quiet passage through the little room of the inn where the two kindred spirits finished their evenings in spirited discussion. For Geffroy, Monet's paintings encapsulate and evoke a range of sensations, emotions, and memories that would otherwise have been forgotten: "Elle sera souvent regrettée…."

Language struggles to represent fully and faithfully a sense of durational time.[160] Though an author can avail herself of verbal tenses to convey a progression of time, the linearity of language complicates the ability to represent the simultaneity and confluence of events, sensations, and memories. How many words would have been required to capture even the scarce number of days and moments Geffroy and Monet shared at Belle-Île? A painting's potential for more immediate appeal to the imagination has the capacity to open up a wellspring of memories of mutual work, walks, and conversations ("de travail, de promenades et de causeries") that would likely elude even the most thorough and exhaustive form of prose. Acknowledging on some level an advantage painting may have in conjuring multilayered aspects of memory with considerably greater economy,

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[159] Ibid.

[160] Here I am thinking of "durational time" in a Bergsonian sense. See Henri Bergson's second chapter, "De la multiplicité des états de conscience: L'idée de durée," in *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, 6th ed. (Paris: F. Alcan, 1889), pp. 57-106.

Geffroy proceeds cautiously in assessing the merit of his own account of Monet's landscapes. The critic underscores the tentativeness of his own results when he states that he has *tried to* compose a description of them ("dont il vient d'essayer une description"). Faced with this incomparable body of work from one of the supreme landscape painters of his day, the critic employs the subjunctive mood to proffer a wish that his verbal tableaux may pay proper homage to the canvases that inspired them: "Qu'un souvenir en soit du moins fixé ici…." Geffroy sets more modest yet analogous goals to the painter through his mode of textual description. He aspires at minimum ("du moins") to provide a memory of his experience. Descriptive language may show a certain level of inadequacy or incompleteness in terms of representing a full array of sensations and recollections generated from Monet's painted images of Belle-Île. The most suitable tribute Geffroy can pay to Monet comes in the form of emulating his pictorial ensemble's power to precipitate a flood of memories, to suggest a progression of moments, and to produce a synthetic image in the mind's eye. Culling from a diverse range of souvenirs about Monet, his paintings, and the actual rocks and sea at Belle-Île, Geffroy constructs a series of evocative verbal tableaux that depend on a reader's own imaginative faculties and memory for their full realization.

SECTION THREE: REPRESENTING BELLE-ÎLE-EN-MER IN *PAYS D'OUEST*

Nearly eleven years after Geffroy and Monet's 1886 sojourn at Belle-Île, the author would finally bring to fruition the research he conducted there with the publication of *L'enfermé* – his biography on the revolutionary Auguste Blanqui. The year 1887 also featured the release of his second collection of short stories with the title *Pays d'ouest*.[161] He divides the thirty tales comprising this book into three primary sections that reflect their common geographical milieux: a group of seven from Normandy, another fourteen from Brittany, and lastly, nine from Vendée. Throughout this volume of travel literature, Geffroy often focused upon portraying the physical and social environments, morals, superstitions, misfortunes, and adversities of the working class and peasantry of rural France. Many of the stories conclude with bleak endings for their protagonists that seem to be precipitated by their poverty and isolation in society.

A sketch of a convivial yet lonely sailor known only as "Le Matelot" by the inhabitants of a small Breton village, "Les crabes" serves as a primary example of one of the more sorrowful denouements in *Pays d'ouest*. After earning his meager pay catching fish every morning aboard the ship of an affable captain, Matelot would roam about town and spin colorful yarns about the sea journeys of his youth for locals and tourists alike:

> Matelot se promenait à travers tout ce monde, abordant le passant, recommençant ses bavardages, raisonneur, bon enfant, prêchant l'horreur de l'eau, expliquant comme quoi il avait passé sur les océans toute son existence, sans savoir nager, évoquant le cap Horn, le cap de Bonne-Espérances, les îles roses du Pacifique. On l'écoutait volontiers divaguer: il faisait partie du décor, et il n'avait rien de déplaisant, avec son visage hâlé, sa barbe grise, ses yeux riants.[162]

Residents and travelers may have listened enthusiastically to Matelot's quaint ramblings, but the story concludes abruptly and tragically with the aging sailor's mysterious and traceless disappearance: "Un soir de cet été, aux jours les plus longs, Matelot a disparu.

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[161] Three years earlier in 1894, Geffroy had published *Le cœur et l'esprit*, his first book of short stories. He would release two additional collections of tales approximately two decades later – *Nouveau contes du pays d'ouest* in 1920 and *La comédie bourgeoise* in 1922. Numerous stories within these four books previously had appeared in journals and newspapers. For an analysis of his short stories in the context of literary naturalism, see Robert Denommé's second chapter in *The Naturalism of Gustave Geffroy*, "The Short Stories," pp. 34-55.

[162] Geffroy, "Les crabes," in *Pays d'ouest* (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1897), 195.

On ne sait ni où ni comment. On suppose."[163] In the final sentences of "Les crabes," a single meddlesome inhabitant remembers hearing a loud noise that sounded like something heavy falling into the sea on the night of the sailor's vanishing. The villagers collectively assume ("[o]n suppose") the sailor must have drowned and imagine the same crabs this poor man loathed crawling over his dead body and devouring "ses yeux riants."[164] With little more than the glass of brandy he could purchase from his modest daily wage and the pleasures derived from sharing "ses bavardages," Matelot essentially was alone in the world and held little hope for the future: "D'espérance, il ne pouvait être question pour lui."[165] Memories of his admonitions to the little children to avoid fishing for crabs, the "sales bêtes" of the sea, survive to mark his humble existence.[166]

In his study of Geffroy's literary and critical contributions to naturalism, Robert Denommé asserts that the author's short stories tend to foreground his humanitarian and ideological considerations over any substantive commitment to character or plot development, particularly in terms of psychological dimensions.[167] Matelot, for one, largely supports his conclusion that many protagonists within *Pays d'ouest* may function more as emblems of social conditions than as full-fledged individuals. I would hesitate to commit to some of Denommé's sharper categorical distinctions among the texts in regard to literary genre and find it somewhat problematic to differentiate a purely 'fictional' story from one rooted at least partially in historical circumstances. Denommé's designation of "Belle-Île-en-Mer" as one of "three outright essays" within *Pays d'ouest* serves as an example of his more rigid or absolute manner of classification. The additional two "outright essays" include "Voyage à Ouessant" and "L'accueil de la mer." He describes the former as "the author's recorded impression of the island" and characterizes the latter as "a veritable seascape in prose."[168] Denommé provides virtually no additional explanation for what unites these texts under this category. Since *all* of the stories in *Pays d'ouest* appear to derive at least in part from firsthand experiences acquired through travel and place considerable emphasis on vivid description of the terrain and inhabitants of Brittany, Vendée, and Normandy, I do not possess a similar inclination to bracket these three texts from the others.

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[163] Ibid., 196.
[164] Ibid., 197.
[165] Ibid., 192.
[166] Ibid., 195.
[167] Denommé, *The Naturalism of Gustave Geffroy*, 34.

Throughout his four volumes of short stories, Geffroy regularly interpolated his views on literature's ability and obligation to call attention to and to alter societal conditions. In "Vieil employé," a story from *Le cœur et l'esprit* about a downcast and increasingly withdrawn governmental clerk who feels apprehension about his advancing age, Geffroy defines his credo on the role of literature:

> La littérature et tous les essais de littérature comportent tacitement cette mission de parler pour ceux qui ne parlent pas, de fixer pour longtemps, un peu de cette vie fugitive des anonymes qui disparaîtrait dans le temps qui passe et dans l'oubli profond, sans l'émotion des artistes.[169]

In addition to fulfilling his desire to give voice to marginalized and disappearing segments of later nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French society and culture, the author often will rebuke outmoded provincial mores and signal a need for social reform when describing the circumstances of his characters. Affirming his naturalist orientation, Geffroy's musing on literature's mission reveals a desire for a more objective or dispassionate portrayal of "un peu de cette vie fugitive des anonymes." He distinguishes his detached form of literary writing from a more artistic mode or possibly even a painting based upon a similar subject. In opposition to Geffroy's pursuit of a more unvarnished presentation of the plight of his protagonists, an artistic approach would infuse emotion into an account of these forgotten and voiceless members of society.

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[168] Ibid., 50.

[169] Geffroy, "Vieil Employé," in *Le cœur et l'esprit* (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1894), 152-153; quoted in Denommé, *The Naturalism of Gustave Geffroy*, 36.

Despite the author's intention to purge emotion from his literature, an artistically oriented sensibility that conceivably receives inspiration from or, at least, resonates with Monet's aesthetic informs and shapes the contents and style of *Pays d'ouest*. I will demonstrate the connection between Geffroy's critical and literary projects in terms of their descriptive methods and expressive aims. In order to make the relationship of Geffroy's work in these two genres more evident, I will focus exclusively on a single story with explicit allusions to Monet and to the Belle-Île trip in which the two first met one another in October 1886. Spanning fifty pages, "Belle-Île-en-Mer" differs in terms of its considerable length, but its reliance upon the author's direct experience, its employment of a first-person narrator, and its emphasis on vibrant description of place and person represent just a few features consistent with many of the tales within *Pays d'ouest*. Monet's artistic presence and temperament loom largely within this story, especially as Geffroy grapples with representing transitory visual and other sensorial phenomena through verbal language. In the course of his series of interwoven vignettes about his voyage to and encounters with the various villages and inhabitants of Belle-Île, the author will pause periodically both to reflect upon challenges of giving meaningful expression to "cette trop courte existence de travail, de promenades et de causeries" and to recall Monet's personal confrontation and struggle with the rugged elements of the island. This story further builds upon efforts within his art criticism to capture aspects of memory and experience that often elude translation into prose. Geffroy essentially creates an elaborated and more extensive suite of the kinds of verbal tableaux he composed for his “Hors du Salon” article on Monet. He likewise encourages a reader to synthesize the text’s discrete images and passages into a composite view of Belle-Île.

In the following analysis of “Belle-Île-en-Mer,” we will observe parallels between Geffroy and Monet’s representational procedures. As a form of a travelogue, this story depends upon sensations stemming from the author’s firsthand encounters with the motifs and phenomena under consideration – a method of working he firmly associates with the painter. Like Monet does with his paintings, Geffroy proposes to “fixer pour longtemps, un peu de cette vie fugitive” in his literature. While certain facets of their subject matter and level of interest in amplifying social concerns may diverge markedly, both painter and writer use their respective mediums to capture aspects of life’s ephemerality. As we already have noticed with respect to his art criticism, Geffroy seeks to create a verbal equivalent to the effects of viewing Monet’s painted images through appealing to the visual properties of language and the imagination of a participatory reader-viewer. He continues along similar lines in his literary project. In agreement with Denommé’s interpretation, segments of “Belle-Île-en-Mer” undeniably resemble “landscape paintings in prose.”[170] With this final section of Part One, I will assess how Geffroy’s deep familiarity with Monet’s way of thinking along with his own inventive manner of writing about the artist’s paintings conceivably could have guided dimensions of his approach to literature. I will consider how Monet’s concern with integrating the instantaneity of perception into visual expression corresponds with Geffroy’s undertaking to bridge a gap between the fluid and unmediated nature of experience and its transformation into prose.

From the beginning of “Belle-Île-en-Mer,” Geffroy enunciates a desire to render his sensations in a way that preserves their freshness, vitality, and rapidity of succession.

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[170] Denommé, *The Naturalism of Gustave Geffroy*, 35.

He also employs rhetorical and grammatical devices that enhance or implicitly serve to signify an effect of instantaneity. In applying these strategies, Geffroy commits to expressive goals and means analogous to the kinds his criticism ascribes to Monet. In his later catalogue essay on the *Grainstacks* series, for example, the critic lauds the painter for his ability to perceive and give dynamic form to fleeting impressions of light and atmosphere that ceaselessly multiply and fade away against the permanent backdrop of the universe: "[I]l est toujours l'incomparable peintre de la terre et de l'air, préoccupé des fugitives influences lumineuses sur le fond permanent de l'univers. Il donne la sensation de l'instant éphémère, qui vient de naître, qui meurt, et qui ne reviendra plus…."[171] The opening sentences of "Belle-Île-en-Mer" make evident the concern Geffroy shares with Monet for representing experiential immediacy:

> Au retour d'un séjour à Belle-Île-en-Mer qui a duré environ un mois, j'essaye de décrire les choses et les gens du pays quitté. Ces notes reproduisent les sensations ressenties devant les paysages tout à coup dévoilés, l'émotion humaine éprouvée au contact des êtres pendant les journées vite vécues où l'on a inspecté des manières de vivre lointaines, et pénétré des existences dissemblables.[172]

Instead of reflecting upon a pocket of nature he had absorbed over a long period of time, Geffroy seeks to describe those initial sensations emanating from landscapes that were revealed to him suddenly or unexpectedly ("les paysages tout à coup dévoilés"). He forgoes a probing study of his feelings for a well-established friend or acquaintance to capture the nascent emotions he experiences at the precise moment of meeting new people ("au contact des êtres"). The persistent unfamiliarity of his contact with this rural coastal existence accelerates his awareness of the passage of time ("les journées vite vécues") and makes this incessant flood of impressions feel even more ephemeral, more brisk.

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[171] Geffroy, "Chronique: Les 'Meules' de Claude Monet," *La justice*, 6 May 1891, 2.

[172] Geffroy, "Belle-Île-en-Mer," in *Pays d'ouest* (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1897), 221.

As noted in the preceding analysis of his criticism, Geffroy in contrast to Monet had previously explored Brittany in considerable depth, but his story puts a premium on relaying novel discoveries from this month-long stay at Belle-Île. In his article on Monet from 1887, the critic repeatedly emphasizes the painter's assiduous quest for unknown aspects of nature, and he very well may have sought to emulate this approach in a deliberate manner within his own work: "Confrontation perpétuelle, puisqu'il vit en plein air, toujours en marche, toujours à la recherche d'une nature qu'il ignore…."[173] While Geffroy had traveled to the region of Brittany before writing his story, his emphasis on surprise revelations from its landscape, the remoteness of its way of life, and the disparate nature of its inhabitants suggest he had in no way exhausted the experiences and sensations Belle-Île had to offer. Two years later in an 1889 article on Monet's exhibition at Boussod, Valadon et Compagnie, Geffroy will introduce a similar trope concerning the artist's ability to discover and depict a seemingly endless and constantly renewable host of sensations stemming from the same landscape or subject:

> Il trouve, lui, que les sujets sont trop nombreux, que tout est à peindre, que la vie est trop courte pour essayer de fixer la variété des aspects et l'infini des sensations. S'il était obligé de rester, jusqu'à la fin de son existence, à la même place, devant le même paysage ou devant la même être, il ne suspendrait pas un instant son travail, il trouverait tous les jours une expression différente à fixer, il en trouverait une toutes les heures, une toutes les minutes.[174]

A single motif stimulates infinite impressions for both painter and author.

Titling the first part of his story "Au retour," Geffroy acknowledges composing or at least assembling its contents upon returning from his trip. In other words, he does not conceive of or write the entirety of this *sur le motif*. Though plainly writing some parts of it at a remove from his journey, he underscores the directness of the transfer of his impressions within this introductory paragraph. His use of the first-person present tense of the verb *essayer* ("j'essaye") signals an effort to reduce any further temporal or authorial distance between what he saw and felt at Belle-Île and what he now describes in his story. Instead of presenting "Belle-Île-en-Mer" as an entirely retrospective consideration of his experience, he situates a reader in the moment of the text's production. Geffroy in some sense implies that we are reading his impressions as they emerge from his mind. He encourages us to feel as if we are receiving his descriptions as he *tries* ("j'essaye") to put them down on paper.

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[173] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: V. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 25 May 1887, 2.
[174] Geffroy, "Chronique: Paysages et figures," *La justice*, 28 February 1889, pp. 1-2.

He intensifies our closeness to both the composition of his story and the sensations and emotions that inspired it with an emphasis on the fidelity of his means of translation: "Ces notes reproduisent les sensations ressenties…." His use of the verb *reproduire* seems aimed toward suggesting the words contained within this story possess the power to replicate faithfully the landscapes and people of Belle-Île as they first appeared to Geffroy. Reading his 'notes,' we recreate the author's experience; we receive these sensations as if we were the traveler himself.

Geffroy's characterization of "Belle-Île-en-Mer" as "ces notes" also permits and invites a reader to participate actively in visualizing and completing his descriptions of "les choses et les gens du pays quitté." Reminiscent of a painter's sketch or a summary drawing, a set of notes perhaps more readily discloses a writer's initial impressions than a more polished or heavily edited text. In her elucidation of Diderot's theory of the sketch, Alexandra Wettlaufer maintains the appeal of *l'equisse* extended to literature in large part due to its less mediated exposition of an artist's or author's visceral reactions and its engagement of a reader's imagination:

> Closer to the soul of the painter, *l'esquisse* seems to present a mode of communication intimately linked to more primal energy, before reason enters and

> dilutes the power through its moderating and organizing forces. Nor is the sketch limited to drawing, for Diderot rapidly attributes it equally to poet and painter, while lauding its expressive vagueness which leaves room for the imagination of the reader or spectator.[175]

The more provisional nature of Geffroy's 'notes' accordingly compels a reader to supply the missing words, to bring his verbal images to a state of completion. Not bound to the requirements of a thoroughly refined, reasoned, or detached narrative, 'notes' can evoke the directness and poignancy we associate with a series of rapidly and broadly applied brushstrokes on a canvas. In his review of Monet's Belle-Île canvases, Geffroy conspicuously celebrates the artist's sketch *Poly, pêcheur de Kervillaouen* (fig. 25) for its mnemonic and energetic capabilities. The animated quality of the picture's strokes brings the fisherman himself back to life and prompts the critic to relive the days he spent with Monet: "Portrait à l'état d'ébauche, mais d'ébauche superbe où revit l'homme … Poly fait retourner la pensée en arrière, fait revivre les jours vécus à Belle-Île en compagnie de Monet."[176] The rougher, more lively quality of written or painted sketches impart a vitality to their subjects.

By composing and presenting "Belle-Île-en-Mer" as a compilation of 'notes,' Geffroy adapts the evocative, memory-inducing properties of Monet's sketches to his prose and offers a reader more immediate access to his initial sensations. His emphasis on reproducing and describing his emotions as they unfold on the way to and at Belle-Île rests on a belief in the durability and efficacy of the first impression: "C'est l'impression qui subsiste."[177] Our memories, our cumulative image of a place over time may derive from the most incidental points of contact:

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[175] Alexandra Wettlaufer, *In the Mind's Eye*, 110.

[176] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 2.

[177] Geffroy, "Belle-Île-en-Mer," 221.

> Les rencontres de hasard, les promenades dans les rues d'une petite ville, le bonjour échangé sur une route, la vision d'un métier, une couleur et une coupe de vêtement, l'accent des voix, la vigueur expressive d'une phrase de terroir, le mystère d'une langue étrangère, tout cela, on est venu le trouver au loin….[178]

Taken in isolation, an impression from a chance meeting, the color and cut of an article of clothing, the mysterious sounds and accents of unfamiliar voices and foreign languages may provide an incomplete or even indecipherable picture of a journey. But when Geffroy floods these 'notes' with his strolls along the streets of a small village, a greeting exchanged with a stranger, or the liveliness and punch of local patois, he creates a more intimate and arguably authentic vision of the particularities of his voyage. To experience unanticipated sensations, to have serendipitous discoveries – *this* is why we travel to distant places: "[T]out cela, on est venu le trouver au loin…."

In the following vignette, Geffroy creates a progression in his narrative from urban to rural landscape as we find him having departed from a Paris station and heading toward Belle-Île aboard a train carriage. He begins "En wagon, septembre 1886" with a reflection upon the insularity of railway travel and its tendency to estrange passengers from the panoply of impressions routinely received along the course of extended journeys. Securely lodged in a train carriage, a traveler risks losing contact with nature and the accompanying "impressions ressenties au cours des longs trajets."[179] [180] He blindly ignores the effects of the constantly shifting surroundings outside the railway car and focuses primarily on his point of destination with perhaps an occasional thought given to trivial matters of purchasing newspapers and meal offerings: "Il ["celui qui monte en wagon"] ne voudra connaître de la route suivie que les bibliothèques et les buffets des gares."[181] The typical railway traveler shuns exposure to the elements. He shields himself from the sun and cool breezes and prefers to devote his time indiscriminately to a piece of second-rate journalism or the latest potboiler:

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[178] Ibid., 221-222.

[179] Ibid., 226.

[180] I have resumed the exclusive usage of masculine gender pronouns in various parts of this section to correspond with the ones employed within Geffroy's text.

> Il s'installe, ferme les carreaux par crainte de courants d'air, tire les rideaux par peur du soleil, et lit des articles, et coupe des livres, et aide à l'effroyable consommation des roman fabriqués aux usines parisiennes.[182]

Within the image Geffroy constructed of Monet in his 1887 article, impressions of light ("du soleil") and traces of the surrounding atmosphere ("de courants d'air") form one of the artist's main pursuits, and as a traveler and writer, Geffroy too appears to value them as principal indicators of a satisfying and lively journey. According to the critic, nature itself provides Monet's standard: "Ces témoins, … sont les objets et les éléments qu'il voudrait reproduire avec leur grâce ou leur horreur, les fleurs, les arbres, les pierres, les falaises, les rocs, les lames, les nuages, le sol, la lumière, l'espace."[183] Whether we experience nature as a painter, writer, or leisurely traveler, no secondary account ever could substitute fully for seeing and feeling these sensations directly with our own eyes and bodies. Instead of tearing through the pages of a book, a train passenger would benefit from drawing open the curtains to look attentively at the vistas passing before her.

Geffroy ostensibly privileges firsthand experience of impressions of light and atmosphere over virtually anything a novel or a newspaper article could offer a railway traveler: "Il y a pourtant à voir, même par la lucarne d'un wagon."[184] He directs his thoughts about the inferiority of the written word particularly toward one segment of the literary world and its apparent hold on urban readers – "des roman fabriqués aux usines parisiennes." Upon awakening from a nap aboard the train, a passenger searches for the latest among an endless proliferation of vapid novels hastily dashed off from the pens of a factory of Parisian literary hacks: "Au réveil, il retourne acheter le roman qui vient de paraître."[185] In "En wagon, septembre 1886," Geffroy undoubtedly rails against the same sorts of formulaic tendencies he attributes to establishment art critics and the stifling consequences of their rigid conventions for original artists. Though reading never may replicate fully an experience of viewing nature with our own eyes, a story such as "Belle-Île-en-Mer" holds instructive potential for both its audience and its author. Like a Monet painting of the rocks of Belle-Île, Geffroy's story may teach us to see again with fresh eyes trained on nature.

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[181] Ibid.

[182] Ibid., 227.

[183] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: V. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 25 May 1887, 2.

[184] Geffroy, "Belle-Île-en-Mer," 227.

The small window of a carriage ("la lucarne") provides a frame for a panorama that continually unfolds and alters in dimension with a train's progress down the tracks. Infinite aspects of nature dance in and out of view through this tiny opening: "Il semble qu'un gigantesque panorama, à dépliements continuels, se déroule, disparaisse et revienne…."[186] As a locomotive cuts its path through a city, clouds of smoke belching from its engine modify the appearance of the landscape. A continually shifting spectacle registered in a glimpse resists encapsulation within words, but the accumulation of visual sensations leaves an indelible impression upon a traveler's memory:

> La ville entrevue à travers deux nuages de fumée soufflés par la locomotive, se dessine ordinairement en silhouette inattendue, le lacis de ses rues et l'agglomération des maisons prennent une physionomie qui reste le plus souvent dans la mémoire avec le charme doux et indicible des choses seulement aperçues et qui ne seront jamais examinées.[187]

Just as we saw earlier in Geffroy's descriptions of Monet's pictures, nature itself assumes the role of an artist capable of creating visual and verbal images within these sentences.

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[185] Ibid.

[186] Ibid., 228.

[187] Ibid., 227.

In Monet's *Bordighera* (fig. 15), for instance, the branches, trunks, and glistening leaves of the fig trees form a design that frames a view into the recesses of Monet's painting: "Un groupe de figuiers aux feuilles luisantes enchevêtre le dessin de ses troncs et de ses branches souples comme des lianes…."[188] In reference to Monet's picture *La Roche Guibel, Port-Domois* (fig. 24), Geffroy observes that the tides have inscribed their timeless history upon the face of Belle-Île's monumental and imposing volcanic cliffs: "Toutes les heures de la marée sont écrites à l'étiage de ces murailles qui surplombent l'abîme."[189] Nature can operate as a visual artist and a historian independent of human intervention.

From the window of a swiftly moving train, a passenger receives an image created from the combination of manmade and natural forces. Two voluminous clouds of engine smoke coalesce and deposit a screen across his view of the surrounding city. An artistic collaboration ensues between a locomotive and the urban landscape. The engine smoke functions like a draftsman outlining or lending a strong profile to ("se dessine") the characteristic features of the city. This screen flattens the appearance of the city's forms, and the terrain assumes the shape of an unanticipated silhouette ("en silhouette inattendue"). The typical signs of urban architecture become active ingredients in the composition and design of this view from "la lucarne d'un wagon." The latticework of streets and clusters of houses take on an appearance ("prennent une physionomie") that imprints itself directly upon a traveler's memory with a pleasant yet unsayable charm ["le charme doux et *indicible*" (my emphasis)]. Words fail to match the ineffable allure of these sensations.

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[188] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 1.
[189] Ibid.

A combination of Geffroy's momentary glimpse of the city ("la ville entrevue") and temporary atmospheric conditions has brought about this effect. The clouds of engine smoke will dissipate soon. The train will proceed down the tracks. Roads and houses will fade far into the distance. The image forever remains in the state of an impression obtained from a passing glance and possibly would lose its efficacy or expressive force if subjected to a protracted form of scrutiny: "des choses seulement aperçues et qui ne seront jamais examinées." Though a traveler can visualize the contours of a city behind a screen of engine smoke in his mind's eye, the array of sensations coming from its surprising silhouette complicate or perhaps altogether defy translation into words. These sensations accumulate in a traveler's memory, but they border on the unsayable ("indicible") or transcend words due in large part to their rapid succession or progression. How do you put moving images into words without the distortion of retrospection, without destroying a sense of fluidity and ephemerality? The linear nature of prose description can prove incompatible with the continuous unfurling of this "gigantesque panorama." The problem for Geffroy becomes developing a process of extracting and transforming these more abstract feelings ("le charme doux et *indicible*") into a kind of prose that aspires toward reproducing the immediacy and fullness of visual imagery. Throughout "Belle-Île-en-Mer," he observes readymade compositions within nature and seeks to represent them in a manner that retains the transitory quality of his impressions. Geffroy attempts to circumvent the constraints of verbal description within his travelogue not only by aligning his way of seeing with Monet's and but also by focusing on a comparable range of effects and representational problems. As Geffroy struggles with finding verbal equivalents to painterly means for producing images, he acknowledges that the visual arts hold an advantage over literary forms of expression. He diminishes these perceived linguistic deficiencies through enacting more evocative ways of describing that stimulate a reader to supplement and complete his 'notes' with her own experience.

As the train makes its way past the suburbs of Paris, Geffroy continues to sharpen the contrast between the uninspired rendering of landscapes in "des romans fabriqués aux usines parisiennes" and the vibrant impressions experienced through a traveler's direct observation of his surroundings:

> Le monsieur qui s'intéresse au romanesque de la littérature de chemin de fer et se complaît aux paysages des descriptions imprimées, ne consent pas à apercevoir que le wagon est tout emplie de lumière verdâtre pendant la traversée des bois qui commencent à Saint-Michel et à Brétigny et vont jusqu'à Estampes.[190]

In this opening sentence of his note on "Brétigny," Geffroy alludes to the sort of *enveloppe* of colored atmospheric light that serves as Monet's key signifier of the effect of instantaneity.[191] When a passenger buries his head in a novel, he neglects or does not notice the greenish light that permeates the interior of a railway car as it crosses through the woods of France. Is Geffroy implying that "paysages des descriptions imprimées" cannot provide a traveler an equivalent of the types of visual sensations available to a reader with his own eyes? Why even bother imagining a landscape in prose when a passenger can view the greenish ("verdâtre") light emanating from the lush trees that border the tracks from the outskirts of Paris at Saint-Michel and Brétigny-sur-Orge all the way to Estampes? Do words suffer a permanent disadvantage in relation to the tableaux of nature that appear in front of our eyes? As the following vignettes will demonstrate partially, Geffroy maintains a certain level of ambivalence about the capacity of language to capture visual phenomena with a similar degree of eloquence and precision comparable to painting. His measures for compensating for these expressive shortcomings extend from confronting directly the kinds of effects that abound in Monet's pictures.

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[190] Geffroy, "Belle-Île-en-Mer," 228.

[191] See my discussion of Monet's "Letter to Geffroy," 7 October 1890, L. 1076 in the introductory section of Part One, "'Une langue à la fois poétique et technique': The Role of the Critic, Viewer, & Reader."

The landscapes presented in "la littérature de chemin de fer" overlook a full range of coloristic and olfactory sensations that can be precipitated by a traveler's awareness of the atmospheric *enveloppe* filtered through his surroundings. Geffroy evokes a confluence of colors and smells in a Baudelairean fashion in the two sentences comprising the remainder of this brief sketch of his travel across Brétigny:

> Aux éclaircies, les lisières se décolorent dans les brumes rousses, violettes et bleues. Les bouffées d'air sont imprégnées de l'odeur des essences, où se mêle subtilement le parfum des violettes d'automne.[192]

The critic's statement about Monet's pictorial goals in his "Salon de 1890" resonates nicely with the impression Geffroy describes in the passage above: "Il [Monet] ne veut pas représenter la réalité des choses, il veut fixer la lumière qui est entre lui et les objets…."[193] In describing his view from a tiny window of a train carriage, he subordinates the specific features of the topography in favor of representing momentary effects of light and air. As the train proceeds along the tracks, the density of the forest dwindles in certain areas. Bright light shines through the clearings, and the fringes of the verdant woods fade into the enveloping mists. Like an impressionist painter laying down strokes of intensely saturated paint, he observes a decomposition or division of spectral colors as rays of light are filtered through these palpable mists. Though we later will observe Geffroy pondering the drawbacks of prose in comparison to painting, this description communicates dimensions of experience that may elude even Monet's pictures. Within the confines of a picture frame, movement across a broad expanse of space becomes extremely difficult to represent in paint. With the mere mention of three colors, Geffroy suggests the continuous motion of the carriage in relation to the light as the color of the mists changes from deep reds to a series of blue and purple tints. Furthermore, how can a painter reliably encode particular smells into a picture? While a painting of a field of flowers could prompt a viewer to imagine a pleasant aroma, Geffroy's verbal tableau seems more readily suited to evoking a simultaneous profusion of colors and scents. A multiplicity of smells emanates from this *enveloppe* of colored atmosphere. Red, blue, and purple mists infuse the train with a subtle blend of the fragrant essences of the forest and the perfume of autumn violets. Geffroy's condensation of his train ride into mists and perfume demonstrates his belief in the expressive force of a momentary impression. An evocation of fleeting colors and smells enable a reader to approach much more closely the conditions of his experience.

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[192] Geffroy, "Belle-Île-en-Mer," 228.

[193] Geffroy, "Salon de 1890," in *La vie artistique*, 1:186.

After passing through Brétigny, Geffroy records a series of reflections based upon his train stops within the western provinces of France, including Nantes, Pontchâteau, Redon, and Quiberon. He similarly identifies the essential characteristics of these destinations with the sensory qualities elicited from the landscape and the architectural forms built upon them: "Les choses, si fugitives qu'elles soient, sont plus durables que l'homme, la vie organisée, les formes sociales."[194] As he sets sail for Belle-Île from Port-Harlinguen in the following section, we find him searching for and questioning the existence of a viable language for representing the tonal complexities and mutable conditions of the sea on a sunny afternoon. In "En mer," Geffroy concerns himself with a set of representational challenges that likewise troubles Monet during his trip to the Breton island. In considering these problems, he also will cast a certain degree of doubt on a painter's seemingly more direct means for depicting the intensity of nature's palette and the nuances of its phenomena. Though we have observed Geffroy lavishing superlatives on Monet's painting campaign at Belle-Île, he concedes within this story that both pen and paintbrush ultimately may fall short in capturing the sensations elicited from its sublime rocks and waters.

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[194] Geffroy, "Belle-Île-en-Mer," 229.

A review of Monet's letters from Belle-Île shows the painter voicing similar frustrations and anxieties about representing the effects of the sea. A momentary pause from Geffroy's story to catalogue this documentary evidence will help to establish parallel concerns. The variability and unpredictability of the weather threaten to spoil even some of Monet's most promising canvases as he grows increasingly weary and impatient in his quest to experience similar light and atmospheric conditions on a different day or for a sustained period of time. Fatigued at the end of another "médiocre journée," Monet complains to his wife Alice: "[Q]uoiqu'il ait fait assez beau, mais le temps a été si variable que je n'aie eu le temps quand il me le fallait, et j'ai failli gâter une de mes meilleures toiles en voulant y travailler quand même...."[195] Some of Monet's difficulties extend from the sheer unfamiliarity of this motif and his inability and reluctance to rely upon his past experiences for painting the incomparable appearance of these waters. In the same letter to Alice, he notes: "[L]a mer me donne un mal terrible, elle est si différent de celle que je suis habitué à peindre, mais j'espère bien arriver à ce que je veux."[196] A week later, Monet writes with buoyed spirits to Gustave Caillebotte: "Je suis dans un pays superbe de sauvagerie, un amoncellement de rochers terrible et une mer invraisemblable de couleurs; enfin je suis très emballé quoique ayant bien du mal, car j'étais habitué à peindre la Manche ..., mais l'Océan c'est tout autre chose."[197]

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[195] "Letter to Alice Hoschedé," 4 October 1886, L. 704.
[196] Ibid.
[197] "Letter to Gustave Caillebotte," 11 October 1886, L. 709.

Casting aside the techniques he accrued while representing the coastal waters and beaches of Normandy, Monet conveys the exhilaration received from painting "un pays superbe de sauvagerie." Though the impressive heaps of volcanic rock and intense colors of the sea have dazzled him, the intricacies entailed with rendering them in paint never lag far behind these delights. In another letter to Alice, Monet contrasts Brittany's typically muted look in paintings with the vibrant greens he observes in the sea beneath a cloud-filled sky: "Vous avez sans doute vu des tableaux de Bretagne sombres; mais c'est tout le contraire, c'est tout ce qu'il y a de plus beau ton, et cette mer, qui, aujourd'hui avec un ciel plombé, était si verte que j'étais impuissant à en rendre l'intensité."[198] Though the perspicacity of his vision enables him to discern vivid tonal relationships absent from the Breton seascapes of other artists, Monet worries that his palette lacks the lustrous combination of hues necessary to replicate "une mer invraisemblable de couleurs." Even in Monet's deft hands, the obtainable mixtures of pigment render the artist feeling ineffectual; they fail to facilitate an agreement between vision and pictorial expression. As Monet explains to Alice, painting the sea at Belle-Île demands his unrelenting devotion; every moment brings with it variations in the conditions of the light and the movement of the water.

> Bref, j'en suis fou; mais je sais bien que pour peindre vraiment la mer, il faut la voir tous les jours, à toute heure et au même endroit pour en connaître la vie à cet endroit-là; aussi je refais les mêmes motifs jusqu'à quatre et six fois même, mais je vous dirai tout cela bien mieux de vive voix et avec mes toiles devant vous.[199]

Multiple canvases representing the same motif affirm to the painter that even a lifetime of study would yield endlessly different outcomes.

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[198] "Letter to Alice Hoschedé," 23 October 1886, L. 721.

[199] "Letter to Alice Hoschedé," 30 October 1886, L. 730.

Additional passages from Monet's letters establish that his friendship with Geffroy blossomed quickly at Belle-Île. Two days after recounting to Alice his serendipitous introduction to Geffroy over dinner at the inn where they both stayed, Monet sends his wife another letter. He reports showing his studies to the critic and the engraver Focillon and receiving their unqualified admiration: "M. Geffroy … m'a fallu montrer mes études qui ont été trouvées très belles, mais ce sont des admirateurs et qui ne sont pas aussi difficiles que moi…."[200] On the following day, Monet received a tour of Brittany from Geffroy and even permitted the critic to watch him painting *sur le motif*: "M. Geffroy, qui connaît toute la Bretagne, me dit que partout je vais être surprise et charmé; c'est un garçon très gentil; il est venu naturellement me voir peindre et est dans la plus grande admiration…."[201] The critic and painter also shared an avid interest in literature, particularly the novels of Tolstoy.[202] Monet's letter to Geffroy following the critic's departure from Belle-Île suggests an impending arrival of a care package of books from the author and expresses the painter's disappointment about the critic's premature departure in advance of a magnificent tempest: "J'ai reçu hier votre seconde lettre, mais les livres point … Vous avez réellement perdu en partant si tôt. Quelle tempête et quel horrible spectacle!"[203] The already intimate and amiable contact between the critic and painter exhibited in these letters would make rather inconceivable Geffroy's total ignorance of the sorts of pictorial problems and doubts Monet had been relaying to his wife. Given Monet's tendencies to share his doubts with great candor, the two likely would have discussed the artists concerns to some extent during their time together. Geffroy's complete interest in exploring these expressive restraints in relation to his own literary practice may very well have stemmed in part from his knowledge of the painter's tribulations and thoughts.

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[200] "Letter to Alice Hoschedé," 4 October 1886, L. 704.
[201] "Letter to Alice Hoschedé," 5 October 1886, L. 705.
[202] Paradise, *Gustave Geffroy and the Criticism of Painting*, 21.
[203] "Letter to Gustave Geffroy," 29 October 1886, L. 728.

Geffroy heightens a reader's proximity to the sensations he describes in "En mer" through composing this vignette entirely in the present tense and designating a specific time of day: "Il est une heure de l'après-midi."[204] As the steamer clears through the jetties near Port-Harlinguen and reaches open waters, his eye swiftly perceives light's role in amplifying a rich diversity of blue tones in the sky and sea: "Le ciel et l'eau sont bleus, mais l'œil distingue bientôt dans le bleu de l'eau une infinité de couleurs et de demi-teintes remuantes. Toute est éclairé, pénétré, décomposé par la lumière."[205] His awareness of the ambient light's contribution to the energetic ("remuantes") division of these marine blues suggests an almost painterly sensitivity to color relationships. While the sun illuminates the sea, the continuous motion of its waves produces a sequence of brilliant blues before his eyes that recalls the jewel-like colors experienced from the turn of a kaleidoscope's wheel: "Chaque vague qui se forme fait virer devant l'œil, pendant les quelques secondes de sa vie fugitive, tous les bleus compliqués d'or et d'argent qui peuvent se former d'un reflet du ciel vibrant sous le soleil, se brisant en écume."[206] This observation may remind us of Monet's thoughts from his letters regarding the intensity of the sea's hues and the mutability of its appearance from moment to moment. During a wave's fugitive existence, elements of nature collaborate to create scintillating combinations of color. Resembling the way in which a painter blends pigment on her palette to produce a striking contrast of hues, the sunlit sky casts a reflection upon the sea that infuses its leaping blue waves with tints of silver and gold. This color sensation endures for a matter of seconds as the waves soon will break and settle upon the surface of the sea in a mass of white foam.

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[204] Geffroy, "Belle-Île-en-Mer," 236.
[205] Ibid.
[206] Ibid., 236-237.

The rapid progression of these light-generated phenomena and the resultant complexity of colors in the sea resist translation into prose. While Monet struggles to obtain corresponding paint mixtures on his palette, Geffroy contends with the imprecision of verbal analogies in his effort to represent the luminosity and motion of this "mer invraisemblable de couleurs." Like the painter with his tubes of synthetic oil paint, he feels "impuissant" due to the insufficient linguistic means at his disposal:

> Quand la langue chercherait à s'approprier le vocabulaire des essayeurs de pierres précieuses, quand elle s'ingénierait à transposer l'opacité de la turquoise, la pure transparence du saphir et de la lazulite, elle ne pourrait encore reproduire le jeu de toutes ces lueurs en mouvement.[207]

We previously have seen Geffroy's reliance upon images of jewels and gemstones to describe the effects of the water in Monet's Belle-Île paintings in his 1887 article about the artists. For instance, he characterizes the sea spume as having the color of blue gemstones: "[L]'écume qui ourle cette avancée de la terre est d'un bleu de pierreries."[208] We also have noted Monet's later remark to Rodin about needing a palette of gold and precious jewels to capture the fulgid Mediterranean light of Antibes.[209] In "En mer," Geffroy admits the ultimate inadequacy of this lapidary language as a substitute for firsthand experience of these color sensations. Appropriation of a gemologist's vocabulary may help to conjure a certain impression of these radiant colors when seen in isolation or in arrested motion, but the dance between the sea waves and rays of sunlight never ceases. Nature's color scheme is far from static. Allusions to the opaque blue-green of turquoise, the translucent azure of lazulite, and the glittering transparency of deep blue sapphire do not fully account for the perpetual interplay among varying forms, angles, and concentrations of light upon the water. “Le vocabulaire des essayeurs de pierres précieuses” lends itself on some level to a partial identification, analysis, and representation of the colors Geffroy observes in the sea. The synthetic effects of light in motion surpass its reach.

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[207] Ibid., 237.

[208] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 1.

[209] See footnote no. 145.

The analytically oriented procedures of painting would not automatically fare much better automatically in translating this multifaceted and dynamic intermingling of light, water, and atmosphere:

> C’est à peine si un peintre subtilement analyste trouverait sur sa palette les équivalents de ces insaisissables passages de lumière, de ces influences réciproques de tons, de ces ombres portées d’une vague sur une autre, qui enveloppent tous les bleus d’une atmosphère rose tremblante et délicieuse.[210]

Though a painter seemingly possesses an advantage of compatibility in transferring optical sensations into a visual medium, she does not escape the entire set of expressive difficulties confronting a writer. Just like a writer who relies upon the language of jewels and gems to convey the sparkling effects of the rich blues of the sea and sky, a painter proceeds with a somewhat reductive system of substitution or transfer. The deficiencies of the medium extend beyond the distinct behavior of pigment and prismatic color. A painter selects and formulates a particular color she sees in the water or the sky one at a time. Her palette mixtures struggle with recreating the blues of the sea because the individual tones of nature develop and function in relation to all of the other colors in their environment (“ces influences réciproques de tons”). The play of light and shadow upon the water also remains elusive (“insaisissables”) as it responds to and fluctuates with the unfurling and overlapping of the waves (“une vague sur une autre”). A painter extracts components of nature’s constantly evolving palette; she only can aspire to simulate but never completely replicate the effects of motion and the passage of time by way of her color analysis.

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[210] Geffroy, “Belle-Île-en-Mer,” 237.

We should take note though that Geffroy qualifies his assertion with "c'est à peine si." While *hardly* any painter could break down and convert such subtle and mutable combinations of light and shadow into mixtures of colored pigment, Monet presumably succeeds in coming closest to achieving this end from Geffroy's point of view. Monet's responsiveness and sensitivity to the atmospheric *enveloppe* allows him to distill and to express a moment's instantaneity within his paintings. Though the material and conceptual means of painting and writing may appear to render this task exceptionally difficult, a development of a pictorial or linguistic procedure for conveying the all-encompassing properties of the *enveloppe* offers potential for a closer approximation of the totality and continuity of nature's effects. In Geffroy's image, a delightful and flickering pink atmosphere blankets the entire spectrum of blues that emanate from the sea and sky. Atmospheric color operates as a synthetic bridge between perception and expression. Rendering this *enveloppe* can become the key to unifying the fluid effects of color and light within a verbal tableau as well because the atmosphere itself embodies or contains movement ("tremblante") and a sense of delicacy or impermanence ("délicieuse").

A vivid image of the colors of the sea and the enveloping atmosphere would communicate only a partial or distorted rendering of Geffroy's experience. The competing demands of *colore* and *disegno* pertain equally to visual and verbal forms of representation: "Et quand on arriverait à le chanter, ce poème inouï de la couleur, il resterait à donner l'idée du dessin souple et fort de ces vagues tranquilles, de ces surfaces élastiques où court une ondulation qui devient une ligne nette et se perd en vapeur."[211] However dazzling these colors may be, both painter and writer need *lines* to lend shape to their images of the sea. Nature itself functions as a draftsman constructing a picture from a specific combination of lines, but Geffroy's process of translating this image into words is perhaps more oblique than Monet's pictorial one. The writer's task involves the discovery of a combination of words that can give the idea ("donner l'idée") of the composition before his eyes. The variability and multiplicity of the lines and forms of the sea complicate anything beyond a broad indication of their character. A verbal expression of line relies upon a certain degree of abstraction. Geffroy hopes to transmit an *idea* of the supple yet bold contours of the tranquil sea waves, but the complete details of nature's composition defy description. In depicting the undulating lines of the sea with words, he emulates how his eyes compensate for the effects of distance. As the rolling surface of the ocean advances toward and extends beyond the limits of sight, it assumes the appearance of a single sharp horizontal line that ultimately dissolves into the vapors of the atmosphere. A more suggestive and summary arrangement of the essential lines of this seascape reproduces their effects and the feelings they elicit most effectively with words. A reader may step in to fill in the remainder of the picture with her imagination.

Before turning our attention to how Geffroy resolves the tension between these two interdependent elements of design, let us dwell just a bit longer on the mode of writing suited best to conveying the diversity and interpenetration of hues within "ce poème inouï de la couleur." He foregrounds the idea that color on its own can inspire a degree of lyricism approaching the poetry of bards. Its most poignant translation resembles an extraordinary or unheard-of poem. An austere composition and recitation of this poem's verses barely would suffice; Geffroy instead proposes to sing of color's radiance ("le chanter"). "Chanter" and "inouï" also introduce synesthetic qualities as both words connote or relate to the production of sound. In capturing color's full range of sensory effects from visual to aural, he will stop considerably short of incorporating pure verse or a *poème en prose* into this compilation of notes.[212] Geffroy instead will deploy a visually evocative and, to a certain extent, poeticized language similar to the kind he developed for describing his experience of Monet's Belle-Île paintings in his art criticism.

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[211] Geffroy, "Belle-Île-en-Mer," 237.

Recognizing the endless complications of signifying subtle gradations of line and color with words, Geffroy sets aside these representational hurdles for the pleasures of a leisurely form of viewing. In this soothing mode of observation, reverie soon may follow: "Il vaut mieux aujourd'hui renoncer à cette lutte avec les formes et les nuances, il vaut mieux laisser les regards errer, suivre ces mouettes qui tournent autour du mât, qui effleurent la vague, qui volent droit, sans un battement d'ailes vers l'horizon embrasé."[213] If a reader obeys Geffroy's implicit cues, she will envision the seagulls as they circle the boat's mast, brush against the waves, and gradually sail toward the luminous glow of the horizon. As her imagination wanders in step with the sights within Geffroy's gaze, she no longer needs to focus on his attempts at registering the specificity of the colors and contours of the sea, light, and surrounding atmosphere. The graceful path of the seagulls in flight can help to precipitate a form of mental drift approaching reverie.

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[212] For a set of criteria for distinguishing Baudelaire's interpolation of prose poetry into his critical writing from merely poeticized prose in the works of other critics, see the third chapter of Wettlaufer's *In the Mind's Eye*, "Baudelaire and the Salons: The Critic as Artist," pp. 121-157.

[213] Geffroy, "Belle-Île-en-Mer," 237-238.

As Michael Charlesworth observes in his study *Landscape and Vision in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France*, reverie may ensue from entering into a form of dialogue with nature, and this exchange will encourage reflection on the self:

> If they do amount to musings on the place of the subject in the world ('what am I'?), these reveries also seem to depend, at their best, on being in a situation in which the natural world can, as it were, make its presence felt. To that extent they can be taken as part of a dialogue; the subject receives natural stimuli, and in turn produces certain thoughts.[214]

Charlesworth further explains that the sensory stimulation afforded by natural phenomena can permit a subject to remove herself from the immediate circumstances of the external world and yet still feel attached to or present within it. Though nature provides the source of reverie, a subject normally ventures to thoughts beyond it.[215] Reverie induces introspection and potentially a greater self-awareness.

With the remainder of this passage, Geffroy will establish a fuller range of conditions hospitable to this process. Observation of the seagulls seems to transport Geffroy and, by extension, a reader into more tranquil contemplation. Abandonment of "cette lutte avec les formes et les nuances" allows him to shift his focus away from the pressures of reconciling the intricacies of external vision with the procedures of verbal expression. Momentarily freed from the task of assigning words to everything he sees, he becomes more attuned to the ambient sensations of touch and sound. While linguistic constraints abound in depicting color and line with words, other dimensions of experience remain more directly within the grasp of words than they perhaps do with pictorial means. Geffroy completes his representation of this sea voyage with a meditation centered more upon what he *feels* rather than what he *sees* aboard the steamer:

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[214] Michael Charlesworth, *Landscape and Vision in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 96.
[215] Ibid.

"La promenade est paresseuse comme sur un lac. Le mouvement du bateau est à peine sensible. La chanson de l'eau est douce à entendre. On voudrait rester ainsi, sous cette caresse d'air et de musique, – toujours."[216] These four diminutive phrases that conclude "En mer" guide a reader away from an exclusive engagement with the demands of vision and into a more serene mental space where reverie can develop. As the boat idly drifts through the waters of the sea, the subtlety of its motion intensifies Geffroy's auditory and tactile sensations. The sounds and rhythms of gently lapping waves transform into the notes of a sweet song. He feels the tender embrace of the "atmosphère rose tremblante et délicieuse" and wishes to remain forever in the presence of its pleasant breezes. When read aloud, the abundance of soft "S" sounds within these sentences contributes to the lulling effect in Geffroy's impression of "cette caresse d'air et de musique." The final word of this meditation recalls the broader aspirations of "Belle-Île-en-Mer." With its associations of perpetuity, *toujours* corresponds with desires he expresses at the beginning of this story to reproduce and prolong the freshness of "les sensations devant les paysages tout à coup dévoilés."[217]

In his images of the people and terrain he encounters in the following series of 'notes' comprising "Belle-Île-en-Mer," Geffroy sustains comparisons with the procedures of painting and other visual media to compensate for their expressive advantages over even the most suggestive and energetic forms of prose. In "Le phare," for instance, he compares the topography of Belle-Île to geographical maps ("de carte géographique") and Japanese watercolors ("des aquarelles japonaises"). From the top of the lighthouse, the southwest portion of the island assumes the summary appearance of terrain plotted on a geographical map: "Les routes, les chemins, les sentiers, les limites des champs sont comme tracés au pinceau, les affleurements pierreux, les maisons basses se détachent en un léger relief souligné d'un trait d'ombre."[218] Under the beaming light shining from the copper lamp near the top of the lighthouse, the natural and manmade elements of Belle-Île resemble an artistic rendering of forms and space. The winding roads and contours of the fields appear as if they have been drawn with a paintbrush. Reinforced with strong shadow lines, the rocky outcroppings and humble houses of the local fishermen stand out in low relief.

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[216] Geffroy, "Belle-Île-en-Mer," 238.
[217] Ibid., 221.

A geographical map designed by an artist ("une carte de géographie dessinée par un artiste") might bring to mind the features of Japanese works on paper with their bold colors, calligraphic lines, and abstract spatial and compositional devices. Geffroy proceeds to liken his view of the southwest region of Belle-Île to a Japanese watercolor rendered in bird's-eye perspective ("des vues de toute une contrée prise à vol d'oiseau"):

> Et la comparaison [des aquarelles japonaises] se justifie davantage encore quand le regard suit la ligne découpée des côtes, – les blocs monstrueux écroulés les uns sur les autres, dressées isolément, vallons encombrés de pierres, hâvres ensablés, – ligne changeant sans cesse de direction et toujours bordée, en ses violents caprices, par le bourrelet d'écume de la vague.[219]

Geffroy's comparison of his view of Belle-Île from the lighthouse to a Japanese watercolor provides the means for him to elide and distill the most essential components of this landscape into a single sentence. Applying an artistic metaphor to his description permits him to evoke the salient lines and compositional features that posed expressive difficulties in his "lutte avec les formes et les nuances" of the sea. From the elevation of the lighthouse, Geffroy directs a reader's eye to follow the prominent jagged line that encompasses the entire coast. This sharp line traces the contours of the monstrous heaps of Belle-Île's volcanic stones, gives definition to the bold silhouette of its pyramidal rocks, runs through its valleys strewn with stones, and finally encircles the perimeter of its sandy harbors. The line's constantly changing direction suggests the vitality and dynamism of the landscape; the incessant crashing of the waves against the coast alters and erodes the island's boundaries. Applying metaphors from the visual arts, Geffroy constructs a sweeping image of the coastline that recalls the cumulative effects he obtained from viewing Monet's paintings of the island.

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[218] Ibid., 250.

[219] Ibid., 250-251.

The colors and lines of Belle-Île's sea and terrain constitute merely one facet of Geffroy's myriad challenges in representing the experience and sensations produced on his journey. Remembering an afternoon devoted to exploring the cliffs at Pointe-Taillefer, he comments on the futility of trying to convey a semblance of the gestures and vernacular of the fishermen he encountered upon the coast: "Je comprends qu'ils ["des marins de la côte bretonne"] rebutent l'observation."[220] Decoding and transmitting the significance of the long pauses and periods of silence in their conversations present the primary obstacles. He recommends complete immersion in the culture and lives of these fishermen as an outwardly viable yet ultimately insufficient remedy: "Il faut vivre avec ces hommes chez eux, manger, boire avec eux, apprendre leur langage, partir chaque nuit à la pêche…."[221] Though not without its own complications and limitations, a painting, on the other hand, occasionally can prevail in capturing an image comparable to the landscape that appears before an artist's eyes:

> S'il est quelquefois possible au peintre d'emporter sur une toile un paysage semblable à ceux qui ont été vus, et hier et avant-hier, un paysage semblable à celui-ci, tout en grandes lignes et tout en soleil, l'eau, les pierres, les herbes humides illuminés par la lumière du milieu du jour, – le littérateur, lui ne peut guère emporter que des à peu près d'humanité.[222]

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[220] Ibid., 244.
[221] Ibid., 245.
[222] Ibid., 246.

Burdened with representing not only what he sees but also what he hears and thinks, an author or, in this case, a journalist ("un littérateur") hardly can expect to succeed in producing anything beyond the most broadly brushed approximations of his meetings with varying aspects of "humanité." With its implications of taking away something physical and tangible, Geffroy's repetition of *emporter* in this passage carries a nice literal connotation to it that underscores his struggles as a writer. A painter like Monet can bring back a canvas from Belle-Île that serves as a reliable record of his vision and experience. How many words would a writer require to accomplish a similar feat? Painterly means may be better suited to depicting a view of nature in summary fashion, especially like the one Geffroy has described. When the midday sun reduces the landscape to a composite of bold lines and incandescent light, a painter conceivably can formulate marks and color combinations resembling this effect. Monet's letters from Belle-Île, however, have betrayed some doubt about a painter's capacity to reproduce at will his daily impressions of the landscape ("un paysage semblable à ceux qui ont été vus, et hier et avant-hier"). His remark to Alice about the mercurial nature of Belle-Île's waters bears repeating in this context: "Bref, j'en suis fou; mais je sais bien que pour peindre vraiment la mer, il faut la voir tous les jours, à toute heure et au même endroit pour en connaître la vie à cet endroit-là…."[223] Painting the sea necessitates the kind of absorptive commitment that Geffroy proposes for understanding, assimilating, and describing the Breton fisherman's language, gestures, and customs.

Acknowledging that a writer never can carry away something so tangible and direct as a painted image of a landscape, Geffroy must rely on a reader to supplement his words with her own imagination and from her individual frame of reference:

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[223] "Letter to Alice Hoschedé," 30 October 1886, L. 730.

> Même lorsque son talent comporte plus que de la patience, même lorsque les procès-verbaux qu'il recueille servent à des évocations, même lorsqu'il est un divinateur, il y a pour lui, dans le pêcheur taciturne comme dans le paysan sournois, – de l'indéchiffrable.[224]

Indefatigable patience, a thorough and lively set of notes, and clairvoyance itself could not surmount language's shortcomings in the face of this most laconic of subjects. The Breton fisherman's economic mode of communication and existence transcends words. Something inscrutable, something impenetrable ("de l'indéchiffrable") remains irrespective of the intensity of an author's observation; words at their very best provide vague approximations for certain elements of lived experience.

In a brief note set at the inn at Kervillaouen, Geffroy marvels at Monet's prescience in coming to visit "cette poésie inexplorée, presque inédite, de Belle-Île-en-Mer."[225] The crude curvature of the island on a tourist's map and the cursory descriptions found in travel guides would offer scant indication of the island's immeasurable and unadulterated visual richness: "Il est heureux qu'un artiste ait deviné de loin, sur les sinuosités d'une carte, à travers les descriptions d'un 'guide,' cet admirable pays."[226] Neither the linearity and schematic properties of a two-dimensional map nor the prosaic language of a travel guide suffices for communicating the unexplored and virtually untouched dimensions of the island. As we saw in his 1887 article, Geffroy touts the exceptional achievement of Monet's canvases, characterizing the painter as the first historian of Belle-Île's sublime waters and cliffs: "Pour la première fois, la terrible mer de là-bas a trouvé son historien."[227] In his later criticism, Geffroy elevates Monet to the consummate poet of nature on the basis of his talent to "résumer la poésie de l'univers dans un espace restreint."[228]

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[224] Geffroy, "Belle-Île-en-Mer," 246.
[225] Ibid., 254.
[226] Ibid.
[227] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 1.

Whether assuming the role of an historian or a poet, Monet develops a unique pictorial language to create images of Belle-Île that far exceed a guidebook or a map's notation of its topographical features. His art expresses "cette poésie inexplorée, presque inédite" precisely because it powerfully presents the sensations he felt while painting its rocks and its sea. In his *Salon de 1844*, Geffroy's critical predecessor Théophile Thoré distinguishes poetry from imitation. As an embodiment of an original impression, poetry surpasses the mere copying of nature: "C'est [la poésie] l'invention, c'est l'originalité c'est le signe manifesté de l'impression particulière. La poésie n'est pas la nature, mais le sentiment que la nature inspire à l'artiste. C'est la nature reflétée dans l'esprit humain."[229] If we apply Thoré's conception of poetry within the context of Monet's artistic project, then we can see why a painter of his talent consistently triumphs over the most adroit "divinateur" in prose. As a form of visual poetry, Monet's paintings express and reenact for a viewer the feelings elicited from his immediate experience of nature; they depict a vision of Belle-Île filtered through the human mind. Since these canvases reflect the workings of the mind, they contain a sense of humanity that largely escapes "le littérateur" in his struggle with "l'indéchiffrable."

In spite of Monet's presumed advantages over Geffroy in terms of representing his impressions of Belle-Île, the author makes clear that the painter must contend with a comparable set of expressive considerations. I will close this section with an examination of some additional specific references to Monet in Geffroy's narrative that reveal parallel artistic concerns between the painter and the author. After hiking three hours up steep cliffs to reach the lighthouse guardian's cottage, Geffroy notices a cluster of stones known as Pointe des Poulains. From his vantage point hovering over Pointe des Poulains, the water surrounding this heap of volcanic rock captivates his interest:

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[228] Geffroy, "Chronique: Les 'Meules' de Claude Monet," 1.

[229] Théophile Thoré [Willem Bürger], "Salon de 1844," in *Salons de 1844, 1845, 1846, 1847, 1848*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Librairie de Ve Jules Renouard, 1870), 20; quoted and trans. in Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism*, 18.

> Autour des pierres, l'eau est d'un noir bleuâtre comme certaines encres, la vague qui se casse à des transparences sombres. C'est seulement en Bretagne, au-dessus des fonds rocheux, que la mer a cette couleur particulière.[230]

Comparing the tones of these waters to the deep bluish black of writing inks, he calls upon the material means through which he composes this description to evoke the complexity of the sea's color.

Critically though, Geffroy's fascination with discerning and conveying the particularities of the colors of Brittany's sea aligns with one of Monet's chief pictorial goals at Belle-Île:

> Monet se passionne à observer la profonde différence entre cette longue lame lumineuse et la grosse et courte vague de la Manche, d'un vert clair souvent troublé par le limon du fond. C'est cette beauté de l'eau qui retient ici le regard, bien plus que la configuration de la côte.[231]

According to Geffroy, Monet possesses a corresponding passion for "les formes et les nuances" of the sea's waves that absorbed the author in his earlier vignette "En mer." Achieving a proper balance between the competing demands of color and line preoccupy painter and author alike. The specific composition, configuration, and hues of every body of water entail exacting observation and unique representational means. As we noted previously in one of Monet's letters to Gustave Caillebotte, the painter struggled mightily with discarding his habits for painting the English Channel and developing a palette and brushwork compatible with Belle-Île's sublime waters.[232] The color and lines of "cette longue lame lumineuse" diverge dramatically from the combination of clear greens and lemon yellows he employed in depicting the broad yet short waves of the English Channel. Geffroy perhaps intimates the poetic quality of Belle-Île's waters for both him and Monet through his use of alliteration in his description of its long, luminous waves ("cette longue lame lumineuse"). For the painter and the author, capturing the transitory beauty of the constantly fluctuating colors, lines, and configurations of Belle-Île's waves holds substantially greater interest than the shape and forms of its jagged coastline.

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[230] Geffroy, "Belle-Île-en-Mer," 258.
[231] Ibid.

One of Geffroy's final notes in "Belle-Île-en-Mer" rehearses a number of the themes he develops at considerable length in his two-part article on Monet's 1887 exhibition, especially the artist's battle with both the critical establishment and the impenetrable elements at Belle-Île. Titled "Claude Monet," this note also extends two fundamental themes that Geffroy entertained in relation to the production of his own text: first, complete immersion in one's environment as a means of understanding and identifying with the subject(s) of one's art; and second, how to overcome the inevitable deficiencies of language for conveying anything beyond a mere approximation of an experience of either nature or art. As testimony to his passion for observing the nuances of Belle-Île's "longue lame lumineuse," Monet does not allow the wind and rain to deter him from doggedly laboring "devant ces cathédrales de Port-Domois."[233] Perhaps the artist succeeds in achieving "quelque chose de nouveau et de grand" because he has completely embraced the hardiness, customs, and even the apparel of those inscrutable fisherman who inhabit the island:

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[232] "Letter to Gustave Caillebotte," 11 October 1886, L. 709.

[233] Geffroy, "Belle-Île-en-Mer," 260.

> Il lui faut être vêtu comme les hommes de la côte, botté, couvert de tricots, enveloppé d'un 'ciré' à capuchon. Les rafales lui arrachent parfois sa palette et ses brosses des mains. Son chevalet est amarré des cordes et des pierres. N'importe, le peintre tient bon et va à l'étude comme à une bataille.[234]

Dressed in boots, a pullover, and an oilskin cloak, Monet resolutely prepares for and persists in a battle against Belle-Île's tempestuous weather and the vicissitudes of its waters and coastline. Though gusts of wind may snatch his palette and brushes from his hands, the cords and rocks weighing down his easel enable his canvases to survive. Does "cette poésie inexplorée, presque inédite" of Belle-Île emerge in part from Monet's art as a consequence of the close bond he has forged between nature and himself?

After condemning the critical establishment for its myopia and hypocrisy, Geffroy incorporates a monolithic sentence underscoring the main ideas he will develop in his article devoted to Monet's Belle-Île paintings. This sentence particularly features the artist's coloristic alchemy and his capacity to suggest the continuous movement of the sea within the confines of a static frame. Geffroy's unusually lengthy sentence also suggests a momentary temporal shift beyond his sojourn at Belle-Île as he situates his readers in front of the artist's finished canvases: "Ici, devant ces toiles d'un dessin sommaire et savant…."[235] Confronted with Monet's paintings of Belle-Île, Geffroy concedes that the note he has scribbled over the course of an evening should not aspire to describe and interpret the totality and depth of their effects:

> Mais ce n'est pas dans cette note griffonnée au soir d'une journée que peut être décrite et commentée cette histoire de la côte et de la mer à toutes les heures, sous tous les temps, tracée par un pinceau prestigieux.[236]

Reminiscent of the way the striations on Belle-Île's rocks record the entire history of the tides, Monet's paintings encapsulate the eternal clash between the sea and the rugged coastline at all hours of the day and under every imaginable condition of weather. The expressive force of Monet's paintbrush derives from his capacity to evoke a comprehensive view of Belle-Île over a seemingly boundless stretch of time within a finite number of canvases. If a note does not suffice, what sort of language and genre of text would a writer need to convey an experience of these paintings in compelling fashion for a reader? Even in the more protracted format of his article pertaining to the exhibition of the Belle-Île canvases, we may recall that the critic still appears somewhat diffident about the overall efficacy of his description of these paintings: "Qu'un souvenir en soit du moins fixé ici, en même temps qu'un hommage est rendu à l'œuvre incomparable de l'un des maîtres paysagistes de siècle."[237] In his art criticism, Geffroy moderates his expectations for what he can expect to communicate about Monet's incomparable paintings. If he falls short of adequately translating his experience of these paintings to his reader, then his article, at least, will preserve a memory of their time together on the island. So why does he bother to include this more cursory note about Monet and his art among the multitude of impressions comprising "Belle-Île-en-Mer"? We perhaps can locate some of the impetus in the past participle *griffonnée*. Translated as to scribble or to scrawl, the verb *griffonner* already possesses strong visual connotations. *Griffonner* carries more explicit artistic associations as well if we translate it as 'to sketch.' While Geffroy's 'sketch' of these paintings admittedly assumes a rough cast, its faint indication of their colors and contours may induce a reader to complete the artist's canvases in her imagination. Whether composed in a visual or a verbal medium, a sketch can liberate an artist from a futile attempt at exhaustive transcription. 'Notes' offer a point of entry for dialogue and collaboration between a reader and a writer.

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[234] Ibid.

[235] Ibid.

[236] Ibid., 260-261.

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[237] Geffroy, "Salon de 1887: VI. Hors du Salon. – Claude Monet," *La justice*, 2 June 1887, 2.

Part Two: Mirbeau's 'Monet'

SECTION ONE: "UN PAUVRE BALBUTIER DE MOTS ": OCTAVE MIRBEAU'S CONCEPTION OF THE CRITIC, ARTIST, WORK OF ART, AND VIEWER-READER

During the late winter of 1907, the journalist Paul Gsell conducted an interview with Octave Mirbeau at the latter's art-filled residence "dans le plus bel endroit de Paris, à deux pas du Bois de Boulogne."[238] [239] After a brief preliminary sketch depicting Mirbeau's physical features and temperament as a man of letters, their exchange begins with a survey of the critic's art collection. In setting the stage for viewing "tous les trésors artistiques qu'il a pu rassembler," Gsell underscores the unequivocal modernity of Mirbeau's accumulation of paintings, works on paper, sculptures, and various *objets d'art* as testimony of his prescience, originality, and forthright convictions as an art critic:

> Pas une œuvre ancienne! Rien que des tableaux modernes. Modernes, non pas même d'aujourd'hui, mais de demain. Connaissez-vous Valtat? Connaissez-vous Roussel? Non, n'est-ce pas?... Vous les connaîtrez demain, parce qu'il vous les aura fait connaître. N'est-ce point lui qui a lancé Rodin, Mlle Claudel, Maillol? N'est-ce point lui qui a le plus furieusement bataillé pour Claude Monet, Pissarro, Cézanne, Renoir, Degas?... Ah ce n'est pas un critique à *la remorque* (original emphasis). Il a le courage de proclamer: 'Un Tel, dont personne n'a encore parlé, est un maître!' Il n'a pas la crainte de n'être pas suivi par l'opinion. Il la mate, il la dompte…[240]

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[238] Paul Gsell, "Interview d'Octave Mirbeau," *La revue*, 15 March 1907; rpt. in Octave Mirbeau, *Combats esthétiques*, eds. Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Séguier, 1993), 2:418-430.

[239] Though rather limited biographical information survives regarding Gsell, we know that he frequently contributed literary criticism to the Parisian journal *La revue* beginning in 1900. As the son of a painter, he had acquired familiarity with the visual arts as well, and he seems to have traveled within progressive artistic circles. While he wrote pieces of art criticism for *La revue* on a regular basis between 1904 and 1908, Gsell's primary legacy derives from his collaboration with Auguste Rodin on a set of interviews from 1910. These conversations would provide the foundation for the sculptor's widely circulated book, *L'art: Entretiens réunis par Paul Gsell*. For discussion of Gsell's role in the composition and 1911 publication of *L'art*, see Jacques de Caso's introduction in his and Patricia B. Sanders' English translation of Rodin's book, *Art: Conversations with Paul Gsell* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. xi-xv.

[240] Gsell, "Interview d'Octave Mirbeau," *La revue*; rpt. in *Combats esthétiques*, 2:418.

Untethered to the yoke of critical consensus, Mirbeau passionately champions the talents of undiscovered or heretofore underappreciated artists. He asserts his tastes and convictions in print with boldness, yet he does not hesitate to recant former judgments about artists when he has erred: "Il dit fougueusement ce qu'il pense.… [Q]uand il juge qu'il s'est trompé sur un artiste, il ne se gêne pas pour vous le déclarer."[241] Such frank admission of a prior miscalculation could shock readers accustomed to authoritative voices, definitive statements, and sweeping declarations in nineteenth-century artwriting: "Cela vous surprend, mais quoi, vous ne pouvez que dire: Voilà un homme sincère."[242] Mirbeau's confidence to speak his mind affirms his sincerity as a critic and, by extension, as a connoisseur and collector.

Even a critic as fiercely independent as Mirbeau could not have been completely immune to currents within the contemporary art world, particularly those ones to which his own thoughts provided inspiration. With Cézanne's death predating this interview by a matter of months, it should not come as a surprise to find the critic showcasing a few landscapes and portraits from his collection by "ce maître impressionniste" as his most prized artistic possessions: "–Voulez-vous voir ce que je possède de plus beau? me demande-t-il en me faisant les honneurs de son logement. Ce sont mes Cézanne!"[243] To bolster his contention of Cézanne's unsurpassed painterly gifts, he goes on to relay to Gsell an anecdote from a recent visit to his friend Monet, "sans doute un bon juge."[244] While observing the painter at work in his studio, Mirbeau notices that Monet has covered the Cézanne canvases within his personal collection with cloth. The critic predictably inquires why they are concealed in this manner. Monet explains that his desire to get to work on his own paintings had compelled him to hide his Cézanne's from view: "Comment l'entendez-vous? Vous comprenez, quand je veux me mettre au travail, je cache mes Cézanne!"[245] Did the Cézanne's within Monet's collection hold too rich of a level of visual interest for the artist and thus pose a distraction from making progress with his own paintings? Or did Monet fear the possibility of inadvertently assimilating aspects of Cézanne's technique with these paintings in such close physical proximity to his own unfinished canvases? In presenting Gsell his own Cézanne painting of "des femmes nues dans un paysage,"[246] Mirbeau makes evident the deceptive simplicity, alchemy, and allure of his stroke for an artist even of Monet's stature, "Et ce métier! Ça paraît tout simple, n'est-ce pas? Eh bien! Ce sont des quantités de petites touches juxtaposées et amalgamées. Regardez!"[247] Regardless of the actual motivation behind the artist's resolution to cover up the Cézanne canvases hanging in his studio while laboring on his own, this anecdote reveals a potential for a healthy competitiveness between sympathetic artists and, more broadly, aesthetic rivalry. We will find these themes quite pertinent both to Mirbeau's relationship with Monet and to the author's characterization of the dynamics between the visual arts and literature.

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[241] Ibid., 2:419.

[242] Ibid.

[243] Ibid. Mirbeau, in fact, owned a total of thirteen paintings by Cézanne. According to the catalogue accompanying the 24 February 1919 sale of Mirbeau's art collection, nine of his Cézannes were oil paintings, and the remaining four were watercolors. See entry nos. 2 through 14 in *Catalogue des tableaux modernes, aquarelles, pastels, dessins* reproduced in Michel and Nivet's *Combats esthétiques*, 2:533-561.

[244] Ibid., 2:420.

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[245] Ibid.

[246] In the notes accompanying the reprinting of this article in *Combats esthétiques*, Michel and Nivet propose that Mirbeau's description perhaps ("peut-être") corresponds with the Cézanne watercolor he owned with the title, *Nymphes attaqués par des faunes*. See footnote no. 7 in *Combats esthétiques*, 2:429, and entry no. 12 from *Catalogue des tableaux modernes* (republished in the same volume on p. 538). Based on Mirbeau's emphasis on the amalgamation and juxtaposition of brushstrokes, I would argue that the oil painting *Le bain*, ca. 1880-1882 (currently in Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart) also represents a solid candidate for the work Mirbeau was describing to Gsell. See catalogue entry no. 7, "*Au bain*," in *Combats esthétiques*, 2:537.

[247] Gsell, "Interview d'Octave Mirbeau," *La revue*; rpt. in *Combats esthétiques*, 2:420.

After Mirbeau shares this Cézanne-inspired story with Gsell, the next stop on their tour brings them face-to-face with two paintings offered by Monet as tokens of appreciation for two of the critic's most formative texts on the artist – *Les oliviers à Bordighera* and *La cabane du douanier* (W. 870 and 739; figs. 26 and 27).[248] Interestingly enough, Gsell elects to describe elements of both paintings in his own words in lieu of supplying any direct thoughts about them from Mirbeau. Mirbeau's ostensible 'silence' (at least in print) in reference to the particular contents of these canvases is significant. The absence of any commentary conforms with positions we will explore him advancing about the efficacy of words and, more specifically, criticism in contributing to an appreciation or an understanding of a work of art. This dilemma about a critic's role becomes particularly acute with respect to a viewer's engagement with Monet's paintings. The act of communal looking is what counts here: "Nous regardons des paysages de Claude Monet."[249] As such, Gsell's personal experience is given priority over any explanation or analysis of the works by Mirbeau. Similar to Geffroy, Gsell underlines in his description Monet's exhaustive quest to register the most ephemeral and scarcely perceptible gradations within the water, sunlight, and atmosphere: "Œuvres qu'estampille une folle recherche des plus imperceptibles modulations de la nuance: diaprures fugitives des vagues, passagères irisations des éclats de soleil, vibrations mêmes de l'atmosphère, tout y est."[250] The marks forming these images serve as material records of Monet's search for sensations that challenge the reach of both perception and visual representation. In Gsell's interpretation of Monet's paintings, the intensity of the painter's pursuit of "des plus imperceptibles modulations la nuance" perhaps dangerously encroaches upon madness or at least an extreme obsessiveness ("une folle recherche"). As we will witness in our examination of a few statements from Mirbeau's fictional painter Lucien in the final section of Part Two, a compulsive desire to paint impossible things can lead to insanity and self-destruction. We likewise will witness the critic cautioning Monet about his tendency to succumb to "la maladie du toujours mieux."[251]

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[248] Presumably adopting a title from the catalogue accompanying the 24 February 1919 sale of Mirbeau's art collection, Michel and Nivet identify the first Monet canvas referenced in the Gsell interview as *Les oliviers à Juan-les-Pins*. See footnote no. 8 in *Combats esthétiques*, 2:429, and entry no. 27 from *Catalogue des tableaux modernes* reprinted in the same volume on p. 543. This painting, however, was not created during Monet's Antibes campaign of 1888 in which he painted motifs at Juan-les-Pins. Mirbeau's gift instead comes from Monet's suite of Bordighera paintings. As Michel and Nivet note, the work dates from 1884. The painter possibly offered *Les oliviers à Bordighera* (W. 870) as gratitude for Mirbeau's catalogue essay prepared for the massive Monet-Rodin retrospective of 1889. See "Claude Monet" in *Claude Monet-A. Rodin* (Paris: Galerie Georges Petit, 1889), pp. 5-26. Portions of this essay previously appear in an article prompted in part by Monet's March 1889 exhibition at Boussod, Valadon et Compagnie. See "Claude Monet," *Le figaro*, 10 March 1889. A letter from Mirbeau to Monet dated 30 December 1884 establishes the artist's gift of *La cabane du douanier* (W. 739) as tribute for the critic's first article devoted exclusively to the painter, "Notes sur l'art: Claude Monet," *La France*, 21 November 1884. For Mirbeau's thank-you letter to the artist, see no. 1, 30 December 1884, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet, eds. (Tusson, Charente: Du Lérot, 1990), p. 33.

[249] Gsell, "Interview d'Octave Mirbeau," *La revue*; rpt. in *Combats esthétiques*, 2:420.

Gsell's meditation upon Monet's paintings ultimately induces an analogy to poetry to account for the subtlety and evocativeness of the artist's vision and his means of expression – another interpretive strategy we will find operational within Mirbeau's criticism. Gsell proclaims, "Claude Monet est le Verlaine du pinceau."[252] Mirbeau's interviewer proceeds to recite the initial two lines from the fourth stanza of "Art poétique" as a summation of the parallel feelings elicited from Verlaine's poetry and Monet's paintings: "Car nous voulons la Nuance encor, / Pas la Couleur, rien que la Nuance."[253] In the very first line of "Art poétique," Verlaine declares the supremacy of music over all other forms of artistic expression, and the succeeding stanzas supply the recipe for achieving analogous effects in poetry: “De la musique avant tout chose.”[254] In metaphorical terms, a musically inspired arrangement of verse abandons the clarity of notational or descriptive color in favor of the mystery and vagueness of more delicate and suggestive halftones: “Rien de plus chère que la chanson grise.”[255] On the surface, these lines of Verlaine’s *ars poetica* may strike us as incongruous with the prevailing early twentieth-century discourse that emphasizes Monet’s reliance upon intense or pure color as his primary mode of conveying the truthfulness of his impressions of nature. When we further resituate the two lines Gsell quotes in his interview with Mirbeau within the larger body of the poem, we can ascertain more clearly their points of resonance with Monet’s aims as a painter. Monet’s ambition to convey instantaneity by way of the *enveloppe* could provide the implicit link between the painter and the poet. The images Verlaine conjures in the stanza directly preceding these lines evoke the transformative, mediating, and veiling effects of the *enveloppe*: “C’est des beaux yeux derrière des voiles, / C’est le grand jour tremblant de midi, / C’est par un ciel d’automne attiédi, / Le bleu fouillis des claires étoiles.”[256] In “Art poétique,” Verlaine calls for a more lyrical form of poetry that arises from merging the indefinite with the precise (“où l’Indécis au Précis se joint”).[257] Seemingly without the filter of Mirbeau’s commentary, Gsell senses a comparable impulse in Monet’s art – an aspiration to preserve and express with immediacy and poignancy the most fluid and ephemeral phenomena. His paintbrush stamps (“estampille”) the transitory upon the canvas with the comprehensiveness of symphonic music and the suggestiveness of poetry. From fleeting glimmers of prismatic rays of sunlight dancing upon the ocean's waves to the quivering vibrations of the moisture-laden summer air, "tout y est."

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[250] Ibid., 421.

[251] See Mirbeau's letter no. 13 to Monet, around 10 September 1887, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 50-51.

[252] Gsell, "Interview d'Octave Mirbeau," *La revue*; rpt. in *Combats esthétiques*, 2:421.

[253] Ibid. Verlaine composed "Art poétique" in April 1874 when he was imprisoned at Mons, Belgium for shooting his estranged lover and fellow avant-garde poet Arthur Rimbaud in the wrist in a drunken fit of jealousy. For the complete text of the poem, see Paul Verlaine, *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, ed. Y.-G. Le Dantec (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), pp. 326-327. For a reassessment of the significance of this poem within the context of Verlaine's shifting theories of prosody, see Alfred J. Wright, Jr., "Verlaine's 'Art Poétique' Re-Examined," *PMLA* (*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*) 74, no. 3 (June 1959), pp. 268-275.

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[254] Verlaine, “Art poétique,” in *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, 326.

[255] Ibid.

[256] Ibid.

[257] Ibid.

After the poetic interlude prompted by this quiet moment of contemplating these two canvases, Mirbeau resumes his conversation with observations about the project that presently consumed the whole of Monet's artistic energies – the painting of his waterlily pond: "À l'heure qu'il est, reprend Mirbeau, il ne peint que des bassins où flottent des fleurs aquatiques. Il raffine obstinément sur les transparences de l'eau. Il veut que le regard en perce la profondeur dormante….C'est presque *la recherche de l'Absolu*."[258] In conceiving his second series of *Nymphéas* in the early years of the twentieth century, Verlaine's "[r]ien que nuance" effectively becomes Monet's aesthetic refrain, but Mirbeau's qualification of this search for the Absolute with "presque" shelters the artist from potentially falling into an irretrievable state of madness from "la folle recherche." The more imminent threat from Mirbeau's standpoint bore material instead of psychological consequences:

> Il n'y a qu'un danger à pousser tellement loin la délicatesse de la vision. C'est que dans vingt ans, dans cinquante peut-être, le temps n'ait tout effacé. Réflexion qui doit d'ailleurs nous rendre d'autant plus précieuses ces merveilles dont nous seuls aurons joui.[259]

Here we encounter a dissolution of the divide between nature and art brought to its most extreme conclusion. However doggedly ("obstinément") Monet may strive to polish and preserve the transparent mirror of his waterlily pond, the reflections of clouds upon its surface and an unobstructed view into its stagnant depths soon will dissipate. Though in markedly dilated fashion, the painted images representing the subtle delicateness of Monet's vision will too fade away in a matter of twenty to fifty years according to

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[258] Gsell, "Interview d'Octave Mirbeau," *La revue*; rpt. in *Combats esthétiques*, 2:421.
[259] Ibid.

Mirbeau. The fragility of nature finds its unbroken equivalent in Monet's brushstrokes and opalescent palette. Time ("le temps") will swiftly extinguish the both of them.

Perhaps intending a clever pun, the critic incorporates another *réflexion* to ponder within his remark about these paintings consisting mainly of reflections. With the impending evaporation of Monet's diaphanous images, a viewer's individual experience of them becomes even more precious. Future generations will be deprived of the pleasure of these temporary marvels ("ces merveilles"); their inevitable physical disintegration hastens the urgency and significance of firsthand observation of them. Considering the perishable condition of Monet's series of *Nymphéas*, descriptions of their appearance and the specific sensations they engender undoubtedly would hold inestimable value to future viewers who will no longer be able to perceive the nuance and sensitivity of the artist's vision rendered in correspondingly delicate paint. Mirbeau, however, does not put forward a verbal depiction of the *Nymphéas* or any alternative means of preserving his memories of them at least in the space of his interview with Gsell. We can never know for certain whether the critic altogether discounted the possibility of translating the elusive contents and effects of these paintings into words. A number of Mirbeau's statements to follow in this section will introduce a palpable degree of skepticism regarding the capacity of art criticism to serve such ends. The indelible material imprint of words on the page could alone disqualify some (if not all) modes of verbal expression as reliable analogues to the impermanence of the *Nymphéas* and the motif that induced them.

After continuing their tour by entertaining a diversity of objects ranging from a tiger and eagle kakemono by Hokusai to "un charmant petit broc de grès," Gsell reiterates his contention that Mirbeau exhibits virtually exclusive tastes for modern art: "Quant à vous, cher maître, dis-je à Mirbeau, il me semble qu'au contraire vous n'aimez guère que ce qui est de votre temps. Car parmi vos tableaux, je n'en ai pas vu un seul ancien."[260] While distinguishing himself from the majority of art collectors who covet only "ce qui est désigné comme venant de très loin et comme très ancien," the critic counters that his predisposition toward the painters of his time does not preclude him from appreciating the entire history of art.[261] He maintains collectors ought to concern themselves with contemporary art at least due to its influence in shaping the world around them, but a more fundamental set of criteria than a work's modernity determines Mirbeau's aesthetic. Canonical Dutch painters, including Jan van Goyen, Rembrandt, and Vermeer appeal to the critic on the basis of their deliverance from convention, their communication of lasting truths, and above all, their exhibition of sincerity: "Mais j'aime aussi parmi les maîtres du passé ceux qui, indépendants de toute convention, ont exprimé des vérités durables…. J'aime tous ceux qui ont été très sincères!"[262] As Gsell had reasoned in the prelude to his interview, Mirbeau's vigorous expression of his convictions and his candor about his previous missteps as a critic would prompt his readers to infer, "Voilà un homme sincère!" A sincere man, collector, and critic expectedly would demand the same of the artists he endorses. With this temperamental accord in place between artist and critic, it would not seem unreasonable to imagine a mutually beneficial exchange ensuing between the fruits of their respective mediums. By the time of this interview, Mirbeau had divulged ample doubt about such undertakings both in print and in private correspondence. We will have occasion to mine a few of these examples momentarily. Let us first continue to follow the arc of Gsell's dialogue with the critic as our preliminary avenue of exposure to his patterns of thought regarding the perhaps irreconcilable gap between image and text.

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[260] Ibid., 425-426.
[261] Ibid., 425.
[262] Ibid., 426.

Mirbeau's displays of sincerity extended to an admission of his discontent and regret concerning both his vocational choice and the expressive means at his disposal as an author. Immediately succeeding his declaration of admiration for all sincere artists, he proffers a bleak statement regarding the impediments of his craft as a way of rounding out the first half of this interview:

> Et pour conclure: 'Ah! tenez, me dit Mirbeau, j'aurais dû être peintre. Je suis un peintre manqué… Je tressaille devant la belle peinture. Les mots, les mots, ce ne sont que des signes morts qu'en vain on violente pour leur faire crier la vie. Tandis que la couleur, c'est la vérité directe!'[263]

This remark shows a crucial divergence between Mirbeau's aspirations and his self-assessed talents as a visual artist. Despite his failure as a painter, he clings to the belief that he should have become one instead of a writer. Though a vital ingredient in both his criticism and the artists he holds in high esteem, sincerity clearly does not function as a singular predictor of accomplishment for a writer or a painter. Mirbeau unfortunately does not elaborate upon the reasons why he regards himself as "un peintre manqué" within this interview. Our subsequent examination of some letters he exchanged with Monet will offer some vague degree of insight, but we are mostly left to speculate on our own about the deeper causes contributing to his downfall as a painter with very few substantive clues.

The sentence following Mirbeau's regrets about not becoming a painter presents a series of ambiguities due to its usage of the verb *tressaillir* and the phrase "la belle peinture." In beginning with the latter, we need to take into account that *peinture* could signify the physical material of paint, the medium or act of painting, or a painting as an object (i.e., a work of art). These three definitions of the word remain fairly intertwined, but we still could permit ourselves to tease out some slightly different implications within Mirbeau's phrase. In the context of what Mirbeau has just said about his frustrations as a painter, we could interpret "la belle peinture" from a maker's point of view. As "un peintre manqué," Mirbeau possibly would tremble or quiver in the process of picking up a brush and trying to apply paint to create an image on the surface of a canvas. If we consider "la belle peinture" from a viewer-critic's perspective, we might understand the phrase to mean either a single beautifully painted canvas or, metonymically, the art of painting as the eminent medium. The tone of "[j]e tressaille" becomes particularly opaque in this second scenario as the verb can carry positive and negative associations. *Tressaillir* also suggests an element of surprise as if contact with "la belle peinture" in some manner startles Mirbeau with a shudder or shiver. Does Mirbeau tremble or quiver in front of a beautiful painting exclusively in a pleasurable sense of being emotionally stirred or moved? Or, fully cognizant of his incapacity to reciprocate the exquisiteness of his experience with proper words, does the critic shudder in fear?

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[263] Ibid.

Whether we ascribe exclusively positive, negative, or some mixture of overtones to "[j]e tressaille," the action of shivering or shuddering constitutes an emotional and/or physiological reaction to a particular external stimulus. Looking at "la belle peinture" generates some sort of interior or outward response from Mirbeau in the form of a shudder; it *moves* him. As he ruminates elsewhere, the medium of painting arouses feelings for both a maker and a viewer by blending together an array of bodily and mental movements. In a letter Mirbeau sent to Monet clarifying his position on Paul Gauguin, the critic reaffirms their mutual belief in the primacy of vision and the artist's touch over intellectual abstractions as conduits for expression in painting: "Nous sommes tout à fait d'accord: en peinture, c'est par les yeux que la pensée doit être excité. Il faut d'abord que les yeux soient charmés, *émus*" (original emphasis).[264] [265] While he credits Gauguin in this letter for "un véritable progrès dans le dessin simplifié" and "un goût d'arrangement décoratif," Mirbeau judges him as "inférieur" to Monet in large part due to the fledgling symbolist's adherence to philosophical idealism and other theoretical concerns.[266] In contrast to symbolists like Gauguin and Maurice Denis who advocated the imposition of an external ideal onto a painting, Mirbeau insinuates that thought in large part derives from the very procedures of the medium.[267] Painted marks charm or allure ("charmés") a viewer's eyes with their sensuality. Retracing the artist's physical movement across the surface of the canvas in a sequence of brushstrokes, she is stirred emotionally ("émus") by the cumulative force of these gestures upon her eyes.

A painting communicates thought through and to the eyes. In his interview with Gsell, Mirbeau attributes the immediacy of this relay between a viewer's eye and a painting to the transparent and truthful nature of its expressive means. From Mirbeau's perspective, color is the direct truth ("c'est la vérité directe"); it speaks to a viewer's eye in a language that requires no translation.[268] In contrast to color, words operate at a remove from vision and are subject to obfuscation; we feel their effects only through some form of mediation, transformation, and contextualization. Words in isolation endure as nothing more than dead signs ("des signes mortes"). Mirbeau characterizes a process of signification as brutal and mostly futile. In order to instill meaning into words, we must violate or assault ("on violente") their stillborn purity. Efforts to convey some sort of immediately comprehensible truth with them tend to be largely made in vain ("en vain"). As we struggle to be understood, we may even resort to shouting or crying out to impart a semblance of vitality to them ("pour leur faire crier la vie"). At a loss, we stutter, we stammer. We may note that Mirbeau repeats "les mots, les mots" as if he is faltering or stumbling in his search for language to convey the magnitude of his disarmament in front of a painting.

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[264] Letter no. 51 to Monet, around 10 February 1891, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 118-122.

[265] For further analysis of this quotation and an assessment of the critical writing of Octave Mirbeau, Gustave Geffroy, and Georges Lecomte with respect to contemporary psychological and art theories, see Richard Shiff, "To move the eyes: Impressionism, Symbolism and well-being, c. 1891," in *Impressions of French Modernity: Art and Literature in France 1850-1900*, ed. Richard Hobbs (Manchester, UK and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 190-210.

[266] Letter no. 51 to Monet, around 10 February 1891, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 118-122.

[267] Shiff, "To move the eyes: Impressionism, Symbolism and well-being, c. 1891," 201.

[268] We could, of course, counter Mirbeau's claim by citing the relativity of color. Color's symbolic and emotive associations *invite* rather than discourage translation.

The necessity of reconciling the truthfulness and immediacy of color with the imprecision and indirectness of words makes writing about either art or its referent in nature especially challenging. Mirbeau's uncertainty about the potential of verbal language to communicate visual experience permeates into multiple dimensions of his literary production. Reporting on his late summer travels to the Île de Noirmoutier in the journal *Gil Blas* in 1886, he calls into question the existence of compatible words for conveying the shimmering colors he perceives. In a passage in which he attempts to describe the clarity and lucidity of the varying rose tones he sees on a beach completely lined with golden sand ("une plage de sable tout dorée"), he defers to Monet's paintbrush as the sole dependable tool for fully representing these color effects in nature:

> La mer est rose, le ciel rose, et la côte, là-bas, – que borde un étroit ruban d'eau plus blanche, – rose aussi, plus rose que la mer et que le ciel, avec de petites taches bleues, et des blancheurs subites qui, çà et là, étincellent vivement. Il faudrait le pinceau de Claude Monet pour exprimer cette clarté, cette légèreté, cette limpidité de rose.[269]

An artist with Monet's visual and painterly deftness can produce mixtures of pigment on his palette that closely replicate the subtlety and richness of nature's hues. As a way of suggesting the complete suffusion of the sea, sky, and shore with this sparkling pink color, Mirbeau resorts to using the word "rose" four times within a single sentence. Though an efficient form of emphasis, this repetition negates the distinctive tints of "rose" within the individual components of this seascape off the coast of Western France. Like Geffroy in *Pays d'ouest*, Mirbeau appropriates the terminology of painting to approximate some of these coloristic nuances. The shore assumes the most intense shade of pinkness with its mixture of little blue strokes ("de petites taches bleues") and sudden glimmers of whiteness ("des blancheurs subites"). But any assemblage of pictorial metaphors struggles to match the economy, directness, and comprehensiveness of Monet's brush. With just a few strokes, the painter can depict not only delicate variations of color but also the changing intensity of light itself. Monet's brush captures this brightness, lightness, and clarity of pink that evades Mirbeau's pen. The instantaneity and harmony suggested by the *enveloppe* of colored light observed both in nature and within Monet's canvases might surpass the grasp of words.

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[269] Mirbeau, "Notes de voyage," *Gil Blas*, 10 August 1886, 1.

A diversified review of Mirbeau's texts demonstrates an extensive history of a similar range of sentiments about the shortcomings of written language and the expressive advantages of painting over prose. His personal correspondence with Monet along with his published articles concerning the artist certainly provides no exception. When Mirbeau was heavily immersed in the drafting of his novel *Sébastien Roch* around February 1889, he sent the artist a letter conveying not only a related series of misgivings about writing but also his veneration for the medium of painting. Though he would prove himself wrong in the final account, Mirbeau sensed he had designed an unmanageable project for himself or perhaps even for an author of far superior intellectual gifts, "un livre, d'une difficulté peut-être insurmontable pour un homme de génie."[270] Dubious of the quality of the pages of *Sébastien Roch* he had drafted up to this point, he suffers from a prolonged state of artistic torture stemming from an inability to uncover language for encapsulating his experience: "Et quel atroce martyre, cette certitude où l'on est de ne rien faire qui vaille, le supplice de voir de belles choses au-dessus de soi, et de ne pouvoir saisir."[271] The sharpness of his eye had not waned, but his mind struggled to seize the words that would allow him to put on paper what he had seen in a satisfying manner. Mirbeau reports his full absorption in and devotion to "la recherche des phrases et des idées" about Monet, but he feels paralyzed within an endless loop of striking through and revising the chapters he already had written: "[J]e rature, je recommence, je reprends sans cesse les chapitres."[272] Mirbeau then makes a swift and unanticipated transition from the pain of writing to the perhaps unattainable promise of gratification in painting. In the very next sentence, he deeply laments that he had not chosen painting as the medium for portraying the object of his vision: "Naturellement, je ne fais pas de peinture, et c'est ce qui me navre le plus."[273] Bearing in mind his practice as an art critic in addition to his camaraderie with Monet and other artists, the medium understandably was never too distant from Mirbeau's thoughts.

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[270] Letter no. 26 to Monet, around the beginning of February 1889, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 72-74.

As he previously realized and admitted to Monet, a pursuit of painting would not necessarily yield a less dispiriting outcome than writing a novel. In a letter he had written to the artist during the previous summer of 1888, the critic acknowledged an abortive attempt at painting "une figure en plein air." By the end of his third session, he had spoiled his sketch in trying to refine it to a more finished state, and he punctured the canvas in a fit of rage: "Ça n'avait plus figure de rien."[274] Mirbeau resigned himself to his station as an author conceding that both the literary and visual arts guaranteed their inevitable share of disappointments and challenges: “Non, mon cher ami, je ne vais pas lâcher la littérature, car j’ai bien des déboires avec la peinture et je m’aperçois que l’une est aussi difficile que l’autre.”[275] This foray into painting offered no convincing reason for Mirbeau to abandon one set of tortures for another.

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[271] Ibid.
[272] Ibid.
[273] Ibid.
[274] Letter no. 25 to Monet, from the end of June 1888, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 69-71.

With his trials as an artist no more reassuring than his exploits as an author, it accordingly seemed ‘natural’ (“naturellement”) for Mirbeau not to pursue painting more seriously during the intervening period in spite of his dismay and discomfort with his progress as a novelist. If we return to the February 1889 letter from Casa Carola at Menton, we find expressive means eluding his grasp in painting as much as writing. Mirbeau feels similarly confounded in a search for an original subject and manner of painting in the presence of the brilliant light radiating from Monet’s canvases: “Et puis qu’est-ce que vous voulez que je peigne, en présence de cette admirable lumière que vous seul pouvez rendre.”[276] If Monet alone can render this prodigious quality of light in paint, could any other artist theoretically develop an original visual language for conveying the substance and effects of this indispensable animating element of nature? Perhaps not in Mirbeau’s hyperbolic formulation. Though phrased in complimentary terms, his dismissal of painting as a viable creative outlet for himself discloses some degree of an underlying friendly competitiveness with or mild envy of Monet. His insecurities regarding his intellectual and artistic capabilities in comparison to the painter extended to comparable diffidence in the realm of horticulture. During the following summer of 1890, Mirbeau pens another letter in which he includes an invitation for Monet to visit his new residence in Les Damps. The critic devotes the majority of his correspondence to agonizing over his continued misfortune with flowers and the consequently barren condition of his garden: “Venez donc, et choisissez votre jour. Je vous prouverai, clair comme le jour, que je suis aussi loin de vous, intellectuellement, que mon jardin du vôtre, parlant.”[277] [278] Monet’s gardening skills represented another dimension of talent in which Mirbeau felt the artist had bested him on the basis of his sensitivity to design and abundant creativity.

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[275] Ibid.

[276] Letter no. 26 in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 72-74.

Neither the critic himself nor his sympathetic colleagues place doubt in Mirbeau’s visual perspicuity in appreciating the light either directly emitted from nature or harmoniously infused into one of Monet’s canvases. A full translation of these sensations into words remains the impenetrable hurdle; a commensurate form of verbal expression appears forever beyond the author’s reach. In a reply to a letter from Jules Huret from the spring of 1891, Mirbeau reprimands the journalist for referring to him as a “*maître*” (Mirbeau’s emphasis): “Je ne suis qu’un pauvre balbutier de mots et d’idées, et ma seule qualité c’est d’admirer ce qui est beau dans l’art et dans la nature. Quant à l’exprimer, c’est autre chose, malheureusement. Mais il y a tant de gens qui n’admirent rien….”[279] When we take into account that Huret recently had embarked upon his influential *Enquête sur l’évolution littéraire* in March 1891, we could be tempted to accuse Mirbeau of feigning modesty in respect to his achievement as an author. Huret’s fluency with the modern French literary field lends credence to his designation of Mirbeau as “*maître*,” but we should not overlook or rebuke the significance of the author’s self-deprecatory identification as “un pauvre balbutier de mots et d’idées.” As implied by this letter, Mirbeau deemed his unwavering commitment to the celebration of the beautiful as worthy of emulation and as one of the most distinguishing features of his literature and art criticism. He also recognized the relative paucity of authors with enough competence to discern and admire anything of real aesthetic value in the world around them. That he might possess the linguistic facility to stammer a few meager words of praise or some exceedingly provisional ideas in front of a work of art already separated him from the majority of his colleagues. Only a “maître” of the highest order assumingly could aspire to transcend this rudimentary manner of representing visual beauty in nature and art with words, but this prospect remains tentative as well. Mirbeau frequently admits his pessimism about the possibility of elevating language to anything beyond words of adulation for “ce qui est beau.” In a satirical dialogue with a fictitious symbolist artist named ‘Kariste’ at Durand-Ruel’s 1895 exhibition of Monet’s *Rouen Cathedral* series, for example, the artist astounds Mirbeau with the unexpected irony of his revelation: “Ça! me dit-il, c’est tellement beau, c’est, vois-tu, tellement *autre* qu’il faut se taire.... Que veux-tu que je raconte, devant ça? devant ça qui est un prodige? Ça me renverse!”[280] With words falling short of the unfamiliar and arresting beauty of a painted image, silence indeed may remain the most appropriate and deferential alternative.

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[277] Letter no. 41 to Monet, from the middle of July 1890, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 97-98.

[278] In one of two surviving letters from Monet, we may infer the painter’s interest in the critic’s garden and the possibility of Mirbeau’s exaggeration of his inferiority: “J’ai bien envie de vous voir, et aussi votre jardin qui doit être déjà très beau.” See “Letter to Mirbeau,” 25 April 1892, L. 1154.

[279] See letter no. 871, “À Jules Huret,” from the middle of April 1891, in *Octave Mirbeau: Correspondance générale*, eds. Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet (Lausanne: Éditions l’âge d’homme, 2005), 2:380-381.

Mirbeau’s reservations about the capacity of “les mots, les mots” to represent or to augment a viewer-reader’s experience or understanding of a work of art leave him or any other authors who publish criticism in a precarious position. Providing further evidence of the sincerity Gsell attributes to him in the interview we have studied, Mirbeau in no way exempted himself from his reservations about the role of the critic and the perceived limitations of artwriting. A prime example of his critical self-awareness and candor occurs in a catalogue essay he wrote to accompany a 1910 exhibition of Félix Vallotton's paintings and prints: "Ce que je pense des critiques, je le pense de soi-même [*sic*], lorsqu'il m'arrive de vouloir expliquer une œuvre d'art."[281] [282] Underscoring the reflexive nature of the experience and reception of a painting or a sculpture, Mirbeau asserts that the damage of a critic's explanation does not end with the work of art itself. Detriment regrettably extends to the critic himself, the artist, and others, including readers or viewers: "Il n'y a pas de pire duperie: duperie envers soi-même, envers l'artiste, envers autrui."[283] The violence Mirbeau associates with imparting meaning to words in his interview with Gsell perhaps finds its most distasteful or dubious iteration in a critic's attempt to elucidate a painting or a sculpture. Explanation serves as the worst form of deception because the inherent simplicity and mystery of a work of art resist translation from the visual to the verbal: "C'est ["une œuvre d'art"] beaucoup plus simple et infiniment plus mystérieux."[284] A critic who believes anything to the contrary writes in a state of delusion. When a reader or viewer embraces a critic's explanation of a work of art, she becomes an unwitting collaborator in perpetuating this fiction of understanding and comprehensiveness. The maker and her object suffer from this transformation from image to text.

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[280] Mirbeau, “Ça et là,” *Le journal*, 12 May 1895, 1.

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[281] Mirbeau, "Sur M. Félix Vallotton," in *Catalogue de l'exposition Félix Vallotton* (Paris: Galerie Druet du 10 au 20 janvier 1910), n.p.

[282] I owe Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet a substantial debt of gratitude for their exhaustive documentation and analysis of Mirbeau's conception of the role of the critic. I was first exposed to this text and several others by means of their rigorous scholarship on Mirbeau. For two particularly thorough expositions on Mirbeau's attitudes and approach toward art criticism, see Michel, *Les combats d'Octave Mirbeau* (Paris: Annales littéraires de l'Université de Besançon, 1995), and "Préface: Mirbeau critique d'art," in *Combats esthétiques,* 1:9-36.

[283] Mirbeau, "Sur M. Félix Vallotton," n.p.

[284] Ibid.

A writer may adopt any number of literary modes or styles to address a work of art, including what Mirbeau refers to as 'rêveries.' However splendidly they may demonstrate an author's imaginative faculties, these writings reveal little about an artist's concerns.[285] The problem resides in the incompatibility of the syntagms of visual and verbal language, especially when words are tasked with explaining the intrinsic content of art: "Mais démontrer techniquement, ou poétiquement, sans obscurité – ce qui n'est pas démontrable par des chiffres ou par des mots – la beauté d'un accord de couleurs et d'un balancement de lignes, qui souvent sont le sujet même, le vrai sujet d'un tableau."[286] Any conceivable ordering of words or numbers falls short of a meaningful substitution for formal and decorative elements – essentially "le vrai sujet d'un tableau." Resembling Maurice Denis's famous opening dictum in his "Définition du néo-traditionnisme," Mirbeau's statement prioritizes the beauty derived from the arrangement of lines and colors as painting's fundamental subject.[287] Whether a critic's text assumes more poetic or technical leanings, its words can undermine her intent to clarify for a reader or a viewer the formal harmonies and rhythms within a picture's composition. Our earlier exposure to Mirbeau's letter to Jules Huret and his satirical dialogue with the fictive painter Kariste likely allows us to portend a suitable alternative to an obfuscating and misleading explanation of a work of art: "Le mieux serait d'admirer ce qu'on est capable d'admirer, et, ensuite, de se taire…ah!, oui, de se taire. Mais nous ne pouvons pas nous taire."[288] Admiration followed by silence spares a critic from engaging in duplicity, but

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[285] Ibid.

[286] Ibid.

[287] Asserting the precedence of the formal and decorative qualities of painting as its means of expression, Denis writes: "Se rappeler qu'un tableau – avant d'être un cheval de bataille, une femme nue, ou une quelconque anecdote – est essentiellement une surface plane recouverte de couleurs en un certain ordre assemblées." See Maurice Denis, "Définition du néo-traditionnisme," in *Théories: Du symbolisme et de Gauguin vers un nouveau ordre classique*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Bibliothèque de l'*Occident*, 1913), p. 1.

[288] Mirbeau, "Sur M. Félix Vallotton."

Mirbeau admits these constraints on the critic may prove unsustainable for "irréparables bavards."[289] The mitigating path ironically or paradoxically entails further mystification of a reader: "Alors nous ne disons que des choses incompréhensibles, pour faire croire que nous les avons comprises…"[290] Understanding comes through vision and experience – not through a critic's exposition in words.

The exhibition of Monet's *London* series in 1904 occasions another one of Mirbeau's more pointed and vitriolic discussions on art criticism and the responsibilities of the critic. Confronting the exhibition *Vues de la Tamise à Londres* at Galeries Durand-Ruel intensifies his awareness of the overwhelming ineffectuality of criticism. Having just experienced Monet's dazzling ensemble of *London* paintings, Mirbeau launches his catalogue essay with a blistering attack on those who assume the ludicrous posture of the authoritative art critic:

> Je n'ai jamais si bien compris qu'aujourd'hui devant cette extraordinaire exposition de M. Claude Monet, le ridicule souverain, la complète inutilité d'être ce personnage, improbable d'ailleurs, et si étrangement falot, et pourtant si malfaisant, que nous appelons en zoologie, un critique d'art.[291]

Though Monet's *London* series may decisively render a critic a bizarre and useless entity, Mirbeau's aforementioned text on Vallotton along with the statement at hand still warn of a writer's residual potential to inflict harm upon a work of art. While a critic may assay an explanation, the process of writing about art objects tends to produce nonsensical results by and large: "Oh! Les sottises, le plus souvent comiques, mais parfois douloureuses, qu'inspirent les œuvres d'art…."[292] Criticism subjects a painting to a heap of fatuous interpretations ranging from comedic to downright painful distortions of its meaning and effects.

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[289] Ibid.

[290] Ibid.

[291] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," in *Vues de la Tamise à Londres* (1902-1904), 1.

[292] Ibid.

Mirbeau directs a special reserve of spleen toward a "si malfaisant" critic like Charles Morice. A leading proponent of symbolist art and literary theories, Morice had drawn his ire for dismissing the impressionist painter Camille Pissarro in Mirbeau's words as, "un lourd et vulgaire imbécile, un paysan grossier, d'une désolante inintellectualité."[293] '*Le Père Pissarro*' had garnered a considerable renewal of attention in the art press as of late due in part to his passing in November 1903. Perhaps to coincide with a memorial retrospective at Galeries Durand-Ruel in April 1904, Morice published a lengthy article in *Mercure de France* in which he in part evaluated the painter's reception in the criticism of Mirbeau, Geffroy, and others sympathetic to Pissarro's art.[294] He dedicated the other half to Whistler's art. Morice had taken issue with the elder impressionist's landscapes for their supposed exclusion of thought; the artist had focused too narrowly and obsessively on painting what he saw: "S'il a des pensées, devant la 'campagne' il les oublie. Son désir unique, despotique et exclusif, est de rendre ce qu'il voit comme il le voit…"[295] The absence of thought exhibited in Pissarro's paintings lessened or eliminated a critic's need to entertain philosophical considerations in respect to his art: "[I]l est tout à fait superflu de nous parler de philosophie à propos de Pissarro, car il n'y en a point dans son œuvre."[296] Though Morice appears to consider an omission of any philosophical underpinnings as a defective feature of Pissarro's landscapes, he offers words of praise for the lack of pretension or vanity displayed in the painter's ambitions:

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[293] Ibid., 2.

[294] Charles Morice, "Deux mortes: Whistler, Pissarro," *Mercure de France* n.s. 50, no. 4 (April 1904): 72-97.

[295] Ibid., 93.

[296] Ibid.

> Pissarro n'a pas le temps d'être vaniteux. Il est trop occupé de son désir de donner un double à la nature, à *sa* nature, à la nature telle qu'il la voit (original emphasis). Ce désir absorbe tous se forces et tous ces instants. Ce désir, qui est son motif de vivre, a fait de lui un questionneur perpétuel, – un questionneur muet.[297]

If we side with Mirbeau's interpretation of Morice's article, a certain degree of bewilderment or irony informs the symbolist critic's remarks. Morice's criticism converts the virtues Mirbeau attributes to Pissarro's art into fatal flaws. Pissarro's all-consuming desire to replicate *his* impressions of nature in paint poses a problem for a critic seeking more theoretical or ideological footing within a work of art. As "un questionneur muet," Pissarro constrains the scope of dialogue; a critic can discuss little beyond the truthfulness of the painter's vision and representation of nature.

Morice's demand for Pissarro's art to resolve social, moral, philosophical, or psychological problems strikes Mirbeau as a particularly unreasonable criterion to impose upon an artist: "[Les paysages de Pissarro] n'avaient, en réalité, résolu aucun des grands problèmes …, dont l'âme des penseurs s'angoisse, et qu'il appartient, sans doute, aux peintres selon le cœur de M. Charles Morice, de résoudre intégralement…"[298] Morice's belittling of Pissarro on the basis of his intensive study of nature ("son désir unique, despotique et exclusif") baffles Mirbeau. After all, if the great thinkers of the ages have agonized over monumental issues without formulating any definitive answers, why should it fall upon Pissarro to offer solutions for them by way of his paintings? When critics like Morice turn to a painting as a pretext for expatiating upon a far-reaching societal, intellectual, or metaphysical quandary, they reveal their ignorance and disdain of nature and its representation in a work of art. Their criticism only betrays their gross incomprehension of art's potential to frame and amplify nature's beauty for a viewer:

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[297] Ibid., 94.

[298] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," in *Vues de la Tamise à Londres*, 2.

> Et qu'est-ce que vous pourriez bien répondre à un homme, qui comme M. Charles Morice, ne comprend absolument rien aux beautés de la nature, se vante même, avec un orgueil joyeux, de n'y rien comprendre et s'en va, proclamant qu'un artiste n'est réellement un artiste qu'à la condition qu'il haïsse la nature, qu'il tourne à la nature un dos méprisant et symbolique, et qu'il cherche, en dehors de la nature, dans la Surnature et l'Extranature, une inspiration plus noble et plus inaccessible.[299]

A critic with Morice's foolhardy orientation obliges an artist to profess a comparable hatred of nature. In case there were any ambiguities about the specific target of his enmity, Mirbeau includes "symbolique" as another integral feature of the artists who conform with Morice's standards. None other than a symbolist painter would turn a scornful and *symbolic* back toward nature (my emphasis). The art of a painter who neglects nature and finds inspiration in more remote or abstruse ideals can be more easily assimilated within a discourse located "dans la Surnature et l'Extranature." Mirbeau abandons hope of a constructive debate with men like M. Charles Morice. These critics' disregard for nature has deluded them into the belief that they can understand and explain a work of art through the lens of philosophical idealism or some other extra-painterly system of beliefs.

At the beginning of his invective against Morice's principles, Mirbeau designates painting as the particular medium that most blatantly exposes the abuses of criticism: "L'œuvre d'art – et je parle ici de la peinture – a ce mystère … qu'elle fait monter, tout d'un coup, avec force, à la surface, ce qui grouille et fermente de bêtises vaseuses au fond de l'esprit de celui qui s'est institué, par métier, son exégète et son juge."[300] Let us continue to observe Mirbeau's lead in applying his subsequent ideas about a work of art primarily to painting in the context of this essay. Acting like a shiny mirror, a painting seductively attracts and swiftly betrays the misguided thoughts of those impertinent minds that allege to interpret and judge it. In Mirbeau's way of thinking, the lines and colors conveying a painter's impressions of nature speak directly to a viewer's eyes and thwart an elaboration of their mysteries in words. When we view landscapes by Pissarro or Monet, we relate to them on the level of feeling. Our eyes are struck by the bold materiality of their paint. The forcefulness of their touch lends immediacy to the sensations recorded on their canvases.

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[299] Ibid., 4.

[300] Ibid., 2.

Morice runs into trouble precisely because his theories and approach to criticism do not provide any clarification of the terms through which we experience and relate to a work of art: "N'en déplaise à M. Charles Morice, la vérité est que l'œuvre d'art ne s'explique pas et qu'on ne l'explique pas. L'œuvre d'art se sent et on la sent, et inversement; rien de plus."[301] A painting assumes a life of its own within Mirbeau's phrasing. Mirbeau's use of the pronominal verbs *s'expliquer* and *se sentir* endows art with agency or vitality and heightens our awareness of the reciprocal relationship between a work and its viewers. The work acts upon us as viewers, and we act upon it. A viewer and a painting elicit and reflect a range of sensations in tandem. We discover and project dimensions of ourselves within a painting's mirror. A work of art offers no explanation of itself, and a critic's attempt to provide one would destroy the reflection.

Mirbeau's notion of a dynamic work of art endlessly capable of generating and receiving its own sensations recalls Jules Laforgue's description of the fluid relationship between an impressionist painter and the landscape motif in front of her eyes: "L'objet et le sujet sont donc irrémédiablement mouvants, insaisissables et insaissisants."[302] The ineffability, mutability, and particularity of these feelings complicate a translation of an experience of a painting into words; our sensations change with the flicker of an eye. To quote Laforgue again, "Les éclairs d'identité entre le sujet et l'objet, c'est le propre du génie. Chercher à codifier les éclairs est une plaisanterie d'école."[303] A static explanation of this perpetually evolving dialogue between a viewer and a work of art amounts to a trivial and artificial academic exercise.

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[301] Ibid., 3.

A critic should proceed from feeling and only then with great delicacy and restraint in her writing. As we already have gleaned from analyzing a number of his statements, Mirbeau maintains that words add virtually nothing to our comprehension of a work of art. They instead tend to disturb the beauty and purity of the emotions received through our eyes: "[P]aroles et commentaires n'y peuvent rien ajouter, et qu'ils risquent, en s'y mêlant, d'en altérer l'émotion simple, silencieuse et délicieuse."[304] A line or color from a painter's brush stirs a sensation within a viewer's eye. In order to describe these emotions, a critic detaches herself from the visual realm and searches for an abstract or synthetic concept as a rather poor equivalent to the eye's intuition: "On ne professe pas qu'une ligne est belle et pourquoi elle est belle. Elle est belle…parce qu'elle est belle. Il n'y a pas autre chose à en dire."[305] Recognition and celebration of the *beauty* of a line is the critic's proper and safest end. Explanation of the combination and coordination of pictorial elements tarnishes "l'émotion simple, silencieuse et délicieuse"; no words will assist in determining the origins or reasons for this feeling.

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[302] Laforgue, "L'impressionnisme," rpt. in *Œuvres complètes: Édition chronologique intégrale*, 3:333.
[303] Ibid.
[304] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," in *Vues de la Tamise à Londres*, 3.
[305] Ibid.

Mirbeau limits a critic's explicatory function and potential to a most general accounting of a painting's contents: "D'un tableau, on peut dire encore: 'Il représente à droite un groupe de femmes vêtues de blanc, et, dans le fond, sous un ciel bleu, une forêt bleu d'automne.' Ici s'arrête le pouvoir d'explication du critique."[306] This dry cataloguing of a painting's subject minimizes any threat to the integrity of a viewer's apprehension of the beauty of a work of art. Adopting this bland method of description severely restricts the critic's arsenal for accessing and inspiring a reader's imagination. Without her own firsthand experience with the paintings, how is a reader supposed to visualize the contents and feel the emotions engendered by Monet's art? If a critic observes the narrow strictures Mirbeau places upon her manner of describing, what is the point of reading her text? Provided with such a minimal description, a reader arguably could have unlimited reign in imagining the dimensions, contents, and effects of a work of art, but she might quickly tire of engaging this disinterested mode of critical address.

In similar fashion to his later essay on Vallotton in 1910, Mirbeau acknowledges the self-imposed predicament he has designed as a critic charged with writing about the paintings of an artist he so clearly admires:

> Alors, me voilà mis par moi-même en étrange posture, devant l'exposition de M. Claude Monet. Et, si je sens, en thèse générale, l'impuissance du critique d'art à expliquer une œuvre d'art, n'est-ce point aussi et surtout que je sens bien davantage mon insuffisance personnelle pour parler autrement que par des cris d'admiration de ces œuvres impérissables, d'une si hardie, si nouvelle et si énorme beauté.[307]

His dedication of nearly half of his essay to arguing for the inadequacy and limits of a critic's power to explain a work of art could come across as a transparent rhetorical strategy either for padding pages with journalistic boilerplate or for obviating the risks associated with a more extended analysis or interpretation of the specific contents of Monet's series. Mirbeau's frank admission of a personal deficiency ("mon insuffisance personnelle") lends credibility to the prospect that his inclination to expound at such length about the impotence of art criticism represents more than an expedient or disingenuous maneuver. Perhaps the boldness, freshness, and enormity of Monet's *London* series legitimately outstripped the language he or any other critic had at his disposal. Faced with the unfamiliarity and sensorial magnitude of Monet's ensemble of thirty-six paintings, Mirbeau intuited that criticism's expressive means would preclude much beyond "les cris d'admiration." His doubt, however, did not impede him from subsequently interpreting Monet's series with the remaining half of his text.

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[306] Ibid.

[307] Ibid., 5.

Though "les cris d'admiration" figured prominently into all of his essays on the artist, Mirbeau never recoiled from efforts to account for and to describe the effects within Monet's paintings despite his lingering reservations about the critic's explicatory and descriptive capabilities in relation to works of art. Instead of deliberating upon individual works of art or thematically related groupings of canvases in the case of Monet's series, Mirbeau admittedly tended to speak more broadly and evocatively about the painter's oeuvre and his pictorial aims. His essays regularly make minimal reference to specific paintings, and their mention often comes in passing. The critic's lengthiest text on the painter serves as a solid case in point. Written for the catalogue accompanying the massive Monet-Rodin retrospective of 1889, this essay identifies a total of three individual works within the span of roughly twenty pages: *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe, La cueillette des fleurs* (probably *Femmes au jardin*?), and *La femme verte* (i.e., *Camille* or *La femme à la robe verte*) [W. 63, 67, and 65; figs. 8, 28, and 29][308] [309] The critic devotes just a few sentences to explaining how *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* and *La cueillette des fleurs* serve as transitional works that anticipate Monet's developments in *plein air* painting. He lists *La femme verte* solely to convey his regret about its omission from the retrospective but provides no additional commentary about this painting. Mirbeau's preface for the *Vues de la Tamise à Londres* exhibition catalogue and his 1891 article on the artist for Durand-Ruel's recently launched review *L'art dans les deux mondes* represent two notable exceptions to this more impressionistic or broad-brush approach to writing about Monet's paintings.[310] The latter resembles the Geffroy article examined in Part One of this study in that it blends together Mirbeau's more customary panoramic presentation of Monet's art with extended considerations of individual paintings. Since the 1891 article in *L'art dans les deux mondes* reads almost like a hybrid of two different descriptive and interpretive strategies, we will employ it as our case study in our close analysis of a visual impulse within Mirbeau's criticism.

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[308] See footnote no. 248 for information pertaining to the Monet-Rodin catalogue, including the preceding March 1889 article from which this essay originated.

In his examination of Mirbeau's polemics in a diversity of arenas, including but not limited to conceptions of the self, social justice, journalism, literature, the theatre, the visual arts, and words in general, Pierre Michel explains how context and audience may have influenced the orientation and scope of his art criticism:

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[309] Note that none of these three early paintings were exhibited as part of the Monet-Rodin retrospective. Mirbeau's reference to *La cueillette des fleurs* remains somewhat of a mystery since the Wildenstein catalogue raisonné does not include a painting with a remotely similar title from the 1860s. The work that corresponds most closely to Mirbeau's discussion of *La cueillette des fleurs* is *Femmes au jardin* (W. 67) of 1866. This discrepancy in titles is not altogether surprising. Mirbeau mistakenly indicates in the same sentence that Monet first showed *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* from 1865-66 at "l'Exposition des Champs Élysées" in 1864. In order not to condemn Mirbeau's inaccuracies too harshly, I second Steven Levine's assertion on this text within *Monet and His Critics*: "Whatever Mirbeau may have lacked in the methodological meticulousness necessary to the historian, he more than compensated in the concision and imagination necessary to the critic" (p. 103). For further analysis of this essay and its prototype in *Le figaro*, see Levine, *Monet and His Critics*, pp. 98-116.

[310] See "Claude Monet," *L'art dans les deux mondes*, 7 March 1891, pp. 184-186.

> D’une part, il écrit dans la grande presse, et s’adresse à un vaste public, en particulier dans *Le journal*, dont le tirage avoisine le million d’exemplaires; et il ne se contente pas d’une seconde ou troisième page, comme c’est souvent le cas de la rubrique artistique: ses articles paraissent presque toujours en Premier-Paris. Ils ont, de ce fait, un écho considérable, qui va bien au-delà du petit monde des artistes et écrivains d’avant-garde….Mais le prix à payer, pour toucher le grand public, c’est de renoncer aux explications formelles: rejetant le rôle de théoricien, il se cantonne dans celui de propagandiste, d’évangéliste de l’impressionnisme.[311]

Writing front-page articles for newspapers with millions of subscribers like *Le journal* meant that Mirbeau’s criticism reached a multitude of readers well outside of avant-garde literary and artistic circles. As Michel has noted, painters including Monet seem to have appreciated how the wide circulation of the critic’s articles could significantly expand and improve their artistic reputation in the greater public.[312] In order for his texts to appeal to more general audiences, Mirbeau ostensibly needed to make concessions in his style of artwriting and principal areas of inquiry. He sacrificed more abstruse or specialized literary and artistic jargon along with more substantive explanations of formal and compositional features of works of art in favor of concision and clarity. The public could more readily understand and be persuaded of an artist’s gifts through adulatory words or ‘propaganda’ than by way of technical or philosophical arguments.

Practical considerations undeniably factor into the advancement of Mirbeau’s theories about the inexplicability of a work of art and the imprecision of words in general, but the pervasiveness of these ideas in his writings suggests the depth of his commitment to them. In other words, logistical constraints may justify or motivate some of his attitudes and approaches toward art criticism, but Mirbeau applies similar standards when parameters such as the target audience, type of publication, or length of the text do not necessitate them. As we already have seen, Mirbeau’s reservations about the role of the critic and his thoughts on the limitations of language in encapsulating experience bleed into his private correspondence with Monet and inform other facets of his literary production. The critic also maintained relative consistency in his style of language, emphasis on "les cris d'admiration," and modes of description from these front-page stories in popular newspapers to exhibition catalogue essays and journal articles intended for more art-savvy audiences. His inclusion of more focused discussions of individual works of art within these niche-oriented texts represents an important departure, but his simultaneous reliance upon more evocative or panoramic descriptions in this setting preserves a sense of continuity from one critical platform to another.

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[311] Pierre Michel, *Les combats d’Octave Mirbeau* (Paris: Annales littéraires de l’Université de Besançon, 1995), 132.

[312] Ibid.

Assessing the extent of Monet's agreement with Mirbeau's thoughts about the role of the critic and his manner of artwriting remains problematic due to the scarcity and obliqueness of corroborating textual evidence. We might be persuaded of the level of Monet's concurrence with Mirbeau more in terms of deeds than words. As we learned in our preceding exploration of the Gsell interview, Monet presented Mirbeau *Les oliviers à Bordighera* and *La cabane du douanier* as a demonstration of gratitude for two of the critic's articles.[313] Finding elaboration on Monet's sentiments in public and private statements presents inevitable difficulties. Though nearly half of the letters Mirbeau sent to Monet survive, the Wildenstein catalogue raisonné includes just two pieces of correspondence that the painter addressed to the critic.[314] Neither of these two letters focuses on Monet's reaction to particular texts or specific ideas within Mirbeau's criticism, but both date from early 1892 – a rather fallow period in terms of articles pertaining to the painter or any other artists among his cohort.[315] In the first of the two extant letters sent to Mirbeau, Monet expressed his disappointment regarding silence on Mirbeau's end in terms of personal news and publications: "Vous ne me dites rien de ce que vous faites, voilà un siècle que je n'ai rien lu de vous. Et ce roman et cette pièce, j'espère que tout cela va bientôt voir le jour."[316] [317] When Monet wrote this letter in the middle of January 1892, Mirbeau had not published any art criticism about an individual artist since his essay on Eugène Carrière from April 1891.[318] The snippet Wildenstein includes in his catalogue raisonné from the second letter in April 1892 conveys Monet's curiosity about the progress of Mirbeau's garden, so it offers even less assistance to us in terms of our present concern. Though we can infer the painter's respect for Mirbeau as a gardener and author from these two letters, we receive little insight into the particular reasons for Monet's interest in reading fresh art criticism and novels beyond friendship and perhaps a self-serving desire for new publicity and promotion of his own work. If we were to locate more pieces of correspondence sent from the artist, perhaps we could obtain a clearer picture of the impetus behind Monet's thirst for more publications from Mirbeau.

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[313] See footnote no. 248.

[314] As Michel and Nivet report in the foreword to their volume of Mirbeau's correspondence with Monet, approximately half of the critic's letters to the painter have gone missing: "La correspondance que nous publions est malheureusement incomplète et à sens unique. Incomplète parce que nous n'avons retrouvé qu'environ la moitié des lettres de Mirbeau à Monet qui ont dû exister." For more detailed discussion concerning the whereabouts and survival of letters to and from the painter, see *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, p. 29.

Two additional documents serve as partial but far from definitive means of overcoming this unfortunate lacuna of correspondence from Monet to Mirbeau. The first piece of evidence is a letter from Mirbeau in response to one Monet had forwarded with words of appreciation for the critic's article in *Le figaro* in March 1889.[319] Though

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[315] See "Letter to Mirbeau," 14 January 1892, L. 1130, and "Letter to Mirbeau," 25 April 1892, L. 1154. To complicate matters, Wildenstein reproduces only a single sentence from L. 1154.

[316] "Letter to Mirbeau," 14 January 1892, L. 1130.

[317] I surmise that "ce roman" refers to *Dans le ciel*. Mirbeau began publishing this book in serial form in *L'écho de Paris* in its 20 September 1892 issue.

[318] See Mirbeau, "Eugène Carrière," *L'écho de Paris*, 28 April 1891, p. 1.

[319] Letter no. 29 to Monet, around 25 March 1889, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 77-78.

Mirbeau begins this article by sharing his regret for being unable to provide a detailed review of the recent exhibition at Boussod, Valadon et Compagnie in the article, viewing these new paintings had spurred him to write it. Instead of recounting "l'étonnante diversité et la nouveauté hardie des sensation sensations exprimées" of the paintings included in the show, Mirbeau elects to convince the public of the genius of "[ce] très rare, [ce] très puissant artiste qu'est Claude Monet."[320] Echoing Geffroy's ambitions in the first half of the 1887 essay studied in Part One, Mirbeau's article sought to correct the record on Monet's artistic goals, inspiration, training, processes, and techniques. Since this text became the foundation for Mirbeau's essay for the Monet-Rodin exhibition, the artist must have held it in particularly high esteem and expressed positive sentiments about it in his now missing letter.

The reply we have from Mirbeau perhaps provides more of a barometer on the critic's (lack of) regard for his own work than an explanation of why or to what extent Monet endorsed Mirbeau's criticism. In response to Monet's letter of gratitude, Mirbeau claims that the artist owes him nothing and modestly characterizes his article as "une œuvre utile et juste."[321] The conclusion of Mirbeau's reply is even more condemnatory in terms of its revelation of the critic's frustrations:

> Ne me dites pas que l'article sur vous était bien fait. Non, il était stupide. Il n'y avait pas le quart des choses que j'aurais voulu y mettre. Mais je me rattraperai, soyez-en sûr. Et je médite une grande étude, qui sera, je pense, joliment tapée, celle-là.[322]

Although Mirbeau's response indicates the artist viewed the critic's article as well conceived, we still might have a less oblique understanding were we to locate the specific contents of Monet's initial letter. Whether or not Mirbeau believed he eliminated the stupidities and rectified the incompleteness in the ensuing essay for the Monet-Rodin retrospective remains cryptic as well. As Michel and Nivet suggest in their explanatory notes to this letter, the "joliment tapée" study the critic envisions was *not* the essay for the Monet-Rodin exhibition. Monet and the art public would have to wait until the 1891 article in *L'art dans les deux mondes* that we soon will analyze in the next section.[323]

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[320] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," *Le Figaro*, 10 March 1889, 1.

[321] Letter no. 29 to Monet, around 25 March 1889, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 77-78.

[322] Ibid.

Our final piece of evidence supplying some indication of Monet's views on Mirbeau's criticism occurs in a letter the artist had sent to Gustave Geffroy in the early days of May 1912 pertaining to the impending exhibition of his *Venice* series.[324] Monet begins his letter desperately seeking news from Geffroy about the health of their dear friend and former Prime Minister George Clemenceau.[325] The artist quickly transitions to confiding his sense of dread concerning the opening of his show at Galerie Bernheim-Jeune toward the tail end of the month. Fearing he had irreparably damaged the few redeeming qualities of these paintings with his modifications in the studio, Monet divulges additional qualms about the exhibition catalogue preface and its potential to inflate the merit of his supposedly underwhelming *Venice* series:

> Fénéon m'avait écrit [de m'adresser] soit à vous ou à Mirbeau, lequel tout justement à Giverny, je lui ai communiqué la lettre, certain qu'il ne se pourrait charger de cela, vu son état, mais il a paru y tenir et vouloir faire l'effort de la faire, ce qui me touche certainement, mais que je redoute en même temps. Il va porter aux nues des choses qui ne le méritent pas, tandis qu'avec vous, j'eusse été plus à l'aise pour vous prier d'être sobre d'éloges.[326]

With the expectation that Mirbeau's declining health would deter the critic from accepting this undertaking, Monet appears to have solicited an essay from him primarily as a sympathetic and deferential gesture toward his ailing friend. Mirbeau's desire to write the preface in spite of his weakened condition had moved Monet, but the artist fears the outcome due to the critic's penchant for hyperbole. If Monet had felt more confident about the virtues of the *Venice* series, would Mirbeau's tendency to elevate his paintings to the heavens ("porter aux nues") have concerned the artist? We cannot say with any level of certainty whether Mirbeau's lofty words of praise for Monet's art had caused apprehension in other contexts. Though Monet confesses his preference for the assurance of Geffroy's more tempered adulatory words under these circumstances, we lack any preceding evidence of disapproval or anxiety relating to Mirbeau's criticism. Fate would have it that the critic managed to complete his preface – his final essay on the artist.[327] We will revisit this essay to examine one of its most lyrical passages in our discussion of divide between the hand and eye in the final section of Part Two.

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[323] See footnote no. 10, p. 78 in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*.
[324] See "Letter to Geffroy," 2 May 1912, L. 2007.
[325] Clemenceau had recently undergone an operation on his prostate.
[326] "Letter to Geffroy," 2 May 1912, L. 2007.

In a letter he sent to the artist in advance of his March 1889 article in *Le figaro*, Mirbeau conveys a desire to write a text derived from everything Monet's paintings had suggested to him: "Je tâcherai qu'il vous plaise, c'est-à-dire que je tâcherai d'exprimer tout ce que vos toiles me suggèrent."[328] As we already have seen in the letter that followed the publication of this article, Mirbeau appeared dissatisfied with the results of his effort despite Monet's approval. Mirbeau's more evocative presentation of Monet in this article could stem from an underlying skepticism about his ability to describe the feelings that specific paintings in the exhibition at Boussod et Valadon had inspired within him. We alternatively could interpret Mirbeau's attempt to offer a panoramic view of Monet's paintings in a more positive light as a literary or rhetorical strategy that aims to parallel the linguistic richness and capaciousness of the artist's canvases.

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[327] Mirbeau, *Claude Monet: "Venise"* (Paris: Bernheim-Jeune et Compagnie, 1912), n.p.

[328] Letter no. 27 to Monet, around 25 March 1889, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 75-76.

Beginning with Mirbeau's very first article solely dedicated to Monet in the politically conservative newspaper *La France*, the critic foregrounds the expressive advantages the artist had cultivated within the medium of painting. Monet distinguishes himself through the eloquence ("l'éloquence") of his art:

> L'éloquence caractérise le talent de Claude Monet, une éloquence claire, forte, harmonique, qui va, roulant ses phrases cadencées et ses sonorités magnifiques, comme une symphonie de Beethoven. Il a rendu ce que les Japonais seuls avaient pu faire jusqu'ici, et ce qui semblait un secret perdu, l'impalpable, l'insaisissable de la nature, c'est-à-dire ce qui est son âme, la pensée de son cerveau et le battement de son cœur.[329]

The clarity, vigor, and harmony embodied within Monet's manner of expression produces the sort of comprehensive and multisensory effects we associate with symphonic music. Matching the talents of a genius composer like Beethoven, Monet arranges a series of fluid rhythms and melodies, but his rolling phrases do not consist of musical notes. His combination of colors and brushstrokes allows him to represent the hidden secrets of nature that elude all artists except those of Japanese descent. The subtlety and fluency of his expression enable him to reveal the ineffable links between nature and the human soul. Monet seamlessly transfers the most intangible and imperceptible elements of nature into art; his images convey the thoughts in his mind and the beating of his heart. He depicts body and spirit upon the canvas. Monet's eloquence allows him to induce an array of sensations from the visual to the auditory to the olfactory within a viewer's imagination. His paintings of flowers, for instance, not only delight the eyes with their radiant color and freshness but also preserve the living essence of these delicate blossoms – their glorious yet evanescent perfume: "Monet a su aussi dérober aux fleurs leur éclat, leur délicate fraîcheur, cette chose vivant et inexprimable qui est en elles – le parfum – et qui désespère l'artiste."[330] Other artists might become stymied in their pursuit of the means to evoke the fragrance of flowers and other intangible and impalpable facets of nature, but Monet manages to describe the indescribable ("l'inexprimable") through poignancy and fluidity of his brush.

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[329] Mirbeau, "Notes sur l'art: Claude Monet," *La France*, 21 November 1884, 1.

While Mirbeau believes Monet has expanded the boundaries of what a work of art can express through his painterly eloquence, preceding critics have reproved the artist for his incomplete and sketchy manner of rendering nature. In his catalogue essay for the Monet-Rodin retrospective, Mirbeau seeks to invalidate the common refrain of conservative critics about the lack of finish in his paintings: "On a dit, tout récemment, de M. Claude Monet, qu'il ne rendait de la nature que des aspects sommaires et que 'cela n'était vraiment pas suffisant.'"[331] The critic detects great irony in these indictments considering that Monet "a poussé le plus loin la recherche de l'expression, non seulement dans le domaine du visible, mais dans le domaine de l'invisible ce que n'avait fait, avant lui, aucun peintre européen."[332] Monet's relentless and peerless pursuit of depicting not only what the eye can see but also sensations well beyond the realm of vision defines the core of the impressionist painter's achievement. The eloquence and complexity of Monet's expressive powers become even more explicit when they are compared with what an author can accomplish with words:

> Si l'on compare les tons d'un peintre aux phrases d'un écrivain, les tableaux aux livres, on peut affirmer que personne n'exprima autant d'idées que M. Claude Monet, avec une plus abondante richesse de vocables; que, malgré la franchise, parfois un peu rude, de son métier, personne n'analysa avec plus de soin, d'intelligence et de pénétration, avec plus de détails, le caractère des choses et la vivante apparence des figures.[333]

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[330] Ibid.

[331] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet" in *Claude Monet-A. Rodin* (Paris: Galerie Georges Petit, 1889), 24.

[332] Ibid., 24-25.

[333] Ibid., 25.

According to Mirbeau, Monet's pictorial language has an economy and an opulence to it that far surpasses a writer's means of signification. A single juxtaposition of tones can communicate more ideas than a group of sentences; an individual canvas can encapsulate a more insightful level of thought than an entire voluminous novel. Monet's colors and brushstrokes form linguistic units ("vocables") of a far superior intensity and profundity than words. The critic acknowledges that Monet's technique may sometimes come across as a bit rough or harsh, but the occasional coarseness of his stroke facilitates rather than impedes the depth and intelligence of his analysis. Occasional coarseness or roughness in the painter's *facture* testifies to his range and articulateness with the brush. He expresses the most intimate dimensions of nature through the discernment afforded by his analytical eye. The summary quality of Monet's execution in no way connotes carelessness. The diversity, liveliness, and expressiveness of his marks and palette animate the figures and objects represented within them.

Having absorbed the implications of Monet's expressive sovereignty, we might be inclined to forego reading art criticism – especially those texts with his paintings as their object of interest. Mirbeau allows for some exceptions to his generally pessimistic outlook on the prospects of art criticism. Gustave Geffroy ranks among those authors who have managed to surmount the difficulties of writing about a work of art. In an 1892 review of Geffroy's first volume of *La vie artistique*, Mirbeau concedes the existence of critics who can aspire to rival even the eloquence of Monet's painting with their words: "Il y a des exceptions; il y en a même d'illustres et de charmantes.... M. Gustave Geffroy est de ceux-là."[334] Geffroy along with other distinguished and persuasive critics overcome the obstacles imposed by their medium by prioritizing the immediacy of a personal experience of nature over its representation in a work of art, feeling over intellectual abstractions, and individual creativity over judging the creations of others: "Avant de regarder des œuvres d'art, M. Gustave Geffroy a regardé la nature; et il en a senti, avec quelle aiguë et noble pitié, toute la tristesse, toute la misère et tout la beauté; avant de décrire les œuvres des autres, il a écrit des œuvres à lui…."[335] An intense study of nature sharpens the critic's vision, and it trains his eye to relate to a work of art through feeling. Before works of art moved his soul, Geffroy experienced an entire range of sensations within nature with compassion and empathy. He acquired a frame of reference and language to describe the creations of others through the trials of writing his own novels and plays. In short, a good critic such as Geffroy embraces the procedures of an artist; he acts like a maker rather than a theoretician in the preparation and production of his criticism. Similar to an impressionist painter, Geffroy hones his capacity to perceive, evoke, and measure beauty and pathos both through direct contact with nature and through conceiving his own literary works of art.

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[334] Mirbeau, "Gustave Geffroy," *L'écho de Paris*, 13 December 1892, 1.

Geffroy's reliance upon personal creation, feeling, and experience as fundamental tenets of his criticism engendered his unparalleled capacity to describe a work of art: "Aucun ne sait décrire un tableau comme lui…."[336] By importing an artist's sensibility into criticism, Geffroy develops a form of descriptive language that resembles a painter's expressive means and encourages us to respond to in a similar manner. In a subsequent review of Geffroy's third volume of *La vie artistique*, Mirbeau urges us to read his friend's compilation of criticism as if we were looking at a beautiful painting: "Il faut le [*La vie artistique*] lire comme on regarde une très belle toile, et laisser courir son esprit entre les lignes charmeresses, de même que, entre les arabesque des toile aimées…."[337] Geffroy's criticism essentially transforms reading into an act of viewing. The seductive lines of his prose approximate the effects generated from a painting's graceful arabesques. Geffroy can describe a work of art like no one else because he appeals to our imagination similar to ways a painting does. Whether we are reading the evocative lines of his texts or looking at the enchanting undulations in a beloved painting, we can feel their full emotive force only through allowing our mind to wander. The drift of our imagination imparts meaning to the critic's words and the works of art that inspired them. Criticism most closely approaches the experience of viewing a work of art when its descriptions inspire us as readers to construct our own images from its sentences.

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[335] Ibid.
[336] Ibid.

In a certain sense, we could regard Mirbeau's thoughts on Geffroy's criticism as his paradigm for how to circumvent the expressive complications of writing about a work of art. In the following analysis of his "grande étude" of the painter from 1891, we will consider the extent to which Mirbeau adopts these standards to describe his own impressions obtained from viewing Monet's art. How does he transform his text into a series of verbal tableaux that stimulate a reader's imagination and encourage her to visualize and *feel* Monet's paintings through the filter of her own experience? How do Mirbeau's rhetorical procedures and evocative language engage her imagination and invite her to collaborate in creating an image of the artist?

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[337] Mirbeau, "*La vie artistique*," *Le journal*, 31 May 1894, 1.

SECTION TWO: ‘EXPRIMER L’INEXPRIMABLE’

On the very same day as the publication of his article in Durand-Ruel’s *L’art dans les deux mondes*, Mirbeau wrote Monet another letter containing some predictable sentiments at this point regarding his text. After complaining the editors had not sent him the proofs necessary to make any revisions or to correct the inevitable typographical errors from this “par trop prodigue” publishing house, Mirbeau seeks to preempt any future laudatory words from the painter: “C’est comme toujours, mon cher Monet: ne m’en voulez [*sic*] pas de cet article stupide. L’intention est bonne; l’exécution mauvaise. Je crois bien que je suis désormais voué à ces deux impuissances.”[338] We lack any correspondence from Monet either to Mirbeau himself or to Durand-Ruel to confirm whether the artist ultimately ignored the critic’s plea to withhold gestures of approval or praise toward the purportedly disappointing composition of this essay. Though it does not specifically reference Mirbeau’s essay, Monet’s letter to Whistler written during the following month suggests that the artist had faith in the overall integrity and quality of Durand-Ruel’s journal. Reassuring Whistler that Geffroy would prepare “un très bel article” about him for *L’art dans les deux mondes,* Monet encourages the painter to send the critic a set of drawings to complement the essay: “Vous pourrez donc sans crainte de vous compromettre lui envoyer les dessins qu’il désire. Le journal est à ses débuts, mais il me paraît destiné à avoir de l’avenir.”[339] With his two intimate friends and most sympathetic critics writing essays for this periodical, Monet anticipated a bright future for the publication and harbored no fear that an artist’s reputation could be compromised from promotion within its pages. Like so many literary and artistic journals in *fin-de-siècle* France, *L'art dans les deux mondes* did not survive for long, but Mirbeau and Geffroy's contributions did not appear to have caused its demise.

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[338] Letter no. 52 to Monet, 7 March 1891, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 123-124.

[339] “Letter to Whistler,” 2 April 1891, L. 1103.

The aforementioned letter from Mirbeau to Monet on the date of his article's publication confirms that good intentions count for very little in the critic's mind. They might even constitute a liability when coupled with the inadequacies of the language of art criticism. Despite his utmost efforts to make this essay into "une grande étude," Mirbeau maintains the execution had once again fallen short. To exacerbate matters, the critic feels doomed to repeat this outcome in perpetuity due to the irreconcilable gap between his ambitions and his means of fulfilling them. The process of translating his admiration and understanding of Monet's paintings into words once again has propelled the critic into a state of expressive impotence and despair. As I introduced in the preceding section, the destination and more specialized readership for this particular essay had liberated Mirbeau from some of the constraints and protocol for writing a front-page article for *la grande presse*. The critic retains from his articles destined for the popular press a dual commitment to "porter aux nues" Monet's art and to a more summary or impressionistic mode of description achieved through representing a motif or group of paintings within a single phrase or sentence. The latter strategy allows him to evoke several canvases portraying similar subjects with great economy and to create a more panoramic style of presentation in which he can elide a broad range of Monet's paintings within one or potentially a series of complex sentences assembled with multiple clauses. Mirbeau does take advantage of the distinctive context and audience for this article by experimenting with three different approaches to interpreting and describing Monet's paintings: (1) an allusion to and comparison with literary themes and figures; (2) a close analysis and extended meditation upon three individual works of art; (3) an adaptation of a more poeticized language and syntax. The critic weaves together these descriptive methods with more familiar ones from preceding articles about the artist in an attempt to emulate more closely a diversity of Monet's pictorial effects. The result intensifies a reader's visualization of his prose.

This article also represents a novel venture for Monet as well in that Durand-Ruel had commissioned black-and-white drawings from the artist to accompany Mirbeau's essay. Essentially reproductions of paintings, these drawings highlighted three of the painter's most innovative achievements during the late 1880s and early 1890s: his Belle-Île seascapes, his *essais de figures en plein air*, and his *Meules* series (D. 443, 446, and 444; figs. 30 through 32).[340] As several of Monet's letters to Durand-Ruel suggest, these illustrations provided an undeniable source of consternation for the artist due to his discomfort with drawing in black and white and the distractions they posed to his progress on his *Meules* series: "[Ç]a [les dessins] n'a l'air de rien, mais ça m'effraie beaucoup, je suis si maladroit avec du blanc et du noir, et je suis si absorbé par ce que j'ai en train que je ne puis faire autre chose."[341] Despite the anxieties the painter conveyed to Durand-Ruel concerning his drawings, we can confirm that Mirbeau remained highly confident regarding Monet's skills as a draftsman. In the same letter in which the critic had set out to resolve a misunderstanding with Monet about his recent article on

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[340] *Le soir à Belle-Île* (D. 443) reproduces W. 1100, *Belle-Île*, 1886 (fig. 17), and *Meules* (D. 444) is based upon W. 1267, *Meules, grand soleil*, 1890. W. 1077, *Essai de figure en plein air* (*vers la gauche*) (fig. 33), is the source for *Femme à l'ombrelle* (D. 446). Though three drawings were reproduced within Mirbeau's article, Monet appears to have prepared a total of four. Modeled after W. 734, *La maison du pêcheur, temps couvert* from 1882, D. 445 *La cabane de douaniers près de Pourville* was omitted from the article. In a letter to Paul-Durand's son Charles, Monet indicates perhaps somewhat begrudgingly that M. Rambaud, the administrative director of *L'art dans les deux mondes*, had retained the four drawings for the purposes of reproduction on future occasions: "Ce marchand, en les voyant, m'a seulement dit qu'il prenait les quatre dessins, parce que, disait-il, ils pourraient être reproduits plus tard à une autre occasion, et voilà tout." See "Letter to Ch. Durand-Ruel," 17 July 1891, L. 1118.

[341] "Letter to P. Durand-Ruel," 21 December 1890, L. 1088.

Gauguin,[342] Mirbeau passes along Geffroy's enthusiasm and rapture derived from the artist's drawings, particularly *Femme à l'ombrelle* (D. 446):

> Geffroy m'a dit que vous aviez envoyé des dessins de toute beauté, et que *La femme à l'ombrelle*, il ne connaissait point quelque chose de plus admirable. Pour un homme qui *ne sait pas dessiner*, cela a dû bien vous étonner (original emphasis). Moi j'étais sûr de cela, parce qu'il est impossible, étant ce que vous êtes, mon cher Monet, que vous ne mettiez pas dans la moindre des choses, la grandeur de votre génie.[343]

We can infer from these remarks that Mirbeau himself had not previewed the final state of the drawings before Monet had submitted them to the publisher and director of *L'art dans les deux mondes*, M. Rambaud. The critic's underlining of the phrase "ne sait dessiner" makes it plainly obvious though that Monet had divulged his fears about drawing to Mirbeau as well. The hyperbole of the artist's apparent claim of an inability to draw provides further evidence of the sharp divide between the doubt-ridden Monet observed in private correspondence and the image projected in this essay of the painter as self-assured and in complete control of his creative techniques. The remark "vous ne mettiez pas dans la moindre des choses …" also foreshadows two other critical themes in this article – the inexhaustibility of nature and the artist's capacity to evoke the essence of the entire universe within a single motif.

In the absence of additional correspondence or other forms of documentation to verify the complete scope of discussions between Monet and Mirbeau about the logistics of publication, we cannot evaluate the full extent to which the critic and artist had collaborated in the selection of paintings to use as prototypes for the drawings included within this article. Further information would offer illumination with respect to an analysis of the relationship between image and text. We have no indication of whether Monet had chosen to prepare drawings of certain paintings based upon advance knowledge of specific areas of emphasis in Mirbeau's essay, but this scenario seems somewhat improbable. Only one drawing reproduces a painting similar to one that receives a protracted and more poeticized meditation in the text – La *femme à l'ombrelle*. The other two drawings feature motifs to which Mirbeau treats in a considerably more cursory fashion. In one of the more panoramic descriptions in which the critic evokes an array of climates and terrains that Monet had grappled with in his art, he imagines the painter "sur les tragiques rocs et dans les gouffres hurlants de Belle-Île."[344] This clause could correspond with the drawing *Le soir à Belle-Île* (D. 443). Mirbeau brings up the *Meules* series twice in this article. In the second instance, his reference primarily establishes a trajectory of Monet's art: "Depuis *le Port de Honfleur* et *l'Église Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois* … jusqu'aux extraordinaires meules qu'il acheva cet hiver…."[345] Mirbeau's first mention of the series alludes to the canvases depicting the grainstacks in wintry weather: "comme dans l'étonnante série de ses meules hivernales."[346] Since Monet based *Meules* (D. 444) off of a painting of the grainstacks in summery, sunny conditions, a relatively minimal connection exists between Mirbeau's imagery and the drawing. The correlation of the drawings with Mirbeau's text appears to be more supplemental rather than illustrative in nature, especially in the case of *Meules* and *Le soir à Belle-Île*. Put another way, Mirbeau did not necessarily depend upon the presence of these drawings to forward his interpretations within his text. Wildenstein has associated one of Mirbeau's extended accounts of Monet's figure paintings with *Essai de*

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[342] See my earlier discussion in Section One of Part 2 ("Un pauvre balbutier de mots") of Mirbeau's statement, "Il faut d'abord que les yeux soient charmés, émus."

[343] Letter no. 51 to Monet, around 10 February 1891, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 118-122.

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[344] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," *L'art dans les deux mondes*, 7 March 1891, 184.
[345] Ibid., 185.
[346] Ibid., 184.

figure en plein air (*vers la droite*) (W. 1076, fig. 1) instead of *Essai de figure en plein air* (*vers la gauche*) (W. 1077, fig. 33) on the basis of the critic's descriptions of the cloud formations and the arrangement of the figure's dress.[347] The drawing *Femme à l'ombrelle* accordingly does not add much to the critic's discussion. It simply serves as a related but far from identical counterpart to Mirbeau's text. The lack of any directly relevant reproductions for the other two paintings the critic considers at length also would point to the ancillary purpose of the drawings in the article. We might be better off to categorize these drawings in a more generic fashion as handsome embellishments to the publication and fine demonstrations of Monet's talents in the medium. As we just saw, Monet's letter to Whistler nevertheless urges the artist to send Geffroy drawings in advance of the critic's article in *L'art dans les deux mondes*, so we can assume they possessed a modicum of value to the writing process. Perhaps Monet's drawings functioned as an *aide-memoire* of sorts to Mirbeau at some point in the conception of his article, but the critic's familiarity with his art obviated any real need to preview them or have them around when composing his text. Since Mirbeau emphasizes the effects of the paintings over their contents, I would argue that the descriptive strategies in his essay operate independently of Monet's drawings.

Mirbeau follows his nod of assent toward Geffroy's warm reception of Monet's drawings in his letter by affirming his resolve not to embellish the artist's achievements to the point of unrecognizability: "Croyez bien que dans l'article, en prophétisant le Monet que vous serez, je n'aurai garde d'oublier celui que vous êtes."[348] The critic vows to exercise care to prevent his prognostications on Monet's future triumphs and legacy in the history of art from interfering with his portrayal of the painter who lives and works today. Though Mirbeau subsequently laments the ineffective execution of his plans for this essay, he did not retreat from his promise to Monet in this letter. The critic fulfills this undertaking of creating a faithful living portrait of the artist by framing his article with a seasonal cycle of images of the painter's garden at Giverny at the beginning and a sketch of Monet toiling away in its fertile soil at the end.

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[347] See the entry for W. 1076 in Wildenstein, 3:407.

[348] Letter no. 51 to Monet, around 10 February 1891, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 118-122.

Before Mirbeau makes any overt reference to Monet's art or even the artist himself in his essay, he situates his readers within the milieu that inspired "ce prodigieux peintre de la vie splendide de couleur."[349] On a surface level, we seem to encounter the garden of the artist before we ever meet the man and his paintings, but the confluence of "cette perpétuelle fête des yeux" and Mirbeau's lyrical descriptions effectively converts nature into a living, breathing work of art created by Monet.[350] The garden at Giverny becomes the consummate expression of Monet's artistic vision. In developing a series of verbal tableaux from the progression of flowers and fragrances from spring to summer to fall, the critic appears to derive inspiration from a phenomenon he frequently experiences when viewing Monet's paintings:

> Et il nous arrive cette impression que bien des fois j'ai ressentie en regardant les tableaux de M. Claude Monet: c'est que l'art disparaît, s'efface, et que nous ne nous trouvons plus qu'en présence de la nature vivante complètement conquise et domptée par ce miraculeux peintre. Devant ses mers farouches de Belle-Isle ou ses mers souriantes d'Antibes et de Bordighera, souvent j'ai oublié qu'elles étaient faites sur un morceau de toile avec de la pâte, et il me semblait que j'étais couché sur les grèves et que je suivais d'un œil charmé le vivant rêve qui monte de l'eau brillante et se perd, à travers l'infini, par-delà la ligne d'horizon confondue avec le ciel.[351]

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[349] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," *L'art dans les deux mondes*, 7 March 1891, 183.

[350] Ibid.

[351] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," *Le figaro*, 10 March 1889, 1. In the essay produced for the Rodin-Monet retrospective, Mirbeau revises this statement as follows: "Il nous arrive cette impression que, bien des fois, j'ai ressentie devant les tableaux de M. Claude Monet; c'est que l'art disparaît pour ainsi dire, s'efface et que nous ne nous trouvons plus qu'en présence de la nature vivante, conquise et domptée par ce miraculeux peintre." See "Claude Monet," in *Claude Monet-A. Rodin* (Paris: Galerie Georges Petit, 1889), p. 18. I

When standing in front of one of Monet's seascapes, Mirbeau often forgets that he is looking at a painting. The intensity of the painter's images of either the untamable, ferocious seas of Belle-Île or the more temperate, welcoming waters at Antibes and Bordighera make the critic feel as if he were lying on the beach instead of viewing a work of art in a gallery or some other interior space. Monet transforms the inert materials of art ("un morceau de toile avec de la pâte") into a vivid or animated dream of nature ("le vivant rêve"). In somewhat paradoxical fashion, the liveliness and emphatic quality of Monet's application of pigment onto the canvas enables him to collapse distance between nature and art; the materiality of his paintings engenders their vitality. This virtual metamorphosis of paint and canvas into living nature enchants a viewer's eye and allows her to travel imaginatively away from the confines of the gallery and toward the most distant horizons represented in Monet's pictures. Mirbeau's verbal tableaux at the beginning of this essay aim to replicate the same kind of experience brought about by viewing Monet's paintings. In order to convey an impression analogous to the kind he feels in the presence of Monet's art, Mirbeau describes a corner of nature ordered and designed by Monet's eyes and hands. If Monet's paintings transport us directly into nature, then the most efficient and reliable manner of reproducing a similar sensation with words is to place us *sur le motif*. A substitution of Monet's canvases with his garden as Mirbeau's primary referent brings us closer to the impression we ostensibly would receive when we look at his paintings: "[L]'art disparaît, s'efface…." Applying Mirbeau's instructions for engaging with Geffroy's criticism to his own, we will attempt to read the introductory paragraphs to this essay as if we were looking at a series of paintings depicting the changes in Monet's garden over the seasons. In adopting this

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prefer Mirbeau's first iteration of this phenomenon with its more direct emphasis on the materials of Monet's art and the absence of the qualifier "pour ainsi dire."

approach, we may see and feel what Mirbeau does when he looks at Monet's paintings – nature itself.

The composition of Mirbeau's essay coincided with a rather unusual period in terms of Monet's artistic output and patterns of exhibition. After embarking upon annual painting campaigns across France and showing in commercial galleries almost every year throughout the 1880s, Monet took a bit of respite from this routine at the beginning of the next decade and entered into a transitional phase for his career. During the first half of 1890, the artist halted his painting routine almost entirely and devoted the bulk of his days to spearheading a subscription campaign to purchase Manet's *Olympia* and donate it to the Louvre. The fall and winter of 1890, however, would mark a pivotal period in the painter's life and artistic procedures. At some point during the late summer or early fall, Monet commenced work on *Les meules* – his first group of paintings to be definitively conceived and exhibited as a cohesive series.[352] In November, he also purchased the Giverny house in which he and his family had resided since 1883. Seeing as Monet had not exhibited any paintings since 1889, Mirbeau could frame his article as a sort of introduction to significant developments in the artist's life and his working methods that had occurred outside of the public eye during the intervening years. Monet's recent purchase of his home at Giverny, for one, made it quite fitting for the critic to feature "le milieu qu'on imagine pour ce prodigieux peintre" as a leitmotif of this essay.

At the same time as Mirbeau was composing this essay in the later winter of 1891, Monet had started to prepare for his May exhibition of the *Meules* series. A contemporary account of the ensuing show at Galeries Durand-Ruel reveals that Monet seemed to have anticipated a dynamic sensory exchange in the production, display, and reception of his series. In a conversation between the Dutch author Willem G.C. Byvanck and Monet at the exhibition, the artist reportedly remarked the following in regard to how a viewer should interact with the ensemble display of the paintings: “[I]ls [les tableaux] n’acquièrent toute leur valeur que par la comparaison et la succession de la série entière.”[353] As a viewer moves from canvas to canvas in the gallery, an accumulation of impressions and memories of the preceding works would color and be colored by those generated from the painting(s) in front of her at the present moment. Because looking at any single *Meules* painting entails consideration of its relationship to an ensemble, a spectator actively participates in completing a circle of meaning through her full experience and comparison of the constituent parts of the series.

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[352] See my previous discussion in the second section of Part 1 ("Transcrire") regarding the disagreement among art historians whether the Belle-Île paintings constitute a series or proto-series.

In his three verbal tableaux of the Giverny garden from spring, summer, and fall, Mirbeau represents nature in a manner that accords with Monet’s procedures of painting and exhibition in series. Even if we were to read one of the critic’s images in isolation from the other two, we still would perceive the fluidity of the garden’s appearance through Mirbeau’s alternation of emphasis on the growth and diminishment of its blossoms. Through reading the three variations on the garden in succession, we can reflect upon nature’s mutability from spring through fall. As we compare the contents of the garden over the course of its seasonal evolution, we gradually integrate these three distinct images into a unified whole.

Mirbeau’s first sentence in this essay establishes a kind of ‘background’ and ‘foreground’ for all three of his verbal tableaux: “Une maison crépie de mortier rose, au fond d’un jardin toujours éblouissant de fleurs.”[354] Its order guides us from the still backdrop of his house roughcast with pink mortar to a locus of growth and movement directly in front of our eyes – a garden with an always-glittering spectacle of flowers. With the present participle *éblouissant* as the single vestige of a verbal form, this sentence reads more like a poeticized fragment consisting of adjectives and nouns or a composite subject with no predicate. Home and garden comprise a single unit, a discrete entity that provides the milieu for the critic's sequence of images. Mirbeau also accentuates the continuity of his descriptions within the phrase "toujours éblouissant": This garden *always* dazzles with its copious assemblage of flowers. It seems noteworthy, however, that Mirbeau does not specify to whom this residence and bountiful grounds belong within neither this preliminary framing sentence nor his subsequent series of tableaux. We will have to wait until we have viewed the garden from season to season for the critic to announce definitively that Claude Monet lives there: "C'est là, dans cette perpétuelle fête des yeux, qu'habite Claude Monet."[355] By postponing a revelation of the garden's ownership and authorship, the critic permits us to meet and form an interpretation of the artist through our experience of imaginatively beholding an enduring feast of visual and olfactory sensations that stem from Monet's invention.

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[353] Willem G.C. Byvanck, *Un hollandais à Paris en 1890: Sensations de littérature et d’art* (Paris, 1892), 177.

[354] Mirbeau, “Claude Monet,” *L’art dans les deux mondes*, 7 March 1891, 183.

The next sentence receives a separate paragraph and summons the season in which Mirbeau first depicts the garden in the most generalized manner possible: "C'est le printemps."[356] Mirbeau will repeat this simple yet open-ended declarative sentence to introduce the following two views of the garden in summer and fall: "C'est l'été…. C'est l'automne…."[357] These diminutive phrases serve as an explicit line of demarcation between the different seasons, but the recurrence of the same sentence structure reinforces a connection, consistency, or continuity among them. His exclusion of a particular time of day, type of weather, or month also heightens the fluidity and evocativeness of Mirbeau's images as we might be compelled to visualize the full or ongoing duration of spring, summer, and fall – not just a season at a finite moment.

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[355] Ibid.
[356] Ibid.
[357] Ibid.

The linguistic means through which Mirbeau imparts an impression of "la nature vivante" into his descriptions of Monet's garden include the scope and precision of his word choice and figures of speech, the ordering of imagery, and modifications in punctuation and sentence structure.[358] The opening sentences of his tableau of the garden in spring offer a compelling example for us to review. While I will reference and compare certain features of Mirbeau's images of the garden from summer and fall with the initial portion of this one from spring, I will devote most of my analysis to these two sentences. These phrases exhibit the major stylistic and grammatical adaptations that collectively work to emulate the continuous unfolding and evolution of living nature characteristic of Monet's paintings:

> Les ravenelles achèvent d'exhaler leurs derniers aromes; les pivoines – les divines pivoines sont fanées; mortes sont les hyacinthes. Déjà les capucines et les eschscholtzias montrent, celles-ci, leur jeune verdure de bronze, ceux-là, leurs feuilles linéaires d'un vert acide et délicieux; et, dans les larges plates-bandes qu'ils bordent sur des fonds de verger en fleurs, les iris dressent leurs pétales recurvés, étranges, fanfreluchés de blanc, de mauve, de lilas, de jaune et de bleu, striés de brunes panachures et de ponctuations pourprées, évoquant, dans leur dessous compliqué, des analogies mystérieuses, des rêves tentateurs et pervers, pareils à ceux qui flottent autour des troublantes orchidées…[359]

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[358] In his chapter "Impressionism and contingency," Enda McCaffrey cites an alternative passage from this article as evidence of "[an] attempt to re-enact a visual impressionism in writing." McCaffrey precedes me in his identification of a similar range of operations at work in Mirbeau's descriptive strategies, but the broader scope of his study condenses his discussion to a single paragraph. My analysis will seek to elaborate on some of our agreed findings. See McCaffrey, *Octave Mirbeau's Literary and Intellectual Evolution as a French Writer, 1880-1914* (Lewiston, NY; Queenston, Ontario; Lampeter, Wales: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), pp. 114-115.

[359] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," *L'art dans les deux mondes*, 7 March 1891, 183.

In order to visualize Mirbeau's descriptions of Monet's garden in the most complete manner feasible, a nineteenth-century reader would require a familiarity with flowers rivaling that of the artist and critic.[360] Today we may readily consult color photographs in print and digital media to compensate as necessary for our horticultural ignorance. The question remains whether Mirbeau expected readers of *L'art dans les deux mondes* to be equipped with mental recollections of some thirty distinctive kinds of flowers populating Monet's garden from the expiring wallflowers ("les ravenelles") of spring to the inexhaustible blossoming of the autumn harpaliums ("des harpaliums") at the conclusion of his suite of verbal tableaux. Even if a reader were not able to conjure the appearance of a particular flower in her mind, the meticulousness in the critic's identification of these different varieties would convey something of the lushness and exoticism of Monet's garden. We might not know what a specific flower looks like, but we can infer the diversity and changes among the garden's inhabitants from season to season from the unique species Mirbeau catalogues.

The critic underscores the continuous and fluid nature of the garden's development through the conspicuous sequence in which he presents its flowers to his readers. Though we tend to associate spring with rebirth and renewal, the flowers which Mirbeau first spies in the garden already have begun to wither away. While the wallflowers ("les ravenelles") exhale their sweet fragrances for one last time, the divine peonies ("les divines pivoines") lose their intensity with the fading of their petals. A third variety, the hyacinths ("les hyacinthes"), has completely exhausted itself at this point; its once vibrant blooms lie dead within the fertile flowerbeds. By initially presenting his readers with perishing flowers, Mirbeau insinuates the spring days and floral activity that have preceded the current one into his description. His use of a present tense active verb ("achèvent") coupled with a construction formed with the present tense of the verb *être* and a past participle ("sont fanées") hints at the ongoing decline of wallflowers and peonies in future days. In keeping with the regeneration of spring, the following sentence depicts flowers in their nascent stages; these sprouting blossoms are already divulging themselves ("[d]éjà … montrent"). The nasturtiums ("les capucines") and California poppies ("les eschscholtzias") emerge from the ground with their tender shoots – the former with fresh bronze greenery, the latter with delectable acid-green leaves of a linear shape. The irises ("les iris") have reached an even more mature stage in their development and raise their multicolored curved petals to greet a garden stroller.

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[360] I am heavily indebted to Benedict Leca for his artful translation of this article, particularly the passages detailing the varieties of flowers in Monet's garden. His rendering of Mirbeau's essay into English allowed me to discern some of its more nuanced phrasing that I might have overlooked. I have borrowed liberally from his translation throughout my analysis. See "Monet and Giverny," in *Monet in Giverny: Landscapes of Reflection*, ed. Benedict Leca (London: Giles, 2012), pp. 72-86.

To extend the theme of ceaseless transformation and rejuvenation of the garden into the next image, Mirbeau closes his tableau of spring with an allusion to the summer plants which get ready to partake in the joy of flowering: "Et les plantes de l'été, entre les bordures qui s'avivent, s'apprêtent partout à la joie de fleurir."[361] The critic then repeats this oscillating rhythm of inception and decline in his image of the garden in fall. The colorful array of nasturtiums and saffron eschscholtzias that were beginning to emerge in the spring now collapse in a blinding tumble under the blazing heat of the summer sun: "Les omnicolores capucines et les eschscholtzias safranés, croulent, de chaque côté de l'allée de sable, en dégringolées aveuglantes."[362] As Mirbeau transports us to the garden of autumn days, the enchantment of the sumptuous dahlias has supplanted the magical allure of the poppies: "À la féerie des pavots succède la féerie des fastueux dahlias…."[363]

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[361] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," *L'art dans les deux mondes*, 7 March 1891, 183.
[362] Ibid.
[363] Ibid.

By depicting flowers in all phases of growth and degeneration and foreshadowing the dawn of another season, Mirbeau's animated descriptions of the painter's garden convey some of the temporal continuity Monet would seek to express by way of painting in series.

The elision of multiple clauses through a combination of semicolons and commas further enhances an effect of fluidity within Mirbeau's sentences. In his image of the garden in spring, the critic employs semicolons to bring together a full range of sensations associated with the decomposition of the flowers and their loss of vitality: Mirbeau invites us to smell the fleeting aromas of the wallflowers, to see the fading petals of the peonies, and perhaps, to feel on an emotional level the death of the hyacinths. In the case of the hyacinths, the critic places emphasis on the notion of death with his inverted syntax ("mortes sont les hyacinthes"); by this procedure, he transforms the prosaic into the poetic. A blend of commas and semicolons in the second sentence heighten the sense of interrelatedness among the flowers even in their divergent cycles of development. While the nasturtiums and eschscholtzias spring forth from the soil, seductive and perverse dreams exude from the petals of the irises and disquieting orchids in full bloom. The punctuation in the second sentence also enables Mirbeau to approximate some of the richness, density, and economy of expression he observes within Monet's paintings. By using multiple commas instead of periods to bracket his impressions, the critic synthesizes the vividness he ascribes to Monet's palette with the erotic suggestiveness of these flowers to produce an unbroken image. We could think of the commas in these sentences as the facilitators for overcoming some of the linearity of language. The commas and semicolons function as a sort of connective tissue that allows Mirbeau to bring together several aspects or dimensions of a motif in a more concentrated form. His description of the irises is instructive in this regard. Within the same sentence in which the nasturtiums and the eschscholtzias arise and begin to flourish, Mirbeau deploys a host of commas to create a multi-faceted picture of the irises. In a long chain of clauses, he depicts their location ("dans les large plates-bandes qu'ils bordent sur des fonds de verger en fleurs"); the array of colors trimming their strange, curved petals ("leurs pétales recurvés, étranges, fanfreluchés de blanc, de mauve, de lilas, de jaune et de bleu"); their striations composed of small brown circular shapes and crimson accents ("striés de brunes panachures et de ponctuations pourprées"); and the mixture of mysterious analogies with alluring and perverse dreams evoked by their seductive, intricate undersides ("dans leur dessous compliqué, des analogies mystérieuses, des rêves tentateurs et pervers"). Mirbeau probably would concede that Monet could portray the visual qualities of the irises in paint with greater eloquence, economy, directness, and precision than he could in words. His treatment of punctuation, however, permits him to express the sensory complexity of these flowers through a far more condensed and suggestive design than one achievable through standard prose.

In his tableau of the garden in summer, the critic maintains this more lyrical mode of punctuation and syntax to represent the intensity and diversity of colors that radiate from the surprising fairy-tale enchantment of the poppies:

> Dans les larges plates-bandes recouvrant les iris défleuris, houle la surprenante féerie des pavots; une extraordinaire mêlée de tons, une orgie de nuances claires, un gâchis resplendissant et musical de blanc, de rose, de jaune, de mauve; un incroyable pétrissement de chairs de blondes sur quoi éclatent les orangés, sonnent les fanfares des cuivres ardents, saignent et s'allument les rouges, s'égayent les violettes, s'illuminent de feu les pourpres noirs.[364]

In order to describe this extraordinary mixture of tones, this orgy of bright nuances that swells from the poppies, the critic combines the sensuality of music with ever so slightly veiled sexual allusions. Mirbeau's series of semicolons and commas intensifies the superheated tone of his language; music and flesh coalesce into an exceedingly eroticized image of Monet's garden. Monet admittedly professed no interest in imbuing his paintings of flowers and nature with carnal suggestiveness, but Mirbeau's use of this kind of language allows him to, in a sense, remake the garden in his own image. Here we might be tempted to recall the ecstatic descriptions of flowers oozing with *eros* and *thanatos* in Mirbeau's novel *Le jardin des supplices*. Seeing the poppies in full bloom in summer educes a form of coloristic rapture: The purity and brilliance of their white, pink, yellow, and mauve blossoms resemble frenzied notes of music arranged to the brink of excess ("un gâchis resplendissant et musical"). Appeals to music alone would not capture this magnificent profusion of color. This luminous array of hues commingles like bodies intertwined in some sort of orgiastic, orgasmic music making: Orange tones explode upon a kneaded mass of blond flesh. Fanfares of ardent coppers resound, reds bleed and ignite, violets revel, and blackened scarlets light up in flames. By consolidating these eroticized metaphors into a single, breathless sentence, Mirbeau perhaps aims to replicate some of the immediacy, complexity, and boldness of the color sensations that exude from Monet's canvases.

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[364] Ibid.

Mirbeau's final tableau of the garden in autumn not only adopts a similar dilated sentence structure with commas and semicolons but also features allusions to a variety of fabrics and articles of clothing to suggest the opulent textures of the flowers. He transforms the floral anatomy of the dahlias ("les dahlias") into ornamental accessories and fabrics we associate with lavish garments: They are adorned with fluted collarets preciously edged with fine gold ("collerettes tuyautées précieusement liserées d'or fin") and overlapping pompoms fashioned in every bright color and subtle shade imaginable ("pompons imbriqués de toutes les couleurs vives et de toutes leurs nuances discrètes"). The dahlias resemble jagged silhouettes of ancient silks, in subdued tones with delectably faded embroidery ("découpures de soies anciennes, aux tons atténués, aux broderies fanées délicieusement"); their laciniated petals taper, spread out, and twist into scarlet tassels ("les pétales laciniés s'effilent, s'épandent, se tordent en crinières écarlates"). Mirbeau does not confine his fabric metaphors to the dahlias. While the China asters ("les reines-marguerites") display ruffs of antique laces at their bases ("leurs antiques fraises de dentelles"), the snapdragons ("les antirrhinums") polish their striped bicolored velvet ("lustrent le velours tigré, bicolore").

Mirbeau's three tableaux derived from his experience of the artist's garden harness the potential of words to evoke a full range of senses. In his image of spring, flowers greet us with their intoxicating aromas and coloristic splendor. The dazzling hues of the poppies in summer elicit comparisons to the eroticism of impassioned music. The delicate composition and vibrant colors of the dahlias in fall recall the hues and textures of luxuriant fabrics. In his image of the garden in fall, Mirbeau incorporates another dimension of sound and arguably taste in an indirect manner: "[L]es glaïeuls retardataires étayent leurs somptueux calices, tendent leurs gorges liliales au vol énamouré des abeilles."[365] Partaking in the pollen and sweet nectar offered from the lily throats of the late-blooming gladiolas, the buzzing bees perpetuate the growth of the garden through their enamored flights. In most instances, painting ostensibly would operate at a disadvantage in terms of its capacity to engage an entire range of the senses. For Mirbeau, at least, Monet's paintings provide a notable exception in that they conflate art with "la nature vivante." With their ability to induce an impression of being in front of nature itself, Monet's canvases incorporate far more than visual sensations within their colors and brushwork. The "éloquence" Mirbeau attaches to Monet's expressive means allows the artist to represent sound, feel, touch, and maybe even taste in paint. If we follow Mirbeau's lead in regarding Monet's canvases as continuations or extensions of living nature, then we might understand the critic's suite of seasonal images of the artist's garden as an attempt to create a verbal equivalent or parallel to the experience of viewing the impressionist's paintings.

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[365] Ibid.

The next paragraph in Mirbeau's essay halts this progression of the seasons and returns us to the location and time in which we first encountered the critic. We once again stand in front of a permanently dazzling garden of flowers with a pink house located at its depths, but Mirbeau now substantially enlarges the boundaries of his image:

> Et, derrière la maison, crépie de mortier rose, des coteaux, aux lignes onduleuses, aux pentes habillées de la changeante moire des récoltes; et, devant le jardin, toujours éblouissant de fleurs, des prairies, vastes, profondes, successives, des prairies où les rangées de peupliers, dans le poudroiement brumeux de l'atmosphère normande, font des reculs de rêve charmants; des prairies où l'Epte circule, sinueuse, chantante, entre des rives ombragées, colonnades d'or, portant des arcs flexibles et des voûtes ajourées, d'où retombent la grâce balancée des lianes et le mouvant caprice des houblons.[366]

The critic's choice to begin with "et" establishes a direct linkage between this paragraph and the initial sentence of the essay as it breaks from the previous pattern of introducing a new image with "C'est...." The seasonal tableaux following the first sentence of Mirbeau's essay accordingly could represent a reverie precipitated by beholding Monet's home and garden: "Une maison crépie de mortier rose, au fond d'un jardin, toujours éblouissant de fleurs." Under this scenario, the reverie appears to have subsided in this paragraph, and we find ourselves in some indefinite or perpetually present moment. Mirbeau employs the by-now familiar strategies of punctuation, syntax, and language to evoke the continuity of nature in this image. The expansion of his frame to incorporate what lies both beyond the house and in front of the garden affords us the kind of panoramic or all-encompassing view that Monet would realize in totality only with '*les Grandes Décorations*' – his culminating *Nymphéas* cycle designed for the Musée de l'Orangerie. At the point the critic was composing this all-embracing view of the artist's environs, Monet had begun to rely upon painting a series of individual canvases to achieve a comparable effect. Mirbeau's description of the surrounding land and waters of Giverny has prescience in relation to Monet's series. It effectively encompasses the majority of motifs that would consume his artistic energy for the majority of the 1890s – the *Cathédrale de Rouen* series as a notable exception. With the hills of undulating contours serving as their backdrop, the *Meules* paintings depicted the forever changing, mottled effects of harvests in these vast, deep, and successive prairies. Monet subsequently will paint the rows of trees that recede along the river Epte in an alluring dream in his *Peupliers* series. The misty haze of the Norman atmosphere and the shady banks where the river Epte flows into the Seine would become the subject of his *Matinée sur la Seine* series.

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[366] Ibid.

Claude Monet resides in that place where dreams merge with impressions of nature: "C'est là, dans cette perpétuelle fête des yeux, qu'habite Claude Monet."[367] As I previously noted, the critic has deferred in identifying Monet as the creator of this perpetual feast for the eyes until this very moment in his essay. We have largely come to know the painter's home and garden within Mirbeau's reverie. It is there ("C'est là") where Monet lives – at the union between nature and the artist's imagination. The reciprocity of feeling that Mirbeau attaches to our experience of a work of art is in full effect here as well. This resplendent garden stems from Monet's artistic vision, and its blossoms in turn offer endless stimulation for his eyes. A living work of art itself, this never-ending festival for Monet's eyes is embodied within his paintings. The critic's rendering of the painter's garden represents a synthesis of Monet and Mirbeau's vision.

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[367] Ibid.

Mirbeau underlines the active role of the imagination of author and reader in the visualization of the milieu that inspires Monet's art:

> Et c'est bien le milieu qu'on imagine pour ce prodigieux peintre de la vie splendide de la couleur, pour ce prodigieux poète des lumières attendries et des formes voilées, pour celui qui fit les tableaux respirables, grisants et parfumés, qui sut toucher l'intangible, exprimer l'inexprimable, et qui enchanta notre rêve de tout le rêve mystérieusement enclos dans la nature, de tout le rêve mystérieusement épars dans la divine lumière.[368]

This environment is *just the one we would imagine* ("c'est bien le milieu qu'on imagine") for this prodigious painter of color, light, and forms veiled in atmosphere (my emphasis). The agreement between our visualization of the artist's milieu and its appearance *in situ* reminds us of another sensation Mirbeau experiences when viewing Monet's paintings. As we already have seen, the critic often feels like he is standing in the midst of living nature when he looks at Monet's art. Familiarity with Monet's paintings enables Mirbeau and his readers to envision the very motifs from which they originate. Mirbeau's descriptions of the garden and the surrounding countryside at Giverny produce an effect comparable to Monet's paintings. Reading his suite of verbal tableaux allow us to imagine and recreate the garden's sights, smells, and sounds.

Direct experience of the artist's environment confirms the vitality and fidelity of his paintings, but, in Mirbeau's estimation, Monet does far more than merely copy nature. The artist does not simply imitate the tones and hues of the flowers in his garden and the misty haze of the Norman atmosphere; his palette mixtures impart the living splendor of color ("la vie splendide de la couleur") to his images. As an extraordinary poet of tender illuminations and veiled forms (“ce prodigieux poète des lumières attendries et des formes voilées”), Monet suggests rather than transcribes impressions of light and atmosphere. The painter does not simply transfer nature’s phenomena onto a canvas with animated combinations of colors; he simultaneously evokes the feelings generated by these subtle forms and soft lights. Monet does not restrict himself to depicting the visual luxuriance of his environment, but he instead imbues a host of multisensory qualities into his paintings. Like the flowers in his garden, his paintings emit an intoxicating perfume (“grisants et parfumés”). We inhale and exhale the delicate air that circulates within his breathable pictures (“les tableaux respirables”). His continuously dazzling garden and the vast prairies of Giverny strengthen the acumen of the artist’s eye and nurture the eloquence of his technique. He surpasses the normal limitations imposed by paint and canvas to touch the intangible, to express the inexpressible (“toucher l’intangible, exprimer l’inexprimable”). Monet’s paintings act like a magical spell upon their viewers, and his images enchant us (“enchanta”). In viewing Monet’s art, our personal dream (“notre rêve”) merges with the entire dream mysteriously enclosed within nature (“tout le rêve mystérieusement enclos dans la nature”). His paintings give palpable form to all of the unfathomable dreams scattered within the divine light (“tout le rêve mystérieusement épars dans la divine lumière”). Mirbeau’s recreation of the milieu in which Monet cultivates his vision and artistic procedures invites a reader to imagine the effects and sensations the critic experiences in front of his paintings. In his three variations on Monet’s garden preceding this paragraph, Mirbeau captures the liveliness of the color, smells, and textures of its flowers through his evocative language. He infuses his own vision or dreams of nature into his images of Monet’s garden and highlights the mysteriousness and sensuality of the life of flowers.

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[368] Ibid.

Having established an absolute correspondence between Monet's art and surroundings at Giverny, Mirbeau poses a series of rhetorical questions that suggest the painter's exceptional capacity to assimilate any milieu to his personal vision. "Mais, tous les milieux où il a passé, ne les a-t-il pas faits siens, en quelque sorte.…?"[369] The perspicacity of Monet's eye and the expansiveness and adaptability of his painterly techniques allow him to discern and to express the "la spéciale poésie" of virtually any environment and thereby remake all terrains and climates into his own:

> Ne les a-t-il pas faits siens, surtout, harmonisant son esprit, sa sensibilité, à leur nature particulière, par une faculté admirable et presque unique (car elle est ordinairement le produit de longues habitudes et de patientes observations), par cette faculté qu'il a d'en dégager, d'un coup d'œil, l'essence de forme et de coloration et, je dirai aussi, de vie intellectuelle, de pensée, à cette heure fuyante, à cette suprême minute d'harmonie concentrée, où le rêve devient la réalité?[370]

Monet subsumes all facets of nature within his art through harmonizing his own mind and sensibility with the particularities of the motif in front of him. Though other artists may achieve a similar form of agreement between nature and temperament through patient observation and pictorial techniques developed over a long period of time, Monet possesses an almost unique faculty ("presque unique") to extract the essence of form and color, intellectual life, and thought with a single glance. His exceptional eye perceives and isolates a supreme minute of concentrated harmony, and at this very fleeting hour, dreams become reality ("le rêve devient la réalité"). His art accordingly represents a conflation of the subjective inner vision with an environment's 'objective' reality. The identification and distillation of this one quintessential moment into a work of art serve as the means by which Monet conflates his own dream with nature. In viewing one of his paintings, we are exposed to the fundamental character of a certain aspect of the landscape. The artist's capacity to extract from nature its intellectual life ("de vie intellectuelle") invites a participatory viewer-reader to engage with his paintings not only on perceptual but also on conceptual grounds. As we experience a particular milieu absorbed within Monet's art, our own dream or vision of this environment becomes intertwined with "tout le rêve mystérieusement enclos dans la nature." Monet's paintings feel, and we feel them.

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[369] Ibid., 184.
[370] Ibid.

As a way of succinctly surveying the wide range of climates and geography that Monet had painted up to this point, Mirbeau then asks us to imagine the artist at home among "tous les milieux où il a passé": "Ne l'imagine-t-on pas chez lui…?"[371] In the series of questions that follow, the critic adopts a descriptive strategy he frequently employed in his previous texts about the painter, including his essay for the Monet-Rodin retrospective. He does not identify specific titles of works of art, nor does he allude to any of the material or physical properties of Monet's paintings. The critic instead composes a sweeping panorama of the full range of landscape motifs inspiring Monet's art from the somber gorges of the Creuse ("les gorges sombres de la Creuse") to the immense deserts of the southern skies at Antibes ("les immenses déserts des ciels du midi").[372] Mirbeau essentially summarizes the totality of Monet's artistic project throughout the 1880s by cataloguing all of his painting campaigns from that decade within the span of a few sentences. His initial question, for instance, transports us from the gray and misty seas of the English channel ("des mers grises et brumeuses de la Manche"), to the tragic rocks and howling chasms of Belle-Île-en-mer ("les tragiques rocs et dans les gouffres hurlants de Belle-Île"), to the calm banks of the Seine ("les calmes rives de la Seine"), and finally, to beneath the quivering shades of the river Epte

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[371] Ibid.
[372] Ibid.

("sous les ombrages frémissants de l'Epte").[373] The generalized nature of Mirbeau's portrayal of these diverse climate and water conditions affords a reader a considerable amount of latitude in imagining the contents and effects of Monet's paintings. If she possesses more familiarity with Monet's oeuvre, she potentially could recall a particular one of Monet's paintings, but Mirbeau certainly does not demand such a precise reconciliation between word and image. One of the drawings accompanying Mirbeau's essay, *Le soir à Belle-Île* (D. 443, fig. 30), provides a natural but far from exclusive referent for "les tragiques rocs et dans les gouffres hurlants de Belle-Île." We could pair up the remaining three motifs in this sentence with any number of paintings. As an example of the flexible or capacious nature of Mirbeau's imagery, his allusion to "des mers grises et brumeuses de la Manche" relates to any number of canvases from Monet's two painting campaigns at Étretat on the Normandy coast in 1883 and 1886, including *La falaise d'Aval avec la Porte et l'Aiguille* from the former and *Étretat, La pluie* from the latter (W. 908 and 1044, figs. 34 and 35). In the process of inviting his readers to imagine the artist's painting in almost twenty distinctive environments, Mirbeau reenacts the impressions he feels when looking at Monet's art: Paint and canvas drop out of view, and our imagination wanders through nature itself. Through providing his readers a more unmediated vista of the actual landscape motifs Monet made his own ("faits siens"), Mirbeau evokes with concise yet vivid phrasing the effects of multiple images from the artist's various campaigns throughout the 1880s. He circumvents the need for an exacting transcription of the contents of individual paintings and encourages a reader to import her distinctive mode of visualizing Monet's art into her experience of his text.

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[373] Ibid.

Perhaps signaling the inevitable futility of criticism, Mirbeau acknowledges a firmly entrenched and well-rehearsed international discourse surrounding Monet's art: "Que dire de Claude Monet qui n'ait été dit, répété mille fois, aussi bien en France qu'en Angleterre, en Belgique, en Amérique et en Allemagne?"[374] That which can be said about Monet already has been printed throughout Europe and America, but this endless circulation and repetition of similar ideas extends mainly from an inability of critics to devise a robust enough language to describe fully "l'énorme puissance et le charme infini de ses œuvres."[375] Similar to Geffroy, Mirbeau identifies didactic potential in Monet's canvases for critics and artists alike and even assigns a spiritual value to the painting lessons his exhibitions provide: "Ses expositions ont ceci de particulier et de tout à fait spirituel, qu'elles servent pour ainsi dire de leçons de peinture aux peintres qui s'étaient, tout d'abord, montrés les plus aveugles…."[376] These blind artists who formerly condemned Monet's innovative and thrilling art ("cet art initiateur et frissonnant") include the most decorated painters of the academy – "des peintres décorés à toutes leurs boutonnières, des peintres primés autant que les bêtes de concours."[377] Sporting lapels completely covered with meaningless ribbons, these banal artists flock to Monet's exhibitions and scrutinize the details of his paintings in the vain hope they may intuit and replicate the essence of his chosen soul ("cette âme d'élu") through pilfering superficial aspects of his techniques: "On en voit des peintres … s'arrêter longuement devant chaque toile, la détailler, s'efforcer à en pénétrer les procédés, comme s'ils croyaient que cela fût possible d'acquérir, avec quelques révélations superficielles de métier…."[378] But these painters unquestionably will suffer the same dismal fate as art critics because Monet has surpassed them in terms of the sophistication and innovativeness of his vision and expressive means: "[C]et œil miraculeux qui dompte le soleil, qui va jusque dans l'inexploré et dans l'invisible, conquérir les formes inapprises et les nouveaux verbes de lumière."[379] Monet's miraculous eye tames the intense and forever changing rays of the sun; it penetrates unexplored and seemingly invisible realms of nature. His vision has conquered unknown forms and facilitated his development of a new language of light. The language and design arising from his incomparable faculties of perception stifle not only painters but also critics who write about his art. Harnessing the transcendent powers of his vision, the artist's brush conveys forms and dimensions of light that far exceed what other painters or critics can portray within their respective mediums. While unduly celebrated painters superficially imitate Monet's brushstrokes and palette, critics resort to rehearsing the same platitudes to describe his art. They neither can learn to express the eloquence of Monet's forms and composition, nor can they possess or formulate novel language or verbs ("les nouveaux verbes") to represent the light his miraculous eye apprehends.

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[374] Ibid.
[375] Ibid.
[376] Ibid.
[377] Ibid.
[378] Ibid.

As Steven Levine previously has noted,[380] Mirbeau's solution to overcoming the expressive gap between Monet's paintings and words resembles a more emphatic version of Charles Baudelaire's verdict from his *Salon de 1846*: "Ainsi le meilleur compte rendu d'un tableau pourra être un sonnet ou une élégie."[381] The proper mode for rendering Monet's art into words furthermore takes into consideration the expressive advantages the critic will ascribe more broadly to the medium of painting in his later interview with

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[379] Ibid.

[380] Levine, *Monet and His Critics*, 119.

[381] Baudelaire, "Salon de 1846," in *Curiosités esthétiques* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1868), 83.

Paul Gsell examined earlier in the first section of Part Two. In his characterization of his experience of viewing Monet's art, Mirbeau highlights the immediacy of the relay between these paintings and a viewer's eye:

> Et je pense que, devant de telles œuvres qui suggèrent l'esprit, par l'unique plaisir des yeux, les plus nobles, les plus hautes, les plus lointaines idées, le critique doit renoncer à ses menues, sèches et stériles analyses, et que le poète, seul, a le droit de parler et de chanter, car Claude Monet qui, dans ses compositions, n'apporte pas de préoccupations littéraires directes, est de tous les peintres, peut-être, avec Puvis de Chavannes, celui qui s'adresse, le plus directement, le plus éloquemment, aux poètes.[382]

Speaking directly to a viewer's eye, Monet's art suggests the most noble, elevated, and remote ideas through the fundamental formal elements of painting – color and brushwork. The intensity of pleasure and depth of thought communicated with this purely visual language resists encapsulation within a critic's standard prose. When confronted with explicating Monet's art, a critic must forego thin, dry, and sterile forms of analysis, but some ambiguity exists regarding the availability of her alternatives. *The poet alone* ("le poète, seul") has the right to speak and sing of Monet's paintings (my emphasis). Poetry may offer the verbal means for evoking the visual and intellectual complexity of Monet's images, but it remains unclear whether all critics can or should transform their impressions into such an elevated form of expression. Perhaps the necessity to rely upon poetic forms to compose meaningful criticism on Monet's paintings resonates with some of the ideas Mirbeau will expound upon a few years later in his interpretations of Gustave Geffroy's artwriting. In order to write intelligibly and substantively about a work of art, Mirbeau will argue a critic first must create her own within the field of literature.

A critic's conventional forms of verbal analysis fall short because, out of all painters, Monet and maybe the symbolist Puvis de Chavannes address their art most directly and eloquently to poets.[383] Monet's paintings do not appeal to poets on the grounds of any mutual literary preoccupations, for Mirbeau sees no explicit ones embedded within his artistic procedures or subject matter. The linguistic plenitude of their respective genres instead brings together painter and poet. Similar to Geffroy, Mirbeau cites the inexhaustibility of a single motif in nature as evidence of the expressive richness of Monet's art: "Aussi, pour diversifier nos impressions, n'a-t-il pas besoin de varier ses motifs et de changer ses décors."[384] Like an individual word or line within a poem, a single motif from nature induces a diversity of impressions in Monet's art. As we saw in Part One in the context of Geffroy's interpretation of Monet's *Peupliers* paintings, the multiplicity of emotions, conditions of weather, and times of day embodied within the artist's series paintings prompts critics to compare the ensemble to a visual poem. In concluding his meditation on the affinities of Monet's art to poetry, Mirbeau alludes to his wintry grainstack paintings. This reference perhaps implies a similar comprehension of the ensemble effect of the series: "Un même motif – comme dans l'étonnante série de ses meules hivernales – lui suffit à exprimer les multiples et si dissemblables émotions par où passe, de l'aube à la nuit, le drame de la terre."[385] Only a poetic form of criticism can emulate Monet's eloquence of expression and the complete range of emotional states represented within paintings like "l'étonnante série de ses meules hivernales."

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[382] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," *L'art dans les deux mondes*, 7 March 1891, 184.

Instead of diminishing or impoverishing the effects of Monet's paintings through an uninspiring and empty prose analysis of their contents, a critic can apply the devices and language of poetry to preserve the suggestiveness, multisensory impressions, and condensation of more remote or abstract realms of thought contained within them. Similar to a poet, Monet does not constrain the purpose or goals of his art to translating or transcribing nature: "Ce qui enchante, en Claude Monet, c'est que, réaliste évidemment, il ne se borne pas à traduire la nature, et ses harmonies chromatiques et plastiques."[386] Though an abundance of chromatic and plastic harmonies in his paintings reflects Monet's fidelity to nature, his art enchants us because it simultaneously reflects his vision and stirs our imagination:

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[383] I agree with Steven Levine's assertion that Mirbeau's inclusion of Puvis de Chavannes within this rarefied category of painters represents a deliberate way of combatting the positions of symbolist poets who eschewed Monet's impressionism. See *Monet and His Critics*, p. 119.

[384] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," *L'art dans les deux mondes*, 7 March 1891, 184.

[385] Ibid.

> C'est une promenade délicieuse et poignante et toute pleine d'intellectuelles surprises, que de le suivre dans cette nature, recréée par son incomparable génie, en cette nature passionnée, remuante, fluidique, où, parmi les sensualités caressantes, le rêve est là….[387]

Monet encourages us to follow him through the paths of nature he has recreated with his incomparable genius. As our imagination strolls down these delightful and poignant promenades of nature full of intellectual surprises, the painter transports us to a place where dream and reality once again intersect: "[L]e rêve est là." As we travel among the tender sensualities brought to life with Monet's brush, our own dream or vision of nature becomes enfolded within the artist's dream; we might even enter into a state of reverie. In the three seasonal tableaux of Monet's garden at the beginning of this essay, Mirbeau endows his evocative images of nature with the very same properties he associates with Monet's paintings – passion, movement, and fluidity. I already have compared these lyrical descriptions of Monet's environment at Giverny to a sort of reverie induced by standing in front of the artist's "maison crépie de mortier rose, au fond d'un jardin, toujours éblouissant de fleurs." Mirbeau's images of Monet's garden and surroundings at Giverny in a certain sense anticipate his ensuing demand for a poetic form of criticism.

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[386] Ibid.

[387] Ibid.

As Steven Levine has suggested, Mirbeau's explications of three paintings that follow his call for critics to renounce their "menues, sèches et stériles analyses" read as highly poetic renderings of Monet's art into words.[388] Let us now turn our attention to analyzing the language and tropes Mirbeau employs both to accentuate specific effects and to reconstruct and transmit his experience of these paintings in a poeticized arrangement of prose.

After devoting the majority of his essay to describing segments of nature that the artist has reshaped both by infusing his own dream and by expressing the inexpressible, ineffable elements embedded within them, Mirbeau curiously turns his attention to three of Monet's more recent figure paintings: *En canot sur l'Epte* (W. 1250), *Essai de figure en plein air (vers la droite*) (W. 1076), and *Portrait de Suzanne aux soleils* (W. 1261). Why would the critic exclude a poetic rendition of Monet's landscapes from these three more elaborate translations of his paintings? We can glean part of the answer to this question from the paragraph following his discussion of the figure paintings: "J'imagine que Claude Monet réserve au public qui ne connaît guère de lui que ses admirables paysages, d'autres surprises."[389] Since most of his figure paintings predate the period in which Monet had earned commercial success and wider acclaim among critics and fellow artists, the public knows him almost exclusively as a landscape painter. The paintings featured in Mirbeau's text perhaps would surprise many readers and enable the critic to avoid repeating the same hackneyed narrative about the artist. His multiple mentions of the *Meules* series in this essay represent another astonishing revelation that Monet held in store for the public. The critic, however, maintained that all of these novel achievements would provide no shock to those intimately acquainted with his art:

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[388] Levine, *Monet and His Critics*, 119.

[389] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," *L'art dans les deux mondes*, 7 March 1891, 185.

> Pour nous qui savons quels rêves hantent ce grand et infatigable cerveau de créateur, ce ne seront pas des surprises, mais bien l'accomplissement prévu, logique, nécessaire de projets longtemps caressés….[390]

Monet's art proceeds through logical development. His assiduous and immensely creative mind nurtures infinite dreams and cultivates manifold projects for long stretches of time. Monet's figure paintings and *Meules* series surface as a necessary and anticipated accomplishment for those viewers who have absorbed his artistic vision through patient study and experience.

Mirbeau's insistence upon the logical progression of Monet's artistic undertakings does not merely serve as a rebuttal to conservative critics who continued to view his paintings as lacking a commensurate level of finish. The critic also respond to more avant-garde symbolist painters who discerned no philosophical substance or content in them beyond a recording of impressions of the visible world. Like all of Monet's figure paintings from this period, the three canvases upon which Mirbeau chose to focus might not ever have been conceived of as 'finished' works. The fact that these paintings remained primarily in Monet's personal collection throughout his life supports an assumption of their rather provisional status.[391] Though Monet would exhibit *Essai de figure en plein air* (*vers la gauche*) and its pendant *Essai de figure en plein air (vers la droite)* as part of his 1891 *Meules* exhibition at Galerie Durand-Ruel, the presence of the word *essai* in both titles also implies that Monet regarded these two works at least as studies. The critic's promotion of figure paintings in this essay also may reflect his own ambitions and predilections regarding the future direction of Monet's art. In a letter to the artist nearly eight years after the publication of this text, Mirbeau exhibits a similar set of preferences. While he continues to lament that Monet had abandoned depicting human subjects, he simultaneously seeks to transform the *Meules* series into a consummate or quintessential form of figure painting in its own right:

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[390] Ibid.

[391] W. 1077 *Essai de figure en plein air* (*vers la gauche)* and W. 1250 *En canot sur l'Epte* never left Monet's Giverny studio. Monet kept W. 1261 *Portrait de Suzanne aux soleils* in his personal collection until 1921 when he gave it to Suzanne's husband Theodore Butler—a painter in his own right.

> Et je vous dirai comme Duret: quel dommage que vous ne vous remettiez pas à la Figure. Vous y seriez, et de beaucoup, le plus fort! Et, je ne sais pourquoi, c'est idiot, mais il semble que la figure ait un caractère de plus grande éternité. Comme si vos meules, par exemple, ça n'était [*sic*] pas des figures! Et quelles figures![392]

As he already had conveyed to Théodore Duret, one of the most eminent and earliest advocates of impressionist artists, Mirbeau considered it unfortunate that Monet had not returned with greater consistency to figure painting. His eloquent expressive gifts assuredly would foster his critical and commercial ascendancy in painting the human figure. Though Mirbeau acknowledges the absurdity and absence of compelling reasoning behind the supposition of figure painting's supremacy, he still feels the need to forward the notion of its superior durability in the history of art over other pictorial genres, including landscape. His conversion of Monet's paintings of 'meules' into figures ("Et quelles figures!") seems rooted in a desire to preserve a proper level of veneration for the artist's achievement in posterity. The critic also had rendered meaningless strict distinctions between figure and landscape painting through a reverse operation in earlier texts, including his essay for the Monet-Rodin retrospective. In a narrative detailing Monet's process of perceiving and depicting instantaneity in a landscape motif, he remarks that these procedures apply equally to painting human figures: "Cette observation s'applique aussi bien aux figures, qui ne sont en réalité qu'un ensemble d'ombres, de lumières, de reflets, toutes choses mobiles et changeantes, qu'au paysage."[393] Landscape coalesces with figure, and figure with landscape. Both represent an accumulation of shadows, lights, reflections, and incessantly stirring and changing phenomena from the critic's point of view. In his rendering of *Essai de figure en plein air (vers la droite)*, we will observe Mirbeau conflating the clothing and delicate bodily features of Monet's stepdaughter Suzanne Hoschedé with the windswept Giverny prairie upon which she strolls. This merger between figure and landscape serves to underscore the harmony, continuity, and internal logic the critic connects with Monet's art.

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[392] Letter no. 105 to Monet, 16 February 1899, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 203-205.

[393] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet" in *Claude Monet-A. Rodin,* 14.

In his treatment of *En canot sur l'Epte* (W. 1250, fig. 36), Mirbeau focuses primarily upon the flow of the river, its shifting reflections, and the fanciful appearance and vitality of the aquatic vegetation below its surface. The young women floating gently along the Epte in a skiff receive less attention with just two indications of their features within the initial portion of his description. The first sentence of Mirbeau's meditation on this image offers our main glimpse at the artist's two eldest stepdaughters, Blanche and Suzanne: "Dans une yole, au repos sur l'eau presque noire, sur l'eau profonde d'une rivière ombragée, dont on ne voit pas la berge que le cadre coupe, deux jeunes filles en robes claires, charmantes de grâce et de souple abandon, sont assises."[394] Though we may distinguish certain aspects of their facial features, hair, hats, and sundry apparel within Monet's painting, Mirbeau confines his description of these two figures to observing the brightness of their dresses and suggesting the graceful charm and supple abandon of their frame and demeanor. He also does not specify anything about the location, size shape, color, or oars of their boat; nor does he refer to how the right edge of the painting crops the skiff and back of one of Monet's daughters. His summary, more impressionistic portrayal of these two young women affords us mostly unlimited reign in our picturing of their appearance, placement, and comportment within the painting. Employing a more

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[394] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," *L'art dans les deux mondes*, 7 March 1891, 184-185.

poetic syntax in this sentence, Mirbeau develops his rendition of the painting through multiple clauses that gradually and alluringly reveal the composition of *En canot sur l'Epte* to his readers. Before we discover anything about whom or what is contained "dans une yole," the critic depicts the water upon which the boat rests in three interdependent ways. Rather than state in more direct and concise prose a French equivalent of "upon the deep, nearly black water of a shaded river," the critic prolongs and enriches our visualization through his more lyrical phrasing. He repeats the prepositional construction "sur l'eau …" first to convey the water's nearly black color and then to show the shaded river's depths. Mirbeau's third clause pertinent to the water intensifies our awareness of its boundaries by calling attention to how the picture's frame ("le cadre") cuts off the riverbank ("la berge") from our view. The background of *En canot sur l'Epte* contains green shrubbery with blue and white blossoms, so a segment of the riverbank definitely does appear within Monet's painting. Confirming the fidelity of Mirbeau's description, the abrupt curtailment of the riverbank in the painting prevents our eye from traveling into deeper illusionistic space and pulls our vision toward the frontal zone of Monet's composition. The long diagonal created by the oar stretching across much of the foreground also points our eye toward the region of flowing currents in front of the skiff. Cradling three faceted views of the river between the gig and the graceful women who canoe upon it, he casts these two figures as secondary to the landscape they inhabit.

In the second sentence, Mirbeau increasingly diverts his focus away from the corporeal presence of the two young women and toward the motion of these deep, dark waters and the reflections upon the river's surface: "Le courant est rapide; il fait trembler, parmi les paillettes de soleil et les verts mouvants des feuilles reflétées, les mauves et roses reflets des robes."[395] He still reaffirms our awareness of the interaction of Monet's stepdaughters with their environment through his reference to the trembling echoes of their mauve and pink dresses in the water below them. We momentarily apprehend fugitive traces of these two figures as the river's rapid current stirs the reflections of their clothing among the sun's spangled rays and the shifting reflections of the green foliage.

If we pause to compare Mirbeau's description of the reflections from the young women's dresses with the colors in Monet's painting, we will notice an absence of mauve hues in their garments. In Monet's painting, the dresses ostensibly consist of either pale pink or even white fabric. So why does Mirbeau refer to "les mauves et roses reflets des robes"? Could he possibly have forgotten the colors of these dresses in *En canot sur l'Epte*, or does something else factor into his description? By calling attention to the pink and mauve reflections of the dresses in the water's swift currents, Mirbeau perhaps demonstrates how Monet senses and represents "la vie intellectuelle" of nature in his images. Color is environmental for Monet. In Monet's painting and Mirbeau's meditation, the reflections of the dresses appear to be pink and mauve because they are affected by the ambient colors of the boat, the water, and the oars.

Mallarméan undertones exist within both this sentence and the remainder of Mirbeau's extended reflections on Monet's paintings. These sometimes veiled allusions to Mallarmé accord with Mirbeau's earlier plea in this essay for critics to "renoncer à ses menues, sèches et stériles analyses" and to reciprocate the evocativeness and eloquence of expression in Monet's art with poetic musings. The literary inspiration the poet offered the critic at the time he was conceiving this very text finds its way into his contemporaneous correspondence with Monet. In the same letter we quoted earlier in relation to Monet's illustrations for this essay, Mirbeau comprehends that the time he spends with Mallarmé revives his intellectual and emotional awareness of the world: "Moi, ces heures passés avec Mallarmé, cela me réchauffe, cela me redonne une conscience."[396] Mirbeau's infusion of Mallarméan themes into his descriptions of Monet's paintings also respects the mutual admiration established between the painter and poet during the late 1880s and early 1890s. Testimony of Mallarmé's high regard for Monet's art includes his commission of a drawing to accompany his poem "La gloire" for an illustrated edition of *Le tiroir de laque*.[397]

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[395] Ibid., 185.

Reminiscent of the unknown lady ("Madame…, l'inconnue") in Mallarmé's *poème en prose* "Le nénuphar blanc," the young women of *En canot sur l'Epte* are at once present and absent, material and immaterial.[398] [399] Mirbeau gradually reveals the graceful charm and supple abandon of Monet's two daughters canoeing along the river in the first sentence only to conceal them from our view in those that follow. The solitary residue of their appearance consists of the transient patterns of their brightly colored dresses reflected in the river. A sampling of two images from "Le nénuphar blanc" will reinforce this connection between Mirbeau's rendering of *En canot sur l'Epte* and Mallarmé's poetry: In the poem's first stanza, the dull sound of his "yole" partially sliding into a clump of reeds ("dans quelque touffe de roseaux") stirs the poet-protagonist from his daydream: "Tant d'immobilité paressait que frôlé d'un bruit inerte où fila jusqu'à moitié la yole.…"[400] Before being arrested by this clump of reeds, the impartial movement of his oar chases away the strips of grass reflected in the waters as he passes indifferently from one landscape to another: “Sans que le ruban d’aucune herbe me retînt devant un paysage plus que l’autre chassé avec son reflet en l’onde par le même impartial coup de rame.…”[401] Mirbeau’s characterization of the boat as “une yole,” along with his allusion to the flickering reflections of the pinks and mauves of the young women’s dresses in the swift current of the river’s dark and deep waters in all likelihood represents a more implicit nod toward Mallarmé’s poetry.[402]

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[396] Letter no. 51 to Monet, around 10 February 1891, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 118-122.

[397] Monet failed to complete this drawing, and Mallarmé never published this project.

[398] Stéphane Mallarmé, "Le nénuphar blanc," in *Collected Poems*, ed. and trans. Henry Weinfield (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1994), 111.

[399] For more extensive discussion of the relations and convergences of artistic aims between Monet, Mallarmé, and Mirbeau, see Steven Levine's chapter "Mallarmé, Women, and Water Lilies (1889-91)," in *Monet, Narcissus, and Self Reflection*, pp. 123-136.

[400] Mallarmé, "Le nénuphar blanc," in *Collected Poems*, 110.

Mirbeau prominently inserts the act of viewing into his description of *En canot sur l’Epte* and uses an impersonal pronoun to allow for the possibility that *we* are the ones looking directly at Monet’s picture: “[O]n ne voit pas la berge que le cadre coupe.” We do not see the banks of this deep, shaded river because the frame cuts it off from our field of vision. When Mirbeau shifts his contemplation to the painting’s foreground, he invokes a third person, disembodied eye (“l’oeil”) that presumably belongs to us as reader-viewers. As we gaze upon the mirrored, shimmery surface of flowing water (“surface brillante, miroitante, courante”), our eye sinks little by little into the wavy freshness of the river’s waters: “[L]’œil, peu à peu enfonce dans cette fraîcheur d’onde.…”[403] In both his images of the garden and his previous cataloguing of landscape motifs the artist had made into his own, Mirbeau includes no specific analysis or discussion of the material components of Monet’s paintings. Within the preceding context, the critic instead invites us to imagine an unmediated view of nature itself as the most faithful translation of Monet’s art into evocative prose. Mirbeau departs from this strategy and leaves no doubt that he is describing nature filtered through a work of art in his portrayal of *En canot sur l'Epte*. In addition to articulating the relationship between the banks of the river and the frame, Mirbeau overtly signals that he is referring to the picture's foreground: "Au premier plan du tableau…."[404] Here the physical boundaries of the painted image operate as an active ingredient in leading a reader-viewer's eye through the critic's verbal rendition of the composition.

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[401] Ibid.

[402] Levine also associates Mirbeau’s imagery of the aquatic plants below the river’s surface to the tufts of reeds in Mallarmé’s “Le nénuphar blanc.” See *Monet, Narcissus, and Self-Reflection*, p. 136.

[403] Mirbeau, “Claude Monet,” *L’art dans les deux mondes*, 7 March 1891, 185.

Mirbeau's clear distinguishing of Monet's painting as his referent in no way precludes him from recreating the sense of animation he observes within the artist's dynamic images of nature. In order to compel our imagination to travel through the water's liquid transparencies until it reaches the golden bed of sand at the bottom of the river ("à travers les transparences liquides, jusqu'au lit de sable d'or"), he unequivocally directs our focus away from the women and their reflections in the river's swift current: "Le drame n'est pas là."[405] Mirbeau perhaps reserves the most poeticized prose for his depiction of the brilliant surface of flowing water and the entire life of lake flora below ("toute une vie florale interlacustre").[406] In describing the area of water that comprises the whole of the foreground ("Au premier plan du tableau qui est d'eau tout entier"), the critic employs present participles ("brillante, miroitante, courante") to suggest the continuous resurgence of its shimmering, reflective, and fluid surface. The mysterious, teeming microcosm of extraordinary underwater plants ("d'extraordinaires végétations submergées") that Monet renders with a dense network of variegated brushstrokes of red, green, yellow, mauve, violet, and white paint proves the most resistant to transformation into words.[407] Richard Shiff and Steven Levine have interpreted Mirbeau's marshaling of such an extensive range of verbs of motion as his means of providing a complement to the flux and range of Monet's abstracted painterly structures.[408] No quantity or combination of words could efficiently and thoroughly compensate for the array of brushstrokes and colors Monet uses to depict the long, threadlike weave of these wild weeds of greenish purple ("de longues algues filamenteuses, fauves, verdâtres, pourprées").[409] Mirbeau's solution to representing the density and totality of Monet's complex pictorial gestures involves comparing the manifold movements and configuration of these voluptuous tangles of plant life with the anatomy of somewhat grotesque or surreal sea creatures. The filamentous weeds writhe, twist, whip, spread, and gather like soft and bizarre locks of hair ("s'agitent, se tordent, s'échevèlent, se dispersent, se rassemblent, molles et bizarres chevelures"); they undulate, wind, turn back around, and stretch similar to strange fish or the fantastic tentacles of marine monsters ("puis ondulent, serpentent, se replient, s'allongent, pareilles à d'étranges poissons, à de fantastiques tentacules de monstres marins").[410] Similar to his multiple iterations of the river's appearance in the first sentence of this passage, Mirbeau's rich accumulation of verbs and animal metaphors serves as a way of stretching or expanding our visualization of his imagery. The critic's extended chain of moving verbs encourages us to imagine the variety and energy of the rhythms Monet creates with his brush; the concentration of action in this sentence emulates the density of marking in this frontal zone of the painting.

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[404] Ibid.
[405] Ibid.
[406] Ibid.
[407] Ibid.

In his meditation on *Essai de figure en plein air* (*vers la droite*) (W. 1076, fig. 1), Mirbeau underscores the fluid relationship between the body and vestment of Monet's image of Suzanne Hoschedé and the components and conditions of the landscape enveloping her. His initial sentence recalls the first one of the preceding passage on *En canot sur l'Epte* with its lyrical phrasing and imbrication of figure and landscape:

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[408] See Shiff, "To move the eyes: Impressionism, Symbolism and well-being, c. 1891," p. 201, and Levine, *Monet and His Critics*, p. 121.

[409] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," *L'art dans les deux mondes*, 7 March 1891, 185.

[410] Ibid.

> Sur un coteau ensoleillé dont on ne voit que l'extrême sommet, terre rose, herbes roussies, en plein ciel, en pleine sonorité de ciel, parmi les nuages blancs et roses, qui se hâtent sur l'azur firmamental, une femme s'avance, svelte, légère, impondérable, un coup de vent dans la mousseline ondulante de son voile, le bas de sa robe un peu soulevée en arrière et balancé par l'envolée de la marche, elle semble glisser au ras des herbes.[411]

An interconnected series of clauses depicting the vegetation, sky, and clouds form a verbal landscape bridge between the sunny hillside and the svelte, light, and imponderable woman who saunters upon it. Just as he did in his description of the river's water, Mirbeau employs repetition to prolong and deepen his image of the sonorous sky hovering above this windswept hillside summit comprised of pink earth and singed grasses: "en plein ciel, en pleine sonorité de ciel." He also uses repetition to convey the proliferation of pink tones among the "terre rose" and "les nuages blancs et roses" in Monet's painting. A correspondence ensues between the movement of the clouds and Suzanne's figure and garments. Her body and drapery share the levity and wispiness of the windblown white and pink clouds. Similar to the way the wind hastens these delicate clouds across the azure firmament, she appears to glide ("glisser") along the grass beneath her feet. Her muslin veil flutters and assumes a puffy cloud-like form as a consequence of a penetrating gust of wind ("un coup de vent"). Propelled by the same weather and atmospheric forces shaping the composition of the sky and clouds, Monet's stepdaughter advances along the sunny hillside with a soaring step ("l'envolée de la marche"); the bottom of her dress lifts from behind in tandem.

In his rendering of *Essai de figure en plein air* (*vers la droite*), Mirbeau expands upon the Mallarméan associations he developed in relation to *En canot sur l'Epte*. Here again we can apply or compare themes and imagery from "Le nénuphar blanc" to Mirbeau's meditation on Monet's painting. The fluctuating relationships between presence and absence, between materiality and immateriality, between dream and reality reverberate throughout Mirbeau's image: "Elle a, dans sa modernité, la grâce lointaine d'un rêve, le charme inattendu d'une aérienne apparition. Regardez-la bien. On dirait que tout à l'heure elle aura passé."[412] As Mirbeau had revealed to his readers in his preceding remarks on the poetic dimensions of Monet's paintings, the artist's dream permeates his passionate, moving, and fluid images of nature ("en cette nature passionnée, remuante, fluidique, … le rêve est là"). Mirbeau's description moreover collapses distinctions between Suzanne's figure and the surrounding landscape. An extension or embodiment of nature, her painted image becomes suffused with Monet's dream or ideal. The merger Mirbeau envisions between Monet's interior dreams and his external vision of nature recalls a line from "Le nénuphar blanc": "Toute je l'évoquais lustrale."[413] Encountering the silvery mist glazing the willows ("la buée d'argent glaçant des saules") on the estate of the unknown lady, the poet-protagonist conjures a lustral image of her in all her perfection and purity.[414] Like the white and pink clouds racing along the azure sky, the figure of Suzanne will shortly pass from our field of vision almost as if she were an apparition. In "Le nénuphar blanc," the poet-protagonist delights in prolonging the fugitive nature of an intimate moment of voyeurism and dreads its imminent dissipation: "Séparés, on est ensemble: je m'immisce à de sa confuse intimité, dans ce suspens sur l'eau où mon songe attarde l'indécise.…"[415] In both Mirbeau's conceptualization of Monet's painting and Mallarmé's poem, the transitory dream will succumb to the passage of time. While emphasizing the object of their gaze soon will flee or will be altered by the discovery of the presence of an onlooker, Mallarmé and Mirbeau invite us as reader-viewers to partake in the ephemeral and sensuous pleasures of the voyeuristic fantasies manifested in their respective texts. In Mallarmé's poem, the poet-protagonist discerns the subtlety of the unknown lady's footsteps and the eroticized, shadowy mysteries contained within the cambric and lace of the flowing skirts enveloping her body from head to toe: "Subtil secret des pieds qui vont, viennent, conduisent l'esprit où le veut la chère ombre enfouie en de la batiste et les dentelles d'une jupe affluent sur le sol comme pour circonvenir du talon à l'orteil…."[416] In Mirbeau's portrayal of Suzanne's image, the undulations of her muslin veil, the gauzy fabric of her fashionable dress, and the graceful steps of her slender figure on the sunny hillside summit impart a dreamlike quality and an unexpected charm to her appearance.

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[411] Ibid.

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[412] Ibid.

[413] Mallarmé, "Le nénuphar blanc," in *Collected Poems*, 110.

[414] Ibid., 111.

[415] Ibid., 112.

Mirbeau continues the coalescing of Suzanne's "svelte, légère, impondérable" body and garments with the atmosphere and features of this breezy landscape throughout his reflection on *Essai de figure en plein air* (*vers la droite*). The critic's intertwining of figure with ground in his translation of Monet's painting amplifies our awareness that the distinctions we normally make between the two are conceptual rather than visual. In nature itself and in Monet's painting, no firm boundaries exist. Bathing her veiled face in golden shade, the parasol Suzanne gracefully holds with her upturned arm assumes the shape of a massive blossoming flower: "L'ombrelle qu'elle porte, en un mouvement délicieux du bras, et qui baigne son visage d'une ombre blonde, s'épanouit au-dessus d'elle comme une grande fleur."[417] Monet's seamless integration of an elegant human figure within the landscape surrounding her inspires Mirbeau to liken even her most inanimate articles to the forms and patterns of growth in nature. The lithe motion of Suzanne's arms transforms an umbrella's shade into the stem and splayed petals of a flower. She effectively regenerates the barren countryside of "terre rose, herbes roussies" through the metamorphosis of her umbrella into a blooming flower. Ambient reflections, tender shadows, and vivid highlights lend a dematerialized or buoyant quality to the fabric of her fluttering dress: "Et ce corps flexible de femme, et cette robe que les reflets fondus ensemble, les ombres douces et les clartés vives, ont faite d'une étoffe innommable, sont des paysages exquis."[418] The seductive interplay of the delicate fabric of her dress and her lissome figure transforms Monet's image of Suzanne into a composite of exquisite landscapes. We should notice here again that the subtlety of Monet's perception of the accumulation of reflections, shadows, and lights upon Suzanne's dress has rendered the texture, weight, and consistency of these fabrics virtually beyond words or unnamable ("innommable"). Mirbeau perhaps places the correlation between nature and the body in high relief within his description of *Essai de figure en plein air* (*vers la droite*) as a means of communicating the more elusive, ineffable properties of Monet's imagery. Harmoniously enveloping figure within the landscape, Monet's eloquent brush evokes the fluid, floating nature of the world of dreams.

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[416] Ibid., 111.

[417] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," *L'art dans les deux mondes*, 7 March 1891, 185.

In similar fashion to his description of *En canot sur l'Epte*, Mirbeau's meditation on *Essai de figure en plein air* (*vers la droite*) explicitly introduces the material and physical dimensions of the picture and seeks to collapse the divide between reading about and viewing a work of art. Just as if we were standing with the critic in front of the actual painting, Mirbeau implores us as reader-viewers to look closely at Suzanne's figure:

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[418] Ibid.

"Regardez-la bien."[419] He also does not veil or conceal the painterly procedures by which Monet has constructed his composition: "Aucune arabesque, rien que des lignes simples, droites, fuyantes, d'une élégance inouïe, d'une pureté, d'une sensibilité, et aussi d'une ampleur de dessin, véritablement magistrales et surprenantes."[420] Perhaps offering a rejoinder to the techniques of symbolist artists and to the adversarial critics of Monet's impressionism, Mirbeau highlights the exceptional elegance along with the sensitivity and breadth of the painter's draftsmanship. Instead of using the pretentious and overly complex arabesques of the symbolists, Monet creates his visual poetry out of nothing but simple, straight, and receding lines. As we observed earlier in our analysis of Mirbeau's remarks about Monet's *Nymphéas* series within the Gsell interview, the critic establishes an equivalency between the artist's techniques and the composition of nature. The simplicity, continuity, and directness of Monet's pictorial means collapse the distance between nature and art. Only the most evocative forms of prose can aspire to capture some of the purity, sensitivity, and breadth of drawing manifested within Monet's "paysages exquis."

In his subsequent meditation on *Portrait de Suzanne aux soleils* (W. 1261, fig. 37),[421] the critic further emphasizes the affinities between the painter and the poet by explicitly comparing Monet's haunting image of his stepdaughter to "quelqu'une de ces figures de femme, spectres d'âme comme en évoquent tels poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé."[422] Having assessed in detail Mirbeau's principal thematic, rhetorical, and linguistic strategies and procedures within our examination of his poetic renderings of *En*

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[419] Ibid.

[420] Ibid.

[421] *Portrait de Suzanne aux soleils* (W. 1261) is one of Monet's least known paintings. Images of the work are almost always reproduced in black and white. The painting has continued to remain in private collections to the present day.

[422] Ibid.

canot sur l'Epte and *Essai de figure en plein air* (*vers la droite*), we will briefly touch upon the two distinguishing features of this passage. The first relates to his composition of two presumably unanswerable questions with lyrical phrasing to engage directly with a reader's imagination: "Énigmatique, les yeux vagues, un bras pendant, toute son attitude molle et charmante de nonchaloir, à quoi pense-t-elle? On ne sait pas. A-t-elle de l'ennui, de la douleur, du remords, quel est le secret de son âme? On ne sait pas."[423] Mirbeau's first question heightens our sense of the enduring listlessness and dolor of her bodily features by representing them almost exclusively with a series of nouns and adjectives. He reserves the single verb until the final clause of his question and uses it to suggest mental or emotional activity in lieu of a physical one. The first word *énigmatique* anticipates Mirbeau's response to the initial question he poses to his readers regarding the thoughts of this woman. With her vague eyes, her drooping arm, and the nonchalance of her languid yet charming bearing, she presents herself as an unsolvable riddle, and, as such, we never can know what she is thinking. In the second question, he does not amplify additional aspects of her external traits but instead asks his readers to ponder her emotional state. Is it one of ennui, sadness, or regret? Neither viewing the actual painting nor visualizing it through Mirbeau's words will allow us to access the secret of her soul.

The second unique feature of this passage on *Portrait de Suzanne aux soleils* relates to the intensity of the recurrence of the word "l'ombre." Though we already have observed Mirbeau employ word repetition on a smaller scale to expand or protract description of certain features in his meditations on the first two paintings, Mirbeau uses "l'ombre" seven times throughout his representation of this image. The few extant reproductions of this portrait confirm the predominance of shadows in the painting. The only light appears to emanate from the three immense sunflowers ("ces trois fleurs de soleil, immenses"). Intensifying further the mysterious, dreamlike qualities of this shadowy interior, two of these three flowers are reputedly a product of Monet's imagination.[424] The sunflowers are the single elements to which Mirbeau ascribes movement or action in this painting: "[C]es ces trois fleurs de soleil, immenses, qui s'élancent d'un vase, placé près d'elle, sur la table de laque, montent, tournent au-dessus et en avant de son front, pareilles à trois astres, sans rayonnement…."[425] These massive blooms soar up ("s'élancent") from the vase situated upon the lacquer table. They ascend ("montent") and turn ("tournent") above and in front of Suzanne's forehead like three rayless stars. The great majority of Suzanne's figure and her surroundings appears shrouded in mysterious shadow. We first encounter her languidly sitting in shadowy mystery ("de l'ombre, du mystère"), in shade that bathes her completely ("de l'ombre dont elle est toute baignée"), and in transparent yet deep shadows ("de l'ombre transparente et profonde").[426] The contours of her mauve dress blend with and turn into a deeper shade of purple as they dissolve into the violet shadows: "Sa robe mauve, d'un mauve qui va se violaçant, se perdant, avec les contours, dans l'ombre violette…."[427] Unable to penetrate the secrets of her soul, Mirbeau characterizes her as being strange as the shadows that completely envelop her: "Sa robe mauve, d'un mauve qui va se violaçant, se perdant, avec les contours, dans l'ombre violette…."[428] Like stars that seemingly emerge from nowhere, these immense sunflowers provide a counterpoint to the enveloping shadows by adding a tinge of dawn, a retreat of shadow, to the overall mysteriousness, to the receding of the ambient shadows: "[C]es soleils, immense ... à trois astres venus on ne sait d'où, et qui ajoutent un mystère d'aube, un recul d'ombre, au mystère, au recul de l'ombre ambiante…."[429] Mirbeau's relentless repetition of shadow imagery offers a metaphorical and visual complement to her enigmatic state of mind. As we visualize the languorous, doleful image Mirbeau produces from his experience of Monet's portrait of Suzanne, the pervasiveness of shadows and shade provides further confirmation of the inscrutability of her thoughts.

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[423] Ibid.

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[424] If we trust the American painter Lilla Cabot Perry's recollection of a studio visit to Monet, there was only one sunflower in a vase when the artist was painting this portrait of his stepdaughter. Perry writes, "In a vase in front of her was one life size [*sic*] sunflower, and she was painted full length but not quite life size as she was a little behind the sunflower." See Perry, "Reminiscences of Claude Monet from 1889 to 1900, " *The American Magazine of Art* 18, no. 3 (March 1927): 123.

[425] Ibid.

[426] Ibid.

[427] Ibid.

[428] Ibid.

Having opened his essay with a series of landscapes rendered in evocative prose, Mirbeau closes it with a figure painting of his own – a portrait of the artist conceived from two different aspects. Though the language comprising this portrait assumes a far more pedestrian and journalistic tone than his seasonal variations on Monet's garden, Mirbeau's final image of the painter fulfills one of art criticism's most fundamental and achievable purposes. As he argued on multiple occasions, including within his subsequent essay on Félix Vallotton, admiration of the beauty of a work of art followed by silence represents a critic's most expedient and respectful mode of address: "Le mieux serait d'admirer ce qu'on est capable d'admirer, et, ensuite, de se taire…ah!, oui, de se taire."[430] Excepting poetry, adulatory words best accommodate what a critic can say about a work of art and may offer the most faithful portrayal of an artist's achievement. An admittedly more oblique form of portraiture, Mirbeau's first approach to constructing his image of Monet involves framing and praising the trajectory of his artistic project. The artist becomes embodied within the works he painted. Possibly to connect this image to other themes explored in his essay, Mirbeau introduces a metaphorical road comparable to the one he had employed in his appeal for critics to render their experience of Monet's paintings in poetic form. The critic previously encouraged our minds to follow Monet down a delightful and poignant promenade in a world of nature recreated by his incomparable genius. In the present context, Mirbeau invokes the unrivalled road Monet himself has traveled to encapsulate the breadth and scope of his artistic development:

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[429] Ibid.

[430] Mirbeau, "Sur M. Félix Vallotton," n.p.

> Depuis *le Port de Honfleur* et *l'Église Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois,* d'une si belle tenue classique, et qui fait songer au plus purs Canaletto, jusqu'aux extraordinaires meules qu'il acheva cet hiver, que de chemin parcouru! Que de conquêtes, d'année et d'année![431]

Through an uninterrupted sequence of successful artistic conquests from one year to another, Monet has forged a remarkable path from his early paintings of urban environments whose classical tenor recalls the purest Canaletto's to his extraordinary grainstack series completed over the past winter. The artist's initial point of departure may echo classical traditions from the history of art, but his future path leads us toward the farthest limits of progress ("vers l'au-delà du progrès").[432] Monet's continuous production of masterpieces goes hand in hand with his superior moral strength, and nothing can quell or abate this formidable combination: "C'est une chose rare, et digne de la plus haute admiration, que cette perpétuelle poussée de chefs-d'œuvre, et cette superbe santé morale que rien n'amollit, que rien n'abat."[433] In retracing the path Monet has followed, we observe something of the tenacity and fortitude of his character reflected in his perpetual outpouring of original and exceptional works of art.

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[431] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," *L'art dans les deux mondes*, 7 March 1891, 185.
[432] Ibid.
[433] Ibid.

The second aspect of Mirbeau's portrait of Monet situates the painter directly in the environment the critic represented so vividly and evocatively at the beginning of his essay:

> Et j'aime cet homme qui, maintenant, pourrait ambitionner toutes les vanités que la célébrité donne à ses élus, je l'aime de le voir, dans l'intervalle de ses travaux, en manches de chemise, les mains noires de terreau, la figure halée de soleil, heureux de semer des graines, dans son jardin toujours éblouissant de fleurs, sur le fond riant et discret de sa petite maison crépie de mortier rose.[434]

The frame Mirbeau establishes for his image of the artist mirrors the one he created for his tableaux of the garden. In the 'foreground,' we find the artist sowing seeds in his garden always dazzling with flowers, and the house roughcast in pink mortar remains in the 'background.' The distinction between the introduction and conclusion of his essay resides in the progression or flow of the critic's image. Instead of leading his readers from background to foreground, Mirbeau reverses this order in his concluding portrait of the artist by presenting the flowers first and only then, the backdrop ("le fond") of the garden. Though he incorporates the adjectives pleasant and discreet ("riant et discret") to vary and enhance his description of the painter's home, Mirbeau produces an effect of symmetry through repeating the phrases "jardin toujours éblouissant de fleurs" and "maison crépie de mortier rose" from the opening of his text. Resembling a musical chorus or some sort of poetic refrain, his essay begins and ends with the exact same words: "maison crépie de mortier rose." Mirbeau further enhances symmetry from the opening to the conclusion of his text by not showing the artist at work on a painting. He instead presents Monet enjoying a bit of respite from painting through toiling within his dazzling spread of flowers. We begin with a reverie on the garden filtered through Mirbeau's vision, and we end with a picture of the man who created this living work of art with his own earth-soiled hands. Mirbeau's image of the artist with his sleeves rolled up, hands darkened with compost, and suntanned face reinforces Monet's tireless commitment to labor and his rejection of the vain ambitions and trappings of celebrity and material wealth. Similar to the way Mirbeau collapses the divisions between figure and landscape in his descriptions of Monet's paintings, the critic endows the artist with the same regenerative and creative powers as nature itself. The artist selects and sews the seeds to renew his forever-resplendent display of flowers. His physical body has absorbed and manifests the ingredients and energetic forces of nature: The sun has tanned his skin, and the soil has blackened his hands. Whether Mirbeau is describing the artist or his environment, he foregrounds the role of vision: "Je l'aime de le voir.…" We see and imagine Monet through Mirbeau's eyes.

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[434] Ibid.

SECTION THREE: THE DESIROUS EYE, THE RESISTANT HAND: DOUBT AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF EXPRESSION IN MONET'S ART AND MIRBEAU'S LITERATURE

During the period in which Monet was working on *En canot sur l'Epte*, he penned a letter to Geffroy conveying a seemingly insurmountable challenge. This letter describes his struggle to depict what Mirbeau later identified in his essay as "[l]e drame" of this painting: "J'ai repris encore des choses impossibles à faire: de l'eau avec de l'herbe qui ondule dans le fond… c'est admirable à voir, mais, c'est à rendre fou de vouloir faire ça. Enfin je m'attaque toujours à ces choses-là."[435] As evidenced by this remark, the artist made a regular habit of painting impossible things. In attempting to represent the Epte's flowing waters and undulating grasses, Monet was taking up yet again ("repris encore") a motif he sensed was beyond his grasp. Though he recognized his desire to translate such complex visual phenomena into paint could drive him toward madness ("c'est à rendre fou"), he remained undeterred in his pursuit. The painter always ("toujours") would gravitate toward those aspects of nature that would test the limits of his brush, and quite possibly, his emotional sanity. Perhaps even more important for the purposes of our discussion, Monet's letter also reveals an unwavering source of this impossibility – a disconnect between the hand and eye. His eye sees and marvels at the exquisite twisting of aquatic plants in the river's depths ("c'est admirable à voir"), but his hand poses doubts about his ability to formulate a range of colors and brushstrokes necessary to transfer their motion and fluidity onto the surface of the canvas.

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[435] "Letter to Geffroy," 22 June 1890, L. 1060.

Steven Levine has traced and assessed the psychological underpinnings of Monet's preoccupation with "des choses impossibles à faire" and several other recurring expressions of doubt in his correspondence. We accordingly will forego dwelling too extensively over the same body of evidence.[436] A small sampling of Monet's letters cited in Levine's studies will suffice to demonstrate an arguably compulsive repetition of this theme. In a letter to his friend and fellow artist Paul Helleu, Monet explains that the combination of his emotionally and physically demanding painting regimen and countless discouraging days spent grappling with the climate of Antibes have prevented him from writing lately: "Je ne pensais pas du reste être si longtemps ici, je n'en finis plus avec mes toiles; plus je vais, plus je cherche l'impossible et plus je me sens impuissant."[437] Never imagining he would have devoted so much time to painting at Antibes and its environs, Monet resigns himself to the possibility of departing with no finished pictures to show for all of his labors. The further he pushes himself to find a pictorial equivalent for the scintillating colors, light, and atmosphere of southern France, the more poignantly he realizes he has devised an impossible task. A sense of expressive powerlessness ("je me sens impuissant") ensues from the intensity and duration of his study of Antibes. Reporting from Rouen to Alice during the following decade, he emphasizes the impossibility of what he aims to represent in painting the medieval cathedral's façade: "[Ç]a n'avance pas sensiblement, d'autant que chaque jour je découvre des choses non vues la veille: j'ajoute et je perds certaines choses. Enfin, je cherche l'impossible."[438] With the passing of each day, Monet feverishly observes the constantly changing facets of his motif. His hand struggles to keep up with the nuances his eye perceives. While he adds certain discoveries to his canvases, he despairs over losing others in the process of adjusting his palette and brushwork to the mutable weather and light conditions he discerns. In the end ("enfin"), the artist realizes that he is seeking to capture the impossible in painting the light, shadow, and atmosphere enveloping the Rouen Cathedral. Monet's search for the means to depict "l'impossible" extends all the way to the final achievement of his artistic career – *'les Grandes Décorations.'* Despite having devoted nearly two decades to observing and painting the reflections upon his waterlily pond at Giverny, the artist writes to Geffroy to express his persistent displeasure with the latest results of his efforts:

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[436] See Levine, "Monet's Series: Repetition, Obsession," *October* 37 (Summer 1986): 65-75, and a full array of passages from *Monet, Narcissus, and Self-Reflection*.
[437] "Letter to Paul Helleu," 10 March 1888, L. 854.

> Naturellement, je continue travailler ferme, ce qui ne veut pas dire que je sois satisfait. Hélas non! Et je crois que je mourrai sans avoir pu arriver à faire quelque chose à mon gré. Je cherche toujours à mieux faire (comme le Md [marchand] de conserves), mais sans grand résultat, car je cherche l'impossible.[439]

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[438] "Letter to Alice Hoschedé," 9 April 1892, L. 1151.

[439] "Letter to Gustave Geffroy," 10 September 1918, L. 2281.

Monet never doubted the solidity and dependability of his work ethic, but his continuous laboring over massive canvases of the waterlily pond and the weeping willows lining its perimeter provided no assurance of obtaining any modicum of satisfaction. His letter takes a more morbid turn with Monet's bleak prophecy of dying without producing any canvases to his liking ("à mon gré") in order to fulfill his bequest to the French state. Though he provides a little levity in the following sentence with a pun about the canning company *Amieux*,[440] his unremitting quest always to do better ("toujours à mieux faire") ultimately offers meager consolation to the painter. He can gain little from improving upon prior efforts when he seeks to achieve the impossible.

We regrettably have not unearthed any surviving letters from Monet to Mirbeau that voice his frustrations and doubts about painting "des choses impossibles à faire." We can, however, surmise from the critic's private correspondence with and published texts about the artist that he received an ample share of these doubt-filled sentiments from Monet. At the conclusion of his catalogue essay on the *London* series, Mirbeau directly references episodes of flagging confidence similar to those that Monet will later confess to Geffroy in his 1918 letter concerning '*les Grandes Décorations*':

> Ces toiles représentant quatre années d'observations réfléchies, d'efforts acharnés, de prodigieux labeur. Je puis en parler, moi qui ai vu à l'œuvre M. Claude Monet. Dire le doute, les découragements, les inquiétudes lancinantes par où, devant cette tâche gigantesque qu'il s'était donnée, passa M. Claude Monet, cela ne regarde personne, et c'est d'ailleurs la fortune habituelle des artistes scrupuleux. Le résultat seul importe.[441]

The critic underlines his considerable familiarity and intimacy with Monet's paintings and artistic procedures in this passage. As someone who had seen and studied Monet's paintings (“moi qui ai vu à l’œuvre M. Claude Monet”), Mirbeau felt justified in speaking from the position of an eyewitness and authority in spite of the misgivings he shares about the role of the art critic at the head of this essay: “Je puis en parler.…” Echoing what Monet had confided to Geffroy about his resolve to “travailler ferme,” the critic sees four years’ worth of relentless efforts (“d’efforts acharnés”) and tremendous labor (“de prodigieux labeur”) embodied within the *London* canvases. In painting his succession of views of the Thames accompanied by the Charing Cross Bridge, Waterloo Bridge, or Houses of Parliament, Monet had devised for himself a monumental (if not impossible) task (“cette tâche gigantesque”). Mirbeau openly acknowledges that “le doute, les découragements, les inquiétudes lancinantes” had figured into Monet’s production of the *London* series, but he quickly follows by negating any need to disclose the particulars in print: “[C]ela ne regarde personne.” As we also saw in Monet’s letter to Geffroy, results mattered to the artist as much as they did to Mirbeau. Since “[l]e résultat seul importe,” why did Mirbeau feel compelled to share with his readers that pessimism, discouragement, and nagging uncertainties had afflicted Monet in his design of the *London* series? Could it be that the critic regarded Monet’s combination of persistent doubt and ambition to tackle (“je m’attaque”) pictorially challenging elements such as the mist, fog, and smoke of London’s urban landscape as integral components of the artist’s creative process?

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[440] See Wildenstein's footnote to L. 2281, 4:400.

[441] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," in *Vues de la Tamise à Londres* (1902-1904) (Paris: Galeries Durand-Ruel, 1904), 7.

While living in an old turreted mansion in the Breton village of Kérisper, Mirbeau sent Monet a letter during the fall of 1887 cautioning him about the dangers of always seeking to do better (“Je cherche toujours à mieux faire …”). Before proceeding to a more pointed form of criticism or counsel, Mirbeau opens his letter with empathetic words: “Je comprends vos angoisses, vos découragements, parce que je ne connais pas d’artiste sincère qui ne les ait éprouvés et qui n’ait été injuste, absolument injuste vis-à-vis de lui-même."[442] A sincere artist like Monet inevitably will experience anxiety and despondence ("vos angoisses, vos découragements"). We might even infer from Mirbeau's observation that being an "artiste sincère" obliges periods of doubt. Though the critic understands Monet's predicament, his repetition and intensification of the word "injuste" with "absolument" conveys to a certain extent his dismay over the painter's unremitting self-flagellation. A sincere artist admittedly will subject herself to unfair and absolutely unjust forms of self-censure, but the remainder of Mirbeau's letter projects a desire for Monet to retreat from his absorption within this creatively destructive mindset. Mirbeau goes so far as to characterize Monet's preoccupation with doing better as an obsession ("une maladie") or even a mania ("une folie"): "Que vous dirai-je, mon ami…? Vous êtes atteint d'une maladie, d'une folie, la maladie du toujours mieux."[443] A quest for rendering impossible things in an increasingly eloquent manner can precipitate madness. Mirbeau's rhetorical question of "Que vous dirai-je, mon ami…?" preceding his diagnosis of Monet's condition might betray a mild form of frustration or exasperation. What could he possibly tell the painter at this point to dissuade him from pursuing these obstinately ingrained perfectionistic ends? Monet's letter over thirty years later to Geffroy plainly attests to the fact that the artist did not heed Mirbeau's advice to curtail his relentless pursuit of always doing better.

Despite Monet's continued susceptibility to "la maladie du toujours mieux," Mirbeau's letter merits examination for what it reveals regarding his thoughts on expressive limitations in paint or in words. As we already observed in the critic's subsequent essay for the Monet-Rodin retrospective, the artist had transcended the normal boundaries of what a painting could accomplish by evoking an impression in a viewer of standing in the midst of nature itself.[444] Possessing such compelling painterly gifts, Monet had exhibited some degree of foolhardiness in scraping away and destroying an undisclosed number of canvases: "Vos toiles grattées? Ah! quelle folie! Et je suis convaincu qu'il y en avait dans le nombre d'admirable, et que toutes avaient la griffe de ce que vous êtes…."[445] Promising paintings certainly had existed among the lot; all of them could and *should* have been salvaged because they bore the imprint of Monet's artistic temperament. Instead of destroying his canvases, the artist could have reclaimed them for the vitality of their impressions. Even at this relatively early stage of their relationship, Monet apparently had conveyed his skepticism concerning Mirbeau's penchant for hyperbole: "Ne croyez pas que j'exagère ce que je pense de vous. Non."[446] In order to alleviate any of Monet's suspicions about the reliability of Mirbeau's encouraging words, the critic summons his recent conversations with their mutual friend Rodin to substantiate his estimation of the artist's paintings:

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[442] Letter no. 13 to Monet, around 10 September 1887, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 50-51.

[443] Ibid.

> Rodin, qui vient de passer quinze jours avec nous, est comme moi. Nous avons causé de vous, combien de fois, et si vous saviez quel respect, quelle tendre admiration Rodin a [*sic*] pour vous! Dans la campagne, sur la mer, devant un horizon lointain, un frissonnement de feuillages, une fuite de mer changeante, il s'écriait avec un enthousiasme qui en disait long : 'Ah que c'est beau. – C'est un Monet!' Il n'avait jamais vu l'Océan, et il l'a reconnu d'après vos toiles; vous lui en avez donné l'exacte et vibrante sensation.[447]

Confirming the didactic potential both Mirbeau and Geffroy had ascribed to Monet's art, Rodin seems to have learned to see nature more clearly through viewing his paintings. In Rodin's encounters with the waters and fields of Brittany, nature's beauty conforms to the design of Monet's art. The sea's surging waves, the countryside, a distant horizon, or the trembling of leaves resemble “un Monet.” Like Mirbeau, Rodin experiences a virtual equivalency between the effects of Monet’s paintings and nature itself. Rodin or any other viewer ostensibly can learn to see and feel nature more intensely through studying Monet’s pristine transmission of its “exacte et vibrante sensation.”

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[444] See my discussion of this passage in the preceding section of Part Two, "Exprimer l'inexprimable."
[445] Letter no. 13 to Monet, around 10 September 1887, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 50-51.
[446] Ibid.
[447] Ibid.

If Monet still doubted the poignancy of the sensations his painting had elicited in Mirbeau and Rodin, the critic sought to provide the artist with some perspective in relation to his incomparable potential to convey nature’s complexity: “[V]ous êtes, c’est-à-dire le plus grand, le plus sensible, le plus compréhensif artiste de ce temps.”[448] Mirbeau’s subsequent remarks demonstrate a desire for Monet to moderate his expectations regarding “des choses impossibles à faire.” The painter’s obsessive devotion to depicting the most elusive and subtle nuances of a landscape would prove futile because any representation of nature could never fully capture all of its mysteries:

> Mais il est un point que l’homme ne peut dépasser. La nature est tellement merveilleuse, qu’il est impossible à n’importe qui de la rendre comme on la ressent; et croyez bien qu’on la ressent, moins belle encore qu’elle n’est, c’est un mystère.[449]

Though Monet perhaps succeeded more than any other painter in evoking a feeling or experience of nature in a viewer, he too could not exceed certain perceptual, sensory, and expressive limits. Nature’s infinite marvels evade the greatest, most sensitive, and comprehensive artist of his time, and impossibility derives from an irreconcilable divide between feeling and expression. No matter the artist, no matter the medium, she will never be able to render nature exactly as she feels it. Even Monet’s penetrating eye does not allow him to feel and apprehend the entire scope of nature’s beauty; its exquisite spectacle always will operate at a remove from his faculties of vision and expression: "C'est un mystère."

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[448] Ibid.
[449] Ibid.

As Mirbeau would maintain in his catalogue essay on the *London* series, we relate to a work of art primarily or most profoundly on the level of feeling: "L'œuvre d'art se sent et on la sent, et inversement; rien de plus."[450] In his 1890 letter to Geffroy on the *Meules* series, Monet too emphasized his aspirations to render what he felt or experienced above all else: "Enfin, je suis de plus en plus enragé du besoin de rendre ce que j'éprouve…."[451] Feelings defy full transference or translation into painted marks or words. The method for escaping madness or folly entails recognition of certain unsurpassable boundaries between feeling and painting, between transient sensory impressions and the inexhaustibility of nature's beauty. Though Monet could see, sense, and represent far more than his fellow artists or authors, certain dimensions of nature's mysteries would remain impermeable to perceiving and representing in a painting. From Mirbeau's perspective, Monet's inability or unwillingness to curtail his pursuit of impossible things undermined his artistic development. When held in check, Monet's doubt and his desire to refine his pictorial means served as a vital signifier and ingredient of being an "artiste sincère." His relentless search for ways to render the inaccessible, impossible reaches of nature could have devolved into madness, but Monet quite fortunately acquiesced and ultimately did not scrape away the entirety of his canvases.

Our examination of Mirbeau's views about the role and potential of art criticism in the initial section of Part Two revealed the extent to which pessimism and impossibility occupied a prominent position within his discourse. We also touched briefly upon how the critic's thoughts about the imprecision and inadequacy of language to encapsulate visual experience permeated into multiple aspects of his literary production, including his writing of novels. We may recall here a remark he made in a letter to Monet while embroiled in the composition of *Sébastien Roch* in 1887: "Et quel atroce martyre, cette certitude où l'on est de ne rien faire qui vaille, le supplice de voir de belles choses au-dessus de soi, et de ne pouvoir saisir."[452] The torture ("le supplice") of the insuperable gulf between vision and expression, between thought and language plagued Mirbeau in writing as profoundly as it did Monet in painting. Mirbeau's eye outstrips the words produced from his pen, and an atrocious agony ("atroce martyre") stems from sensing the permanence and inevitability of these conditions. Around the period in which Monet was developing his procedures of working in series to render more completely what he felt ("rendre ce que j'éprouve"), the extent of Mirbeau's doubt and disgust with literature had become even more severe and pronounced within his correspondence with the artist: "Par-dessus le marché, la littérature m'embête au-delà de tout. J'arrive à cette conviction qu'il n'y a rien de plus vide, rien de plus bête, rien de plus parfaitement abject que la littérature."[453] The absolute emptiness, stupidity and contemptibility of literary commerce ("le marché") irritate him beyond anything else. While the natural sciences discover new worlds and continue to penetrate more deeply into the mysteries of life, even the venerable literature of Flaubert continues to read as an illusion of hollow words ("une illusion de mots creux").[454] Mirbeau laments that his age and domestic situation preclude him from abandoning literature for the more affirmative realms of chemistry, anatomy, geology, or paleontology: "Et ce qu'il y a de plus terrible, c'est l'impuissance où je suis, moi particulièrement de sortir de cette crasse intellectuelle, de ce mensonge, de cette objection."[455] Mirbeau concludes by contrasting his inescapable "crise de cerveau" with the strength, vision, and creative fecundity of Monet's art:

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[450] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," in *Vues de la Tamise à Londres*, 3.

[451] "Letter to Geffroy," 7 October 1890, L. 1076.

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[452] Letter no. 26 to Monet, around the beginning of February 1889, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 72-74.

[453] Letter no. 43 to Monet, around 25 July 1890, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 101-105.

[454] Ibid.

> Ah! vous qui êtes fort et un voyant, et qui avez le génie de la créative, vous qui travaillez à des choses vraies et saines, dites-vous bien que vous êtes heureux et un élu de la vie, et que vous avez tort de vous plaindre.[456]

The limpidity of the painter's eye ("un voyant") enables him to strive toward true and healthy things ("des choses vraies et saines"). As an exceptional individual ("un élu"), Monet should avoid complaining about his artistic plight. His trouble extends from his constant desire to attain the impossible, and Mirbeau again warns him against the folly of such pursuits: "Ne vous martyrisez pas à vouloir l'impossible."[457] The martyrdom of impossibility derails and deters Monet from creating "des choses vraies et saines."

Although Mirbeau had committed to sending installments of his novel *Le journal d'une femme de chambre* to the newspaper *L'écho de Paris*, he penned another despondent letter to Monet during the early portion of September 1891 to report his prolonged literary torpor: "Je ne travaille pas beaucoup, le jardin m'absorbe beaucoup, et puis je suis dégoûté, de plus en plus, de l'infériorité des romans, comme manière d'expression."[458] His "crise de cerveau" evidently had not abated. We also can notice some rather overt similarities in tone and phrasing between Mirbeau's remark and many of Monet's letters. Monet's October 1890 letter to Geffroy pertaining to his *Meules* series here again can serve as an illuminating comparison. Mirbeau displays a familiar degree of obsessiveness as gardening engrosses his attention ("le jardin m'absorbe beaucoup") to the exclusion of almost everything else, especially his literary obligations. At the point when Monet was developing his *Meules* series, things that could be easily dashed off on the first attempt had begun to disgust the artist more than ever ("et plus que jamais les choses faciles venues d'un jet me dégoûtent"). In a similar fashion, Mirbeau feels increasingly repulsed ("je suis dégoûté, de plus en plus,") by the inferiority of his most familiar genre of literary expression – the novel.[459] We also may observe a mirroring of Monet's language in Mirbeau's reliance upon "de plus en plus" – a rather prevalent phrase within Monet's letters.

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[455] Ibid.

[456] Ibid.

[457] Ibid.

[458] Letter no. 54 to Monet, around the beginning of September 1891, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 126-128. As Michel and Nivet explain in a footnote to this letter: "Le 1er décembre, Valentin Simond – à qui Mirbeau a promis *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* pour *L'écho de Paris*, raconte à Goncourt, sans doute en septembre ou en octobre, la visite d'Alice Mirbeau venue se plaindre de la paresse de son mari." See footnote no. 1, p. 127.

With the passing of each day, Mirbeau and Monet become more and more aware of the expressive complications they needed to surmount in order to render their feelings fully and faithfully. As Monet states in his letter to Geffroy: "Enfin, je suis de plus en plus enragé du besoin de rendre ce que j'éprouve…."[460] The restrictiveness of things that came easily continued to trouble Monet and likely operated as a motivating factor for working in series. As Monet apparently remarked to the American impressionist painter Théodore Robinson in 1892, he sought to surpass the sketch-like notations of transient impressions from his earlier years in order to suffuse his paintings with "more serious qualities":

> He said that he regretted he could not work in the same spirit as once, speaking of the sea sketch Sargent liked so much. At that time anything that pleased him, no matter how transitory, he painted, regardless of the inability to go further than one painting. Now it is only a long continued effort that satisfies him, and it must be an important motif, that is sufficiently inspiring – … 'If what I do no longer has the charm of youth, then I hope it has some more serious qualities and that one might live for longer with these canvases.'[461]

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[459] "Letter to Geffroy," 7 October 1890, L. 1076.

[460] Ibid.

[461] Theodore Robinson, MS Diary, 3 June 1892 (New York: Frick Art Reference Library); quoted in John House, "Monet: The Last Impressionist," in *Monet in the 20th Century*, Paul Hayes Tucker, John House, and MaryAnne Stevens, eds. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 8.

A summarily rendered transcription of a fleeting phenomenon on a single canvas no longer functioned as a satisfying pictorial format or artistic procedure. Working in series enabled Monet to prolong his concentration on the changing aspects of a motif and to introduce a richer sense of duration into his art. Mirbeau's letter professes a comparable desire to transcend the formulaic constraints of the novel, particularly in the face of nature's complexity: "Tout en le simplifiant, au point de vue *romanesque*, cela reste toujours une chose très basse, au fond, très vulgaire; et la nature me donne chaque jour, un dégoût plus profond, plus invincible, des petits moyens" (original emphasis).[462] The author's intimate contact with nature through his garden heightened his revulsion toward the crudeness and vulgarity purportedly intrinsic to the novel. Its limited means ("des petits moyens") seemed to have thwarted Mirbeau's ability to make the kind of truthful and life-affirming art he associated with Monet. As a mode of expression ("comme manière d'expression"), the novel distorted or impoverished his experience of the world.

Just as Monet sought to capture "more serious qualities" through painting in series, Mirbeau aimed to shatter the novel's reductive framework and develop a more immediate and expansive literary format: "Je vais me mettre à tenter du théâtre, et puis à réaliser, ce qui me tourmente depuis longtemps, une série de livres, d'idées et de sensations, sans le cadre du roman."[463] Mirbeau especially fulfilled his playwriting aspirations with his production of *Affaires sont les affaires* – a biting satire on French society and commerce in the Third Republic. This comedy would earn him international critical success in the realm of theatre during the early years of the twentieth century. Mirbeau's proposal in this sentence to address his torments once and for all through a series of books comprised of pure ideas and sensations holds more considerable interest for our purposes here. His use of the term "une série" in the context of a letter to Monet also introduces the possibility that Mirbeau regarded his effort to work "sans le cadre du roman" as a literary parallel to the artist's innovatory method of painting. Mirbeau could emulate the fluid effects of Monet's series in his literature by breaking from a novel's more rigidly structured framework. No longer tethered to a need to advance a plot or to sustain any sort of narrative logic, he could more closely approximate the nonsequential, disjointed nature of thought and feeling in the pages of a book. The burdens of character development and preserving a storyline's progression hardly correspond with an uninterrupted flow of ideas and sensations in the experiential world. In dispensing with these demands, Mirbeau could compensate more readily for the linearity of language with a more saccadic or impressionistic form of writing.

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[462] Letter no. 54 to Monet, around the beginning of September 1891, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 126-128.
[463] Ibid.

As Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet contend in their gloss of this letter, the present subject of his consternation, *Le journal d'une femme de chambre*, nominally functioned as a novel, but its fragmentary structure already represented a meaningful departure from the genre's conventions.[464] From their point of view, however, *Dans le ciel* constituted Mirbeau's first unequivocal attempt at writing a book of pure ideas and sensations; they even brand this work as "[un] roman 'impressionniste.'"[465] In the remainder of this section, we will turn our focus toward *Dans le ciel* and inspect a few meditations by the hapless painter Lucien on the complications and limitations of expression. Lucien's obsessive and ill-fated quest to paint impossible things from a dog's cry to everything a blind man can see devolves into madness and, ultimately, suicide, but a number of his ideas about art resonate strongly with Mirbeau and Monet's own creative and expressive doubts. We then will close with a passage from Mirbeau's last article on Monet in which he portrays the painter's achievement of the impossible in his *Venice* series – a virtually complete reconciliation of the divide between the eye and the hand.

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[464] See footnote no. 5, p. 127 in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*.

[465] Ibid.

Characterized by Mirbeau scholar Robert Ziegler as a "drama of creative paralysis,"[466] *Dans le ciel* appeared in serial format in *L'écho de Paris* virtually every Tuesday from 20 September 1892 through 2 May 1893.[467] Consistent with both theme of artistic impotence and Mirbeau's own desire to rupture "le cadre du roman," he never finished *Dans le ciel*. A compilation of the novel's twenty-eight installments into book form would have to wait nearly one hundred years until Michel and Nivet's 1989 publication.[468] *Dans le ciel* departs from a novel's conventional framework with its overlapping of three narrative voices. The first narrator, a loosely veiled persona of the author, reluctantly pays a visit after fifteen years to the home of his estranged and isolated friend 'X' – a decrepit former abbey at the summit of a hilltop. Unable to tolerate the stifling heat, the suffocating atmosphere, and the haunting noises emanating from X's dilapidated residence, the anonymous narrator quickly departs from his formerly close friend after a single sleepless night. Before he abandons 'X' presumably to die atop this desolate hill, the narrator endures a day's worth of pathetic and deranged ramblings from this formerly promising novelist and only escapes after pledging to read and burn his friend's roll of grease-laden pages recounting his life. The second narrator 'X' suddenly assumes responsibility for sharing the contents of his autobiography. Later identified as Georges, this narrator recalls the painful events of his childhood that seem to have been provoked in part by the overwhelming intensity of his feelings: “Je suis né avec le don fatal de sentir vivement, de sentir jusqu’à la douleur, jusqu’au ridicule.”[469] After his parents died in his care from a cholera epidemic, Georges renounces his claims to any inheritance. Wandering aimlessly through the fields near his family’s home, he encounters the artist Lucien. He is instantly attracted to the fervor of the painter at work. Moved by the light in Lucien’s eyes, “une lueur – nullement diabolique – et comme il n’y en avait de semblable dans les yeux des autres,” Georges pours out the entire story of his life to the painter.[470] Lucien replies by telling Georges that his emotional troubles stem from the fact that he is an artist: “Sais-tu quel est ton mal à toi?... Eh bien je vais te le dire… Tu es un artiste… (ellipses in original)”[471] Desirous of escaping the memories of his cruel family and entranced by the painter’s charm and impassioned words, Georges bolts from the countryside and moves to Paris to live in a small room in Lucien’s apartment building. The remainder of George’s memoir focuses on his progressively strained dealings with the manic painter. Mirbeau enfolds Lucien’s voice into George’s account of life in Paris as a third narrator through a series of letters he sends to the fledgling writer from his painting sabbatical in the French countryside. As Lucien’s awareness of his expressive deficiencies expands, his desperation to paint impossible things paradoxically escalates: “Tu te rappelles, je t’ai parlé d’un chien qui aboie toujours, d’un chien qu’on ne voit pas, et dont la voix monte dans le ciel comme le voix même de la terre ?... Voilà ce que je veux faire!... Un grand ciel… Et l’aboi de ce chien !... (ellipses in original)”[472] Georges’ concern for his friend’s sanity and welfare intensifies, but Lucien responds by isolating himself in his apartment to work on his masterpiece. Unable to finish his *chef d'œuvre*, a landscape with a group of peacocks lying in a field of pansies, Lucien bleeds to death as a result of cutting off his recalcitrant hand. The story abruptly ends with Georges fainting upon discovery of Lucien's decaying corpse in his studio apartment.

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[466] Robert Ziegler, "The Uncreated Artwork in Mirbeau's *Dans le ciel*," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 3, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 440.

[467] Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet, *Octave Mirbeau: L'imprécateur au cœur fidèle* (Paris: Librairie Séguier, 1990), 476.

[468] Mirbeau, *Dans le ciel*, eds. Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet (Paris: L'Echoppe, 1989).

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[469] Mirbeau, *Dans le ciel*, ed. Pierre Michel (Éditions du Boucher / Société Octave Mirbeau, 2003), 37, http://www.leboucher.com/pdf/mirbeau/ciel.pdf, Accessed 10 September 2017.
[470] Ibid., 83.
[471] Ibid., 84.
[472] Ibid., 125.

Lucien's search for the absolute, his instability, and his eventual suicide recall aspects of the psychology, temperament and fate of Vincent van Gogh or the fictional painter Claude Lantier from Zola's novel *L'œuvre*. But as Michel and Nivet maintain, such a direct and exclusive linkage of Mirbeau's anti-hero with one of these two figures proves to be overly reductive and diminishes the most salient themes the author foregrounds within *Dans le ciel* – the pervasiveness of artistic impotence and creative inertia among even more mentally stable and prolific artists such as Monet and Rodin:

> Il serait pourtant erroné et réducteur de ne voir dans cette partie de *Dans le ciel* qu'une simple transposition des dernières années de Van Gogh, ou dans Lucien un avatar de Claude Lantier. Au-delà de ces cas particuliers, c'est la tragique et contradictoire impuissance de l'art que Mirbeau tente d'exorciser. Et la conscience de cette impuissance, même les plus grands créateurs, même ceux qui, tels Monet et Rodin, donnent une impression d'équilibre et de perfection, la ressentent cruellement et en sont paralysés.[473]

Lucien's restlessness, discontentment, and emotional struggles accordingly can overwhelm Monet and Mirbeau as profoundly as they do van Gogh and the fictional Claude Lantier. As we have established in the preceding analysis, both Mirbeau and Monet suffered prolonged stretches of doubt about their ability to express what they saw and felt. Monet's persistent cries of despondency and powerlessness in his correspondence and Mirbeau's admonitions against "la maladie du toujours mieux" testify to the fact that the artist's desire to paint impossible things regularly consumed him.

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[473] Michel and Nivet, *Octave Mirbeau: L'imprécateur au cœur fidèle*, 479.

In his article "The Uncreated Artwork in Mirbeau's *Dans le ciel,*" Ziegler expands upon Michel and Nivet's theories about the sources for the character Lucien and posits Monet as a potential prototype. He briefly alludes to a recurring theme from Monet's letters as prime evidence for this connection – the painter's cumulative disappointment and disgust with the products of his insistent study of nature.[474] I do not intend to dispute or to designate any single artist as a definitive inspiration for Mirbeau's character. I am interested primarily in uncovering resemblances in language, ideas, and feelings among Lucien, Monet, and Mirbeau. One of Ziegler's broader arguments considers the ways in which *Dans le ciel* exhibits "Mirbeau's interest in uncoupling creation from production."[475] While he features other themes integral to our present concerns such as the disconnection between the hand and eye, Ziegler emphasizes the nihilistic implications of the book throughout his interpretation. Associations with Monet remain only a peripheral part of his analysis: "While paintings and poems may be the intended bridge connecting heaven and earth, they are only momentary complaints, expressions of dissatisfaction that give way to silence and that dissipate in space."[476] Though Ziegler makes a number of compelling points in this context, I would prefer to apply a similar set of themes in *Dans le ciel* to amplify a connection between Mirbeau and Monet's attitudes about artistic inertia and issues of nature's resistance to translation into paint and words. I will relate Lucien's frustrations about the deficiencies of pictorial and verbal expression to components of the artist and author's correspondence. Mirbeau's essays about Monet also will factor into this discussion. Since Monet occupies a marginal presence in his article, Ziegler reasonably does not incorporate Mirbeau's response to the artist's obsession with pursuing impossible things, nor does he address the linguistic and thematic parallels between the painter and author's letters. In analyzing a few of Lucien's meditations from *Dans le ciel*, I will seek to demonstrate how certain dimensions of this character's artistic disposition potentially reflect an exchange of ideas between Monet and Mirbeau.

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[474] Robert Ziegler, "The Uncreated Artwork in Mirbeau's *Dans le ciel*," 444. Ziegler also cites Steven Levine's article "Monet's Series: Repetition, Obsession," to amplify his claims.

[475] Ibid., 439.

[476] Ibid., 450.

Stimulated by Lucien's recognition of his artistic sensibility, Georges aspires to become a writer, and he immerses himself in reading as a therapeutic and reformative activity: "Je lisais de tout, sans pouvoir jamais me rassasier de lire, je lisais avidement, comme boit un blessé dans les déserts de feu, comme boit un blessé qui enfonce toute sa tête, dans les eaux fraîches de la source miraculeusement rencontrée."[477] Georges' comparison of the voracity of his reading with the thirst of a wounded man in the desert reinforces the bodily and emotional healing it had provided him. Suffering from the abuse of his father and his hypersensitivity to the world around him, he had arrived into Lucien's orbit psychologically scarred and in desperate need of a curative. Reading provided a means for him to feel again and to connect with the thoughts of others, but Lucien felt this pursuit was too removed from the experiential realm for Georges to blossom into a creator in his own right. Lucien approaches Georges on some indeterminate day ("un jour") immersed in his reading and poses several questions to gauge the level of his passion for writing: "Tu veux écrire?… Tu sens en toi quelque chose qui te pousse à écrire?… Quelque chose qui te démange les mains, comme une fièvre et te monte à la gorge, comme un sanglot?… Est-ce ça?... Oui? (ellipses in original)"[478] Lucien's measure of Georges' ambition to write includes a bodily dimension comparable to the one reading brings to the inexperienced author. A longing to write is felt ("tu sens") from within. While affirming and productive, the urge to create simultaneously inflicts physiological trauma on the body. The hands itch with a feverish impulse to put words down on paper; the throat quivers with sobs and aches to release a reservoir of emotions. Georges lacks the language and frame of reference to explain the feelings stirring within him: "Je ne sais pas… Je ne pourrais pas expliquer… Mais je crois bien que c'est ça!… (ellipses in original)"[479] This exchange leaves Georges searching for words; locating the impetus for his desire to write disarms and disassociates him from the essential components of his medium.

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[477] Mirbeau, *Dans le ciel*, ed. Pierre Michel (Éditions du Boucher / Société Octave Mirbeau, 2003), 86.

The painter's advice to the young writer in *Dans le ciel* resembles Mirbeau's thoughts about the precedence of lived experience and original feeling in the creation of a work of art: "Avant de regarder des œuvres d'art, M. Gustave Geffroy a regardé la nature; et il en a senti, avec quelle aiguë et noble pitié, toute la tristesse, toute la misère et tout la beauté; avant de décrire les œuvres des autres, il a écrit des œuvres à lui…."[480] As we discussed in our preceding analysis of this statement from Mirbeau's critique of *La vie artistique*, Geffroy's exceptional capacity to describe and interpret the creations of other authors and artists stems from his sensitive study of nature and the feelings it elicited within him.[481] Before an author, critic, or painter can look at and explicate the creations of another, she must conceive her own art based upon her own encounters with nature and life in general. In *Dans le ciel*, Lucien believes Georges cannot test the veracity and depth of his yearning to write through passive absorption of literature.

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[478] Ibid.

[479] Ibid.

[480] Mirbeau, "Gustave Geffroy," *L'écho de Paris*, 13 December 1892, 1.

[481] See the first section of Part Two ("Un pauvre balbutier de mots").

Mirbeau's fictional painter warns Georges against the dangers of reading too much and living within the cloistered world of abstract thought: "Eh bien mon garçon, tu lis trop… tu avales de travers un tas de choses que tu digères mal…. (ellipses in original)"[482] In order to swallow, digest, and glean intellectual and artistic nourishment from the books of other authors, Georges first needs to experience life for himself. No book, no painting substitutes for the feelings and understanding obtained from one's own existence: "Il faut vivre, mon petit… Pour toi, il n'y a pas de livres, pour moi, pas de tableaux qui vaillent cette…cette…chose…cette…cette…enfin…oui, quoi ?...la vie !...(ellipses in original)"[483] Lucien continues by providing Georges some additional instructions for how to transform life into art that possess a distinctly Baudelairian ring: "Je sortirais, je me promènerais, j'irais dans les rues, le long des quais, dans les jardins… partout… J'observerais les visages, les dos, les yeux qui passent!… (ellipses in original)"[484] Wandering through urban landscapes as a *flâneur*, Georges could obtain more direct contact with life and sharpen his vision and creativity. Close observation of the eyes, faces, and gestures of those who pass before him upon the Parisian streets and quays or in its luxuriant city gardens and parks would enrich his capacity to describe the features, figures, and setting of his stories.

We could interpret Lucien's stammering of "cette… cette… chose… cette… cette… (ellipses in original)" on the surface as some sort of consequence of his not being a man of letters: "Tu comprends, moi, la littérature, ce n'est pas mon métier. Je n'y entends rien… Quand c'est beau, je sais que c'est beau, voilà tout!... (ellipses in original)"[485] But his faltering and floundering with words reflect on a more collective level an inability to develop language to describe the visual richness of life's sensations – an acute problem Mirbeau himself confronted as a critic and author. In the initial section of Part Two, we had surveyed Mirbeau's private and public assertions regarding the inadequacy of written and conversational language to account for works of art and elements of nature. These texts reveal the author's struggle to find words to encapsulate vision and experience. We will reprise just one of these instances in the present section. In a letter to Jules Huret, the author characterizes himself as a poor stammerer of words whose only redeeming literary merit derives from his recognition of beauty in art and nature: "Je ne suis qu'un pauvre balbutier de mots et d'idées, et ma seule qualité c'est d'admirer ce qui est beau dans l'art et dans la nature. Quant à l'exprimer, c'est autre chose, malheureusement."[486] Though inflected with self-deprecation, irony, and perhaps a tinge of false modesty, Mirbeau's statement recalls Lucien's professed ability to distinguish beauty in literature yet still lack the means to account for and explain its source. Lucien seemingly would experience greater comfort conveying his thoughts and impressions through visual modes of representation. As we will see later, however, Lucien's trouble in communicating his artistic aims derives at least in part from expressive complications and an absence of clarity within his approach to painting. Mirbeau's fictional painter locates an identical sorrow at the core of all forms of art: "Pourtant, je crois bien que tous les arts se ressemblent… Écrire, ou peindre, ou mouler, ou combiner les sons… Oui, je crois que c'est la même douleur, vois-tu?… Et veux-tu que je te dise?… (ellipses in original)"[487] Writing, painting, sculpting, and even the humble act of combining sounds into words cause a maker sorrow because they all entail some degree of loss or impoverishment of their referent. Life's continuity has no representational equivalent. The process of substituting lived experience with words, painted marks, or the imprint of a sculptor's hand makes an artist painfully aware of the restrictions on what she can say within her respective medium.

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[482] Mirbeau, *Dans le ciel*, ed. Pierre Michel (Éditions du Boucher / Société Octave Mirbeau, 2003), 86.
[483] Ibid.
[484] Ibid., 87.
[485] Ibid., 86.

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[486] See letter no. 871, "À Jules Huret," from the middle of April 1891, in *Octave Mirbeau: Correspondance générale*, eds. Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet (Lausanne: Éditions l'âge d'homme, 2005), 2:380-381.

[487] Mirbeau, *Dans le ciel*, ed. Pierre Michel (Éditions du Boucher / Société Octave Mirbeau, 2003), 86.

Particularly when tasked with describing the beauty of visual elements, verbal expression regrettably ("malheureusement") does not come easily to even an author with Mirbeau's literary gifts. When words fail Lucien, he resorts to hand gestures and facial contortions to convey something of his thoughts to Georges: "Et la figure plissée de grimaces… il traçait dans l'air avec son doigt, d'idéales figures… Je cherche ça… Saisis-tu? (ellipses in original)"[488] We observe an abundance of ellipsis not only within this particular remark but throughout Mirbeau's text as well. The prevalence of this punctuation device in *Dans le ciel* produces a visual and rhetorical effect upon a reader. While ellipsis can bind together thoughts or phrases and create an effect of continuity among otherwise choppy and fragmentary sentences, it simultaneously prolongs and protracts the spaces and pauses between them. Mirbeau's reliance upon ellipsis could signify the divide between thought and language, or perhaps it evokes an absence or the nonexistence of words to convey Lucien's feelings. We should note that Lucien *draws* ideal figures in the air ("d'idéales figures") with his fingers and twists his face into a series of grimaces to communicate his thoughts (my emphasis). The language the painter requires resides somewhere beyond his grasp of verbal expression: "Lucien n'était pas éloquent."[489] The combination of ellipsis and Lucien's exaggerated gestures rather paradoxically appeals to a reader's imagination and compels her to visualize his drawn forms and fill in the gaps of signification. Shapes, lines, and other visual forms potentially transfer some sort of essential or primal meaning that evades imprecise verbal language.

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[488] Ibid.

[489] Ibid., 87.

We have witnessed Mirbeau grappling as well with the expressive and sensorial plenitude of works of art and other visual phenomena and the corresponding deficiency of words. As he concluded in his interview with Gsell: “Les mots, les mots, ce ne sont que des signes morts qu’en vain on violente pour leur faire crier la vie. Tandis que la couleur, c’est la vérité directe!”[490] While mixtures of color on a canvas can bear and transmit an immediate truth to a viewer’s eye, words exist as inert signs that we adulterate and distort in the vain hope of communicating something significant about our experience and feelings. Lucien’s “ideal figures” do not readily equate to any combination of words, nor do they necessarily require or benefit from explanation. Yes, we will concede that this troubled fictional painter evidently lacks the ability to formulate his aesthetic goals with the clarity of either Monet or Mirbeau: “Il avait même de la difficulté à exprimer ses idées. Lorsqu’il se lançait dans une théorie, les mots sortaient, avec peine, de sa bouche contractée.”[491] Though Mirbeau and Monet may possess an advantage over Lucien in terms of their command of their artistic ideas and aesthetic aims, they share his doubt about the hand’s capacity to reciprocate the immediacy and poignancy of their vision. As Mirbeau contends in his catalogue essay on Monet’s *London* series, we need not explain the beauty of a line; it is self-evident and defies transformation into words: “On ne professe pas qu’une ligne est belle et pourquoi elle est belle. Elle est belle…parce qu’elle est belle. Il n’y a pas autre chose à en dire.”[492] Nothing else needs to be said, but Lucien and Mirbeau still suffer from “la même douleur." Pain and loss derives from the realization that their art will fall short of rendering life's full beauty, and yet, they persist in their efforts to produce meaning through their stutters.

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[490] Gsell, “Interview d’Octave Mirbeau,” *La revue*, 15 March 1907.

[491] Mirbeau, *Dans le ciel*, ed. Pierre Michel (Éditions du Boucher / Société Octave Mirbeau, 2003), 87.

[492] Mirbeau, “Claude Monet,” in *Vues de la Tamise à Londres*, 3.

Similar to Mirbeau and Monet, Lucien highlights originality and one's own sensations in his conception of what a work of art should embody:

> L'art, mon garçon, ce n'est pas de recommencer ce que les autres ont fait… c'est de faire ce qu'on a vu avec ses yeux, senti avec ses sens, compris avec son cerveau… Voir, sentir et comprendre, tout est là!… Et puis exprimer aussi, diable!… Mais que veux-tu exprimer, si tu n'as rien vu, et si ce que tu as vu, tu ne l'as pas compris!…(ellipses in original)[493]

In order to make art, Lucien instructs Georges that he needs to see through his own eyes, feel with his own senses, and understand with his own mind. Without access to his personal and original sensations, he has nothing substantive to translate into words. Vicarious absorption of another artist's experience does not foster true creation. While Georges has seen and felt by way of his immersion within literature, he cannot understand or appreciate life completely through an author's words. From Lucien's perspective, we draw inspiration from ourselves – not from repeating what others have done. Though seeing, feeling, and understanding constitute the basis for making art for the painter, expression remains his forever damning obstacle.

In a letter to his artistic comrade and patron Bazille from Honfleur, Monet likewise refers to the integral role of seeing and understanding nature through his own eyes within the development of his pictures:

> En somme, je suis assez content de mon séjour ici, quoique mes études soient bien loin de ce que je voudrais. C'est décidément affreusement difficile de faire une chose complète sous tous les rapports, et je crois qu'il n'y a guère que des gens qui se content d'à peu près. Eh bien, mon cher, je veux lutter, gratter, recommencer, car on peut faire ce que l'on voit et que l'on comprend, et il me

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[493] Mirbeau, *Dans le ciel*, ed. Pierre Michel (Éditions du Boucher / Société Octave Mirbeau, 2003), 87.

> semble, quand je vois la nature, que je vais tout faire, tout écrire, et puis va te faire … quand on est à l'ouvrage … (ellipses in original)[494]

Though his painting sessions in Honfleur had engendered an unusual period of contentment within him, Monet was never one to derive satisfaction from rough approximations of his experience – even during this nascent stage of his artistic career. His studies of motifs remained at a remove from what he ultimately desired to achieve in his paintings – a complete transmission of what he saw before him, including a harmonious composite of relationships of color, light, and weather conditions ("une chose complète sous tous les rapports"). Similar to Lucien, Monet believes that his observation of and reflection upon nature represent the only effective mode of artistic discovery: "Tout cela prouve qu'il ne faut penser qu'à cela. C'est à force d'observation, de réflexion que l'on trouve."[495] The artist resolves to struggle, to scrape away, and to begin with the faith that he can determine the means to paint what he sees and understands. His impressions of Honfleur inspire confidence in his ability to express everything this port city has to offer. When he sees nature, he feels a short-lived expressive fecundity; he can do anything, write down everything, and have a go at it.

Due to the vicissitudes of light, atmospheric, and weather conditions, Monet's momentary interludes of exuberance tended to deteriorate into desperation and disgust throughout his career. Writing to Alice from his final campaign at Pourville in 1897, the painter reports his utter dismay with his circumstances. He fears his massive struggles with depicting Pourville's cliffs and sea have been for naught, and he will return to Giverny without a single viable picture: "[Je suis] absolument navré de tout, découragé et attristé de constater qu'après m'être donné tant de peine, je ne vais rien rapporter encore."[496] Intervening hours of pleasant weather temporarily buoyed his spirits and allowed him to resume work on two canvases, but inclement conditions soon resumed. Though his instincts told him to remain in bed and await a return of hospitable weather, he decided to retouch certain paintings with disastrous consequences:

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[494] "Letter to Bazille," 15 July [1864], L. 8; partially quoted and translated in Levine, "Monet's Series: Repetition, Obsession," 67.

[495] "Letter to Bazille," 15 July [1864], L. 8.

> [L]e mieux serait de ne plus toucher à certain toiles et si le temps devenait beau, d'en recommencer, ce que j'aurais dû faire déjà au lieu de transformer et de n'arriver qu'à faire des choses bâtardes et imprécises.[497]

No longer able to withstand the physical demands of painting outdoors in stormy weather, Monet was forced to suspend contact with his motif. His restiveness had spurred him to transform his canvases into imprecise and bastardized representations of his experience at Pourville. His impulsive decision to work on his canvases despite the dreadful weather had left him in a terrible state of doubt and artistic powerlessness: "[C]e que j'avoue aussi, c'est une terrible impuissance."[498] Since the forces of nature could overwhelm and paralyze Monet's eloquent brush, it should not surprise us to find Mirbeau's inarticulate painter completely devastated by their magnitude.

A series of letters from Lucien contain similar cries of artistic impotence and fits of rage. Having fled Paris in a state of indignation, he writes Georges from the Norman town of Porte-Joie requesting that his friend settle his affairs in Paris and immediately ship the remainder of his painting supplies. The change of scenery had not substantively altered Lucien's emotional state of being. Though he confessed to an increase in productivity since leaving Paris, the outcome of his manic painting sessions still was abysmal from his perspective: "J'ai beaucoup peint aussi, et n'ai fait que d'innommables saloperies. Presque toutes mes toiles, je les ai crevées de rage…. (ellipses in original)"[499] As Monet's above-mentioned letter indicates, he too had a tendency to make a muck of his paintings due to his obsessive desire to experience the same weather and atmospheric conditions on a different day. Other pieces of correspondence from Monet reveal the pleasure the painter derived from lacerating or burning his canvases. In a letter to Paul Durand-Ruel concerning the impossibility of exhibiting his second *Nymphéas* series, Monet admits to destroying at least thirty canvases and sparing only five or six viable pictures: "C'est tout au plus si j'ai cinq à six toiles de possibles et viens du reste d'en détruire au moins trente, et cela à ma grande satisfaction."[500] Though Monet would persevere and end up showing his forty-eight *Nymphéas* canvases at Galerie Durand-Ruel in 1909, he was inclined to bouts of anger and destructiveness just like Mirbeau's fictional painter. The painter more often than not characterized his progress with his motifs in the most dismal light.

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[496] "Letter to Alice Monet," 29 March 1897, L. 1386; partially quoted and translated in Levine, *Monet, Narcissus, and Self-Reflection*, 177.

[497] "Letter to Alice Monet," 29 March 1897, L. 1386.

[498] Ibid.

For both Lucien and Monet, a persistent agony comes from the process of transmitting what they see, feel, and understand onto a canvas. A painter's hand often betrays her eye: "Et puis exprimer aussi, diable!" In another passage from this same letter from Écluses de Porte-Joie, Lucien's frustrations and patterns of language appear as if they could have been extracted from any number of pieces of correspondence we have quoted from Monet. Lucien admits to Georges to feeling more and more disgusted with himself: "Je me sens, cher petit, de plus en plus dégoûté de moi-même."[501] As the artist explores and experiences nature in greater depth, he more profoundly senses his incapacity to render its beauty: "À mesure que je pénètre plus profond dans la nature, dans l'inexprimable et surnaturel mystère qu'est la nature, j'éprouve combien je suis faible et impuissant devant de telles beautés."[502] Though Monet never embraced pantheistic preoccupations with the supernatural mysteries of nature within his writings and public statements, both Mirbeau and Geffroy inscribed them onto his paintings. In quite possibly his first references to Monet in print, Mirbeau describes the painter as a sensitive creator who renders impalpable, vibrating sensations of atmosphere and light along with nature's most elusive and fugitive mysteries:

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[499] Mirbeau, *Dans le ciel*, ed. Pierre Michel (Éditions du Boucher / Société Octave Mirbeau, 2003), 108.
[500] "Letter to Paul Durand-Ruel," 27 April 1907, L. 1832. Certain portions of this letter are quoted and translated in Levine, *Monet, Narcissus*, *Self-Reflection*, 206-207.
[501] Mirbeau, *Dans le ciel*, ed. Pierre Michel (Éditions du Boucher / Société Octave Mirbeau, 2003), 109.

> [C]es créateurs, sensitifs comme Claude Monet, qui a rendu tous les frissons de la nature et fixé avec de la couleur, l'impalpable de l'air, les vibrations de la lumière, l'insaisissable et fugitif mystère des choses….[503]

Whether or not Monet concerned himself with nature's supernatural and indescribable mysteries, he often sensed his palette and brush were insufficient for representing what he saw. In a letter to Rodin from Antibes, the painter professes his need for a palette of gold and precious gems to depict the brilliant light effects he perceived: "Il faudrait peindre ici avec de l'or et des pierreries."[504] From Etretat in 1885, he marvels at the exquisite environment of its beaches and boats, but he suggests he would need two hands and hundreds of canvases to compensate for the deficiencies in his technique for rendering its effects: "Etretat devient de plus en plus épatant, c'est le vrai moment, la plage avec tous ces bateaux, c'est superbe et j'enrage de ne pas être habile à rendre tout cela. Il faudrait deux mains et des centaines de toiles."[505] Monet consistently confronted the challenge of reconciling his brush with the intensity and rapidity of his impressions. Unlike Lucien, he often succeeded in spite of his pessimism and temporary faltering.

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[502] Ibid.

[503] Mirbeau, "Notes sur l'art: Le pillage," *La France*, 31 October 1884, 1.

[504] "Letter to Rodin," 1 February 1888, L. 825.

[505] "Letter to Alice Hoschedé," 20 October 1885, L. 592; quoted and translated in Levine, *Monet, Narcissus, and Self-Reflection*, 48.

Lucien's visual acumen certainly did not rival Monet's, but he shared the same host of doubts about the fidelity and facility of his hand: "La nature, on peut encore la concevoir vaguement, avec son cerveau, peut-être, mais l'exprimer avec cet outil gauche, lourd et infidèle qu'est la main, voilà qui est, je crois, au-dessus des forces humaines."[506] Perhaps Lucien's failure extended from attempts to conceive nature exclusively with his mind rather than perceive its sensations with his eyes. Nature's visual complexity posed extensive expressive difficulties for Monet, but he overcame the gaucheness, coarseness, and betrayal of his hand through his relentless focus upon painting what he saw and felt. As Mirbeau first explained in his 1889 article in *Le Figaro*, Monet's eye and hand developed in tandem through his exclusive concentration on the motif in front of him:

> Bientôt, à force d'isolement, de concentration en soi, à force d'oubli esthétique de tout ce qui n'était pas le motif de l'heure présente, son œil se forma au feu capricieux, au frisson des plus subtiles lumières, sa main s'affermit et s'assouplit en même temps à l'imprévu, parfois déroutant, de la ligne aérienne; sa palette s'éclaircit.[507]

Instead of forming a vague picture or concept of nature in his mind, Monet purged all forms of *a priori* artistic knowledge, conventions, and procedures. In their place, he engaged in a form of aesthetic forgetting ("d'oubli esthétique") that entailed isolation, introspectiveness, and an unremitting attentiveness to the present moment. By approaching nature from a perceptual rather than conceptual point of view, the artist's eye became even more attuned to the subtleties and capriciousness of light and other sensations. Abandoning all of the formulas and theories for depicting nature, his hand grew more firm and supple and could more readily respond to the vagaries of nature's lines. His palette became more luminous, and the color combinations on his canvases were suffused with the same delicate nuances of light registered within his eye.

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[506] Mirbeau, *Dans le ciel*, ed. Pierre Michel (Éditions du Boucher / Société Octave Mirbeau, 2003), 109.

[507] Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," *Le figaro,* 10 March 1889, 1.

In a final moment of lucidity and self-awareness after a day in the Louvre with Georges, Lucien acknowledges that art blossoms or perishes on the basis of its health: “Vois-tu, mon petit, en art, il n’y a qu’une chose belle et grande: la santé!… Moi, je suis un malade… et ma maladie est terrible; et je suis trop vieux maintenant pour m’en guérir… C’est l’ignorance… (ellipses in original)”[508] Lucien attributes his incurable sickness to his ignorance of and estrangement from the fundamental technical components of creating a work of art. His insatiable desire to paint complicated things comes from his inability to render what appeared in front of his eyes with simplicity and truth:

> Sais-tu pourquoi je me bats les flancs pour trouver un tas de choses compliquées, ce qu’ils appellent, les autres, des sensations rares, et ce qui n’est pas autre chose que de l’enfantillage et du mensonge… Sais-tu pourquoi?… C’est parce que je suis incapable de rendre le simple!…parce que je ne sais pas dessiner, et parce que je ne sais pas mettre les valeurs! Alors je remplace ça par des arabesques, par des fioritures, par un tas de perversions de formes…. (ellipses in original)[509]

Like the symbolist painters whom Mirbeau reviled, Lucien consumes himself with finding rare sensations. He resorts to arabesques, fussy embellishments, and distortions or perversions of form to compensate for his ignorance of drawing and the distribution of light and shadow in a motif.

We should recall here Mirbeau’s admonishment to Monet not to martyr himself in pursuit of impossible things: “Ne vous martyrisez pas à vouloir l’impossible.”[510] Lucien’s story serves as a cautionary tale to what happens to an artist when he compulsively locks his vision on the most impenetrable, indescribable, and ineffable realms of sensation. Though Mirbeau had lauded Monet for his capacity to “toucher l’intangible, exprimer l'inexprimable" in his 1891 essay in *L'art dans les deux mondes*, the health of his art depended upon not drifting too far in this direction. When he trained his eye instead upon "des choses vraies et saines," his hand responded in an equally eloquent and perspicuous manner.[511] Plunging deeper into an irretrievable abyss of madness, Lucien longs to make a beautiful, healthy form of art, and he includes Monet among those painters who have fulfilled this dream: "Oh! avoir une belle santé d'art, comme le père Corot… Tiens, comme Claude Monet, comme Camille Pissarro!… Est-ce que ce n'est pas du rêve, aussi, leur peinture?…"[512] Their paintings express their dreams or ideal because they have trained their hands through assiduous observation and study of nature: "Et ils savent!… Ce sont de profonds ouvriers!… Ah! savoir (ellipses in original)."[513] Knowing comes through their hard work and not from a theoretical or artistic legerdemain. And lest we accuse these painters of being servile imitators of nature, Lucien underscores the equilibrium between their minds and their vision: "Est-ce que dans cet admirable équilibre de leur cerveau, on ne sent pas l'enthousiasme, l'éternelle jeunesse de la poésie, l'ardeur des imaginations créatrices?… (ellipses in original)"[514] When we look at Monet's paintings, we feel the ardor of his creative imagination; their evocative poetry allows us to envision aspects of nature beyond our everyday experience of the phenomenological world.

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[508] Mirbeau, *Dans le ciel*, ed. Pierre Michel (Éditions du Boucher / Société Octave Mirbeau, 2003), 129.
[509] Ibid.
[510] Letter no. 43 to Monet, around 25 July 1890, in *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, pp. 101-105.

In a lyrical passage from his final essay on Monet, Mirbeau senses that the artist perhaps has realized the impossible in his *Venice* series – a complete accord between the eye and the hand (W. 1743, fig. 38). In painting the flickering reflections upon the waters of Venice's Grand Canal, Monet's hand surrenders to following the graceful movements of the morning sunlight: “On dirait que la main s’abandonne à suivre la lumière. Elle renonce à l’effort de la capter. Elle glisse sur la toile, comme la lumière a glissé sur les choses.”[515] Instead of trying to arrest or capture light with his brushstrokes, his hand becomes one with its motion and endless progression. His eye sees light softly slipping upon the water and across the façade of the Doge’s palace, and his paintbrush responds with a nimble gliding across the surface of his canvas. The fluidity of his strokes resemble a dancer’s seamless translation of emotion through her choreography: “Il la traduit comme la plus intelligente danseuse traduit un sentiment. Des mouvements se combinent et nous ne savons pas comment ils se décomposent.”[516] Like the elegant steps and turns of a dancer’s body, his marks coalesce into a single unbroken image whose composition remains impenetrable to analysis.[517] Monet’s paintings of Venice’s light and atmosphere collapse the distance between vision and expression. Dancer and painter alike impart sensations directly to our eyes without the mediation of words; their movements move us: “Il faut d’abord que les yeux soient charmés, *émus*.”

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[511] Ibid.

[512] Mirbeau, *Dans le ciel*, ed. Pierre Michel (Éditions du Boucher / Société Octave Mirbeau, 2003), 131.

[513] Ibid.

[514] Ibid.

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[515] Mirbeau, *Claude Monet: “Venise”* (Paris: Bernheim-Jeune et Compagnie, 1912), n.p.

[516] Ibid.

[517] Here we might recall Mallarmé’s notion of corporeal writing (“une écriture corporelle”) and its expressive advantages over verbal language: “[E]lle [la danseuse] ne danse pas, suggérant, par le prodige de raccourcis ou d’élans, avec une écriture corporelle ce qu’il faudrait des paragraphes en prose dialoguée autant que descriptive, pour exprimer, dans la rédaction: poème dégagé de tout appareil du scribe.” See Mallarmé, “Ballets” in *Divagations* (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1897), p. 173.

Coda: "Horreur des théories"

Endings bring irresolvable doubt. The final stroke, the final period halts the continuity of feeling and expression. A maker knows not what follows, nor can she control a viewer's experience and reception of her art. Toward the end of his life, Monet seemed intent upon doing everything he could to protect his artistic legacy. Though he had signed a contract in April 1922 to deliver his *Grandes Décorations* to the State, he wavered on whether he would follow through with this commitment. Having to adjust to the complications of weakening vision, he repeatedly questioned his ability to complete his prodigious *Nymphéas* canvases. Monet's loyal friend Georges Clemenceau had brokered an agreement with the French government. The combination of Clemenceau's emotional support and his occasional dose of intense pressure on the artist ultimately ensured Monet's fulfillment of his bequest. With his health rapidly failing him, the painter was forced to resign himself to the possibility of releasing his waterlily cycle into the world without being able to resolve the panels to his satisfaction. In September 1926, Monet wrote Clemenceau to reassure the statesman that he at least would give a portion of his panels as promised: "Sachez enfin que, si les forces ne me reviennent pas assez pour faire ce que je désire à mes panneaux, je suis décidé à donner tels qu'ils sont ou tout au moins en partie."[518] Mirbeau's "maladie du toujours mieux" had continued to plague the artist until his final days. As luck would have it, Monet regained a bit of stamina and managed to put some finishing touches on his panels. Had he managed to obtain what he had desired? The answer perhaps resides in the enduring location of the *Grandes Décorations* during his lifetime. Up until his final breath, the panels remained in Monet's studio at Giverny. The artist had persisted in his pursuit of impossible things to do.

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[518] "Letter to Clemenceau," 18 September 1926, L. 2685.

Monet's reluctance to part with his *Grandes Décorations* does not represent the only sign of his anxiety about his artistic legacy. He expressed significant concern over what others would say and think about him. Convalescing in June 1926, Monet dictated a reply to a letter from John Singer Sargent's biographer, Evan Charteris. The sentiments within this piece of correspondence are consistent with those he advanced in public over the last thirty years of his life:

> Après avoir relu attentivement votre lettre et celle copiée de Sargent je vous avoue que, si la traduction de la lettre de Sargent est exacte, je ne puis l'approuver d'abord parce Sargent me fait plus grand que je ne suis, que j'ai toujours eu horreur des théories, enfin que je n'ai que le mérite d'avoir peint directement devant la nature en cherchant à rendre mes impressions devant les effets le plus fugitifs, et je reste désolé d'avoir été la cause du nom donné au groupe dont la plupart n'avait rien d'impressionniste.[519]

In spite of his prolonged periods of doubt and creative paralysis, Monet had developed a clear sense of who he was as an artist, and he sought to prevent any exaggeration or misrepresentation of his identity and achievement. As we may recall, a desire to shape the terms of the discourse surrounding his art extended to those critics who were his closest and most sympathetic allies. In a letter to Geffroy, for instance, Monet worries that Mirbeau will overstate the merits of the *Venice* series in his impending catalogue essay: "Il va porter aux nues des choses qui ne le méritent pas…."[520] As Steven Levine has noted in respect to Monet's letter to Charteris, the painter somewhat unwittingly has constructed a theory of his own despite his stated aversion.[521] The artist's theory of himself accords with how we have come to know him: Painting directly in front of nature, Monet searches to render his impressions of its most fugitive effects. Does it matter if a divide existed between the artist Monet imagined himself to be and who he was in actuality? To answer this question would require me to develop my own theory of the artist, and I doubt its consequences would be any less distortive in nature.

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[519] "Letter to E. Charteris," 21 June 1926, L. 2626.

[520] "Letter to Geffroy," 2 May 1912, L. 2007.

[521] Levine, "Monet's Series: Repetition, Obsession," 66.

Monet's horror of theories ("horreur des théories") does not preclude him from resorting to employing one to make sense of his artistic life, but we should not be overly quick to dismiss the strength of his convictions. His regret in this letter stems from the misleading nature of labels: "[J]e reste désolé d'avoir été la cause du nom donné au groupe dont la plupart n'avait rien d'impressionniste." It saddens Monet that his paintings contributed to or even caused the formation of a hollow stylistic category. From his perspective, the group of artists subsequently associated with the movement of 'impressionism' had little to do with its aesthetic aspirations. This statement implies the artist had conceived a theory of impressionism as well.

Theory proves inescapable even for artists like Monet who distrust its reductive effects. In order to define our experience of a painting in words, we rely upon categories and terms that only approximate the feelings and thoughts these objects stimulate within us. In a short review on Monet and impressionism from this period, Geffroy reminds his readers that the paintings will endure long after faddish theories and labels have faded: "Les théories passent, font place à d'autres, qui passeront. Les étiquettes tombent. Les œuvres restent."[522] Monet's paintings ultimately speak for themselves without the filter of theory. Our role as viewer-readers is to see the paintings without this layer of mediation.

Whether it assumes the form of criticism, a novel, a poem, a painting, or a sculpture, any mode of representation impoverishes or diminishes the sensorial plenitude and immediacy of experience. A translation from nature to art is effectively a theoretical process and involves loss. Whether an artist chooses colors or words to describe Monet's garden at Giverny or any other corner of nature, she will never fully replicate the fragrance of its flowers, the feel of the soft earth beneath her feet, the brilliant illumination of the sun's rays penetrating through the atmosphere, or the sound of buzzing bees and chirping birds. The fluidity of nature's total picture defies the expressive means we have at our disposal to represent it. As Mirbeau's tortured painter Lucien explains in *Dans le ciel*, we will never render nature as completely as we feel it: "Dans la nature, c'est toujours beau. La nature se fiche des théories, elle!"[523] Nature's beauty doesn't give a damn about theories! It takes a painter with Monet's 'éloquence' and abhorrence of theory to narrow the distance between vision and expression. In the presence of his art, a viewer or a critic might be best served to heed Mirbeau's advice and remain silent. Though the majority of our pens prove considerably inferior to his paintbrush, we are fortunate to have exceptional authors and critics like Mirbeau and Geffroy to renew the visual potential of language. In receiving Geffroy and Mirbeau's images of 'Monet,' we learn to see his paintings with fresher and sharper vision; we transform their words into mental pictures and experiences of our own design.

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[522] Geffroy, "Claude Monet et l'Impressionnisme," *L'art vivante*, 1 January 1925, 3.

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[523] Mirbeau, *Dans le ciel*, ed. Pierre Michel (Éditions du Boucher / Société Octave Mirbeau, 2003), 92.

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