Albert Boime, Art and the French Commune

3. The Dislocating Impact of the Commune on the Impressionists

FIRST, it is necessary to examine the situation of the various members of the French avant-garde at the time of the establishment of the Commune and their response to it. This in turn cannot be discussed independently of the Franco-Prussian war which immediately preceded the Commune and with which it is inescapably attached. The presence of Prussian soldiers on the outskirts of Paris during the formation of the Commune, the release of French prisoners to the government of Versailles, and the complicity of the Versaillais and the Prussians, generally dictated the tragic outcome of that short-lived experiment in authentic self-government. These events forced the dispersal of the young Impressionists and their colleagues, disrupting their lives and careers and profoundly affecting their physical and mental health.

Manet experienced creative paralysis and nervous exhaustion in the aftermath, leading to deep depression for several months. He was unique among the Impressionists in depicting the civil war and even in witnessing it; most of the others had fled Paris earlier to escape involvement in the Franco-Prussian war. Manet, like his brothers Eugène and Gustave and his friend Degas, enrolled in the National Guard as volunteer gunners during the siege of Paris. Although neither Manet nor Degas saw much action (Manet quit the artillery to join the officer staff because the duty "was too harsh"), their collaboration with the predominantly working class members of the battalions probably predisposed them to sympathize with the Commune organized in large measure around the National Guard. This model followed a local administrative scheme which proved invaluable in establishing and administering the Commune. Indeed, the concept of its federal system derived from the essentially democratic organization of the National Guard during the siege.

Two weeks after the armistice of 27 January 1871, Manet rejoined his family in southwest France. There he stayed until the Commune had been proclaimed, subsequently made an effort to enter Paris but changed his mind, and then either returned to Paris during Bloody Week (22–28 May) or just after. A letter of 10 June to Berthe Morisot states that he has been back in Paris for "several days," presumably less than a week, suggesting that he may have retreated from Paris again to wait out Bloody Week.

During the interval between his encounter with Tiburce Morisot on 5 June (see below) and the 10 June letter, the denunciations and summary executions of Communard prisoners continued unabated and even foreign papers heretofore supportive of the Versaillese condemned the ruthless and vindictive nature of the extermination. Manet's memorable watercolor and two lithographs devoted to the civil war refer to this wholesale massacre which lasted through 13 June. So haphazard were the arrests, on the slightest of suspicions (of nearly 400,000 denunciations by informers only a tiny fraction were signed) that it may never be possible to estimate the number of arbitrarily seized victims. These "legal" shootings by the Versaillais were far more terrible than the slaughter during the battle, and went on day and night. In a letter of 5 June 1871, Berthe Morisot's mother informed her that her brother Tiburce, a lieutenant in the Versailles army (to whom Manet inscribed a proof of one of his lithographs), had "met two Communards, at this moment when they are all being shot . . . Manet and Degas! Even at this stage they are condemning the drastic measures used to repress them. I think they are insane, don't you?"[1]

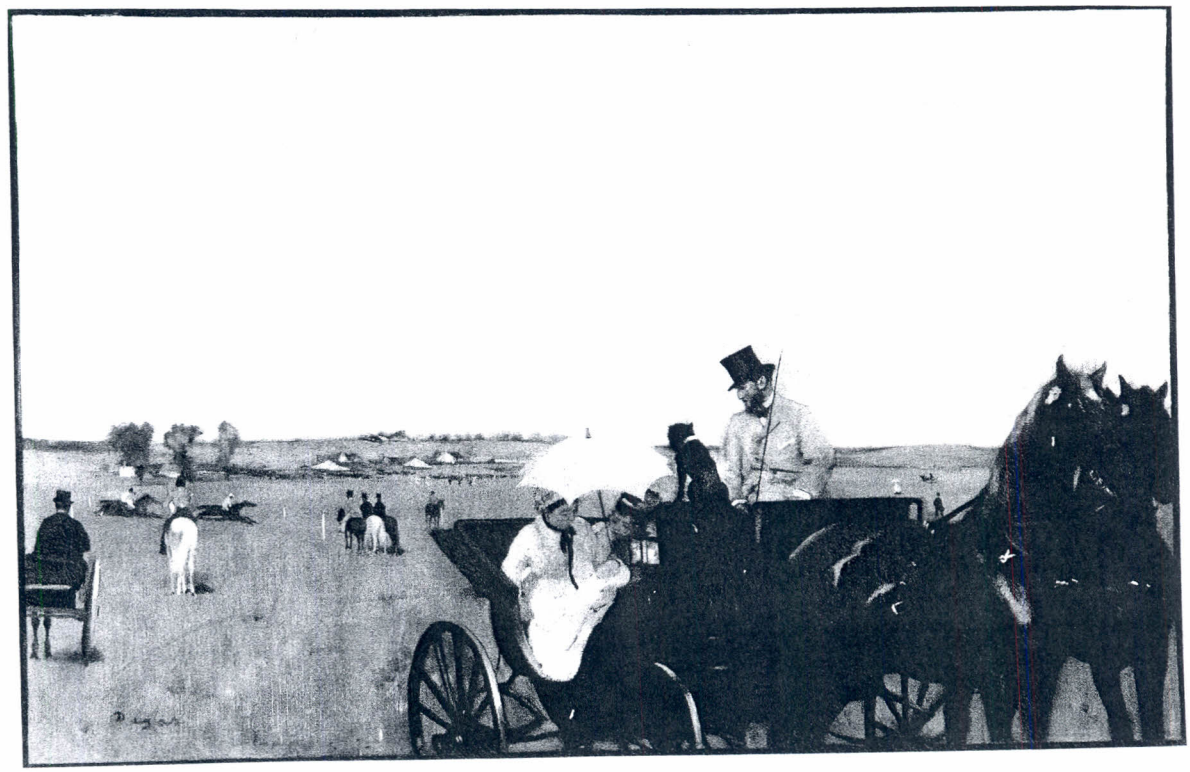
Since neither Manet nor Degas supported the insurrection but probably condemned the harsh measures meted out to the Communards, this exasperated comment from the mother of one of the future Impressionists reflects the overdetermined circumstances created in part by the Versaillais propaganda and fed by the deep antagonism of conservatives towards the radicals. If either Manet or Degas had actually been suspected of being Communards it is unlikely that they would have been in a position to openly criticize the Versaillais. Neither had any sympathy for the insurgency as such, and their class bias predisposed them to look unfavorably on its participants. Degas spent the period of the Commune at the country estate of his wealthy friend, Paul Valpinçon, at Ménil-Hubert, in Normandy, ostensibly to recuperate from the siege of Paris.[2] A picture that he probably sketched in this period and completed slightly later, *At the Races in the Country*, depicts the serene countryside surrounding his friend's estate as the setting for the leisure activities of the local gentry (fig. 23). Not only is there no sign here of the turmoil embroiling all of France, but Degas locates his wealthy friend in top hat at the apex of the composition casting a protective glance at mother, child, and wet-nurse as if to represent symbolically the traditional hierarchy as constitutive of the surrounding order and stability.

Manet had written to his friend Bracquemond from Arcachon on 21 March roundly attacking the executions of the two generals on Montmartre and, although elected to the Comité de la Fédération des Artistes—the democratic body chosen to organize the Commune's arts program—he never took part.[3] Philip Nord, moreover, has recently shown that Manet was "never a Communard, nor a visionary of the working class." He sees the painter excluding from his political orbit the Communard left and socialist revolution, yet assuming the trappings of a radical bourgeois who eschewed the moderate republicanism of a Jules Ferry.[4] Nord claims that Manet "traveled in radical political circles, painted canvases with charged and explicit political content, and lent critical support to politically motivated efforts to democratize the salon system."[5] This claim would position the painter somewhat to the left of the Impressionists, but

omits to inquire why the painter refused to join the Impressionists in their organizing venture—an act far more radical then sticking with the Salon system and trying to reform it from within.

Although Manet was never a left-wing radical in the formal sense of party politics, the profound impact of the Commune on Manet's thought and his many contacts with it should not be disregarded. Manet was linked to the Commune through his brother Gustave, a lawyer who joined the Ligue d'Union républicaine des droits de Paris during the Commune. This group attempted to mediate a conciliation between the Communards and the Versaillais, favoring neither entirely and hoping to get the two bodies to dissolve themselves and together set up a provisional government pending the election of a constituent assembly.[6] The leader of the League, Arthur Ranc, had actually been elected a member of the Commune and was a close friend of Georges Clemenceau and many others in Manet's circle.[7] It was thanks in part to Clemenceau's patronage that Gustave Manet was elected to municipal office in the eighteenth arrondissement in 1876 and 1878. Not fortuitously, Gustave pledged himself in 1878 to the cause of amnesty for exiled Communards. Thus Manet and his brother fit the political pattern that I have previously proposed for the Impressionists and their allies.

Manet's good friend and biographer, and pioneer historian of the Impressionists, Théodore Duret, had edited the pro-republican newspaper, *La Tribune française*, for



23. Edgar Degas, *At the Races in the Country*, ca. 1872. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

which he was indicted by the Second Empire government in the late 1860s for press offenses. He subsequently joined the staff of Henri Cernuschi's *Le Siècle*, one of three major pro-conciliation journals operating during the Commune. He and Cernuschi, whom he would later help organize a celebrated collection of Asian art, were arrested during Bloody Week and led to a cul-de-sac to face a firing squad.. They were lined up against a wall at the foot of which lay several corpses in a pool of blood, and were spared only at the last minute when a deputy in the officer's escort recognized them.[8] This kind of intense experience of so many friends and colleagues made Manet's "brush" with the Commune decisive for his subsequent career.

Pissarro, whose radical political convictions were in the process of unfolding, may have been predisposed to support the Commune but he had been away in England awaiting the outcome of the Franco-Prussian war. Aged forty, Pissarro had had no desire to fight for a regime he loathed. His wife Julie was pregnant, and the Prussian advance forced them to flee to a friend's farm in Brittany, leaving behind most of their belongings, including over a thousand of his paintings. Yet when the Prussians completed the encirclement of Paris on 19 September, threatening the Republic established two weeks previously, Pissarro felt the need to enlist in defense of the fledgling government. His mother then admonished him not to enter the fray, claiming her own need for protection and playing on his guilt feelings.[9] The death of his two-week-old baby, however, settled the matter by taking the fight out of him and prompting a desire to reunite with his mother and his brother's family who had sought refuge in England.

During his stay in England, the Prussians occupied his house in Louveciennes and destroyed hundreds of his paintings—a major part of his life's work. The news of this catastrophe devastated him, compounded by the report of the capitulation of Paris and then the ruthless suppression of the Commune. Pissarro shared the outrage of his friends at the behavior of the Versailles government;[10] until his death he preserved a personal chronicle of one of the Fédérés, those killed and arrested for being Communards. In 1887, when two letters of his idol Millet were published in *Le Figaro* denouncing and blaming the Commune for the destruction of Paris, Pissarro angrily and disappointingly wrote his son Lucien that "these letters show the painter in a very peculiar light and clearly indicate the petty side of this talented man."[11] The trauma of the years 1870–1871 rushed again upon him, recalling the reorientation of his life and career. It may not be coincidental that he finally married Julie, pregnant again, on 14 June at the very end of the reprisals of the Versaillais against the Communards. It was a way of giving some order to their lives after the destabilizing effects of the Franco-Prussian war and the civil war.

Like Pissarro, Sisley lost most of his possessions, including paintings, during the Franco-Prussian War when it was likely that Prussian troops occupied his rental house at Bougival. A small riverside suburb and favorite resort for weekending Parisians, Bougival lay outside the French fortifications and sustained terrible damage. Athough Sisley took refuge in Paris, nothing is known of his experiences during the Commune. In a letter dated 3 June 1871, Sisley's patron, Edmond Maître, gave him an account of what he considered the real tragedy of the Commune: "I mourn above all else the loss of the Hôtel de Ville which contained two marvels, the ceilings by Ingres and Delacroix,

and the fire at the Cour des Comptes that housed the *Justinian* [by Delacroix]."[12] Nevertheless, the impact of this period on Sisley's career is demonstrated by the fact that there is a virtual absence of work between the time of the two sieges and 1872.[13]

Cézanne's response to the Franco-Prussian War was to go into hiding in southern France, fearful of any military or political entanglement, and he spent the duration of the war and the Commune in L'Estaque, near Aix. Here he was close to insurgent Marseille, which set up its own short-lived Commune that was bloodily repressed. While Cézanne's correspondence of this period has been lost, his close relationship with Zola in this period suggests a shared response to the events. Although Cézanne expressed loathing of Thiers and his henchmen for the slaughter of the Communards, he is mute on the position of the Communards themselves. His letter to Pissarro of 6 July 1876 in which he hopes to see Dufaure—infamous for his murderous treatment of the Communards while serving as Minister of Justice under Thiers—get "knocked out" of the Senate, seems more designed to ingratiate himself with his mentor than to express sympathy for the insurgents.[14] He seems to have shared the contempt for the Communards expressed in Zola's *La débâcle*, viewing the destruction of that short-lived experiment as a cleansing action ridding France of the corruption ultimately traceable to the Second Empire.

Yet whatever Cézanne's own attitude to the Commune at the time, it must have been subsequently modified by his relationship with Pissarro and his art dealer Père Tanguy, an ex-Communard who barely escaped deportation. Tanguy managed to return from exile in the mid-1870s and open an art supply house. Too poor before the war to afford a shop, he had peddled his colors on foot; now in his desperation to put the recent past behind him he became an art dealer appealing to a second clientele as well. Tanguy was not only one of the first to show an interest in Cézanne, his favorite painter, but in the work of the Impressionists generally. During the later 1870s, his small paint shop and gallery on the rue Clauzel was the only place where Cézanne's work could be viewed.

Monet, like Pissarro, spent this period in England. His sole recorded comment on the Commune comes in a hasty note to Pissarro concerning a mistaken report on the execution of Courbet: "You have doubtless learned of the death of poor Courbet shot without a trial. What shameful conduct, that of Versailles, it is frightful and makes me ill. I don't have a heart for anything. It's all heartbreaking." Monet's pathetic confession tells us that he sympathized with Courbet's position and condemned the vengeful reaction of the Versailles. Monet's paralysis over the conflict suggests his emotional and intellectual dependence on some notion of social justice, but this was never expressed in the form of radical politics. When he arrived in Paris in the fall of 1871 one of his first actions was to visit Courbet, who had been temporarily moved from his cell in Saint-Pélagie jail to a nursing home. The older artist, already shrunk in both body and spirit, would soon be excluded from the official Salon of 1872 for his activities in the Commune by a cabal of vindictive artists led by Meissonier. Monet, Pissarro, and Sisley did not even bother to submit to the Salon that year and Renoir, who did, was rejected. Here the heavy hand of the Commune struck at their professional interests. Although Manet's *Le Bon Bock* was accepted, it was a modest effort whose conven-

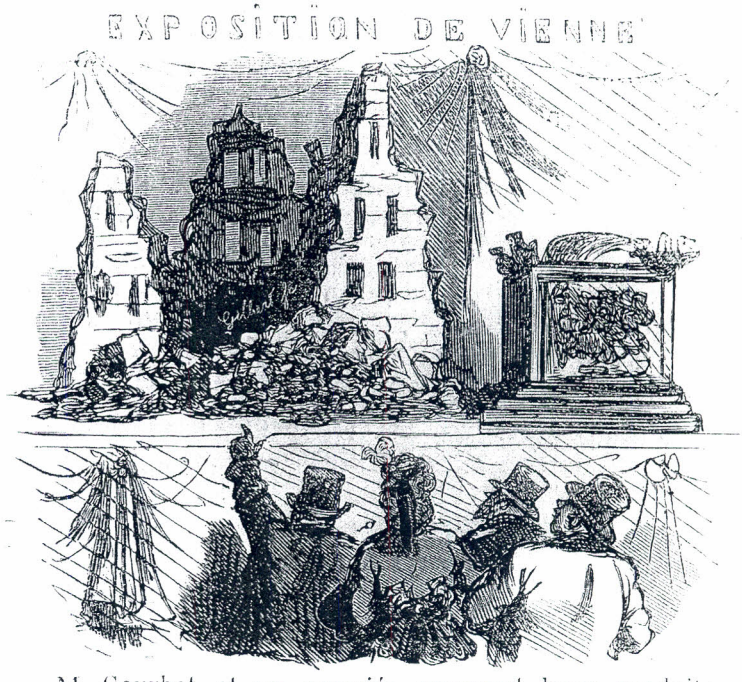
tional rendering and obvious ties to 17th-century Dutch art could appeal even to the conservatives.

Renoir had been drafted during the hostilities with Prussia and served in a regiment of light cavalry (*chasseurs à cheval*).[15] Although Renoir claims to have rejected the advantage of a cushy position offered by a friend in the military (perhaps Prince Bibesco), he seems to have been exceptionally skilled at networking. He was first assigned to Bordeaux and then sent to Tarbès, where he groomed horses. All told, he served little over four months in the army and never saw any combat. His letter of 1 March 1871 to his friend Charles Le Coeur, written shortly before his discharge, testifies to his comfortable station and declares that he was "bored to death." He also enjoyed plentiful food and admits to feelings of guilt over his Parisian friends starving during the siege.[16] As if to atone for his situation, he claims to have "treated" himself to dysentery which nearly killed him. He describes his fears and relief of having survived the war intact, and notes in an ironic and detached mode the cost of human lives and the destructive impact of the war on the mental health of civilians.

He returned to Paris early in March but the outbreak of the Commune dislocated him and clashed with his conservative disposition. According to Coquiot, who knew him personally, Renoir had no desire to get mixed up with the Communards and in his own words the Federals were fanatical and stupid.[17] He braved the dangers in leaving the encircled city from time to time and entering the ground occupied by the Versaillais. He managed to survive the civil war but at one point had almost been shot as a spy for the Versaillais. He evidently went back to Paris near the end of the civil war for he sketched a Communard being executed. He knew Raoul Rigault by chance, the notorious Communard *procureur* at the Prefecture of Police under the Commune—brutally shot in the streets by the Versaillais—who provided the painter with a "laissez-passer" to leave Paris to rejoin his parents at Louveciennes and sketch landscapes unmolested. But the Commune seems to have left him bewildered, and he wandered around the outskirts of the capital penniless and depressed. He was evidently stopped at one point by the Versaillais, but was rescued by the intervention of Prince Bibesco, an ordinance officer of old Romanian stock who served under General du Barail of the Versailles army.[18] It is reasonable to assume that Bibesco accompanied du Barail when he led his cavalry division against the Communards during Bloody Week. This is important to consider when we recall that Bibesco and his Romanian protégé Georges de Bellio were both important patrons of Renoir.

Thus it was unavoidable that Renoir and his colleagues experienced the brunt of the tumultuous social struggle of the Commune, its resistance and defeat, all of the killings and the deportations, the immense toll of human suffering, and the total destruction of the short-lived proletarian organizations. And, as proper bourgeois, it was inevitable that they participated in the erasing of its memory.

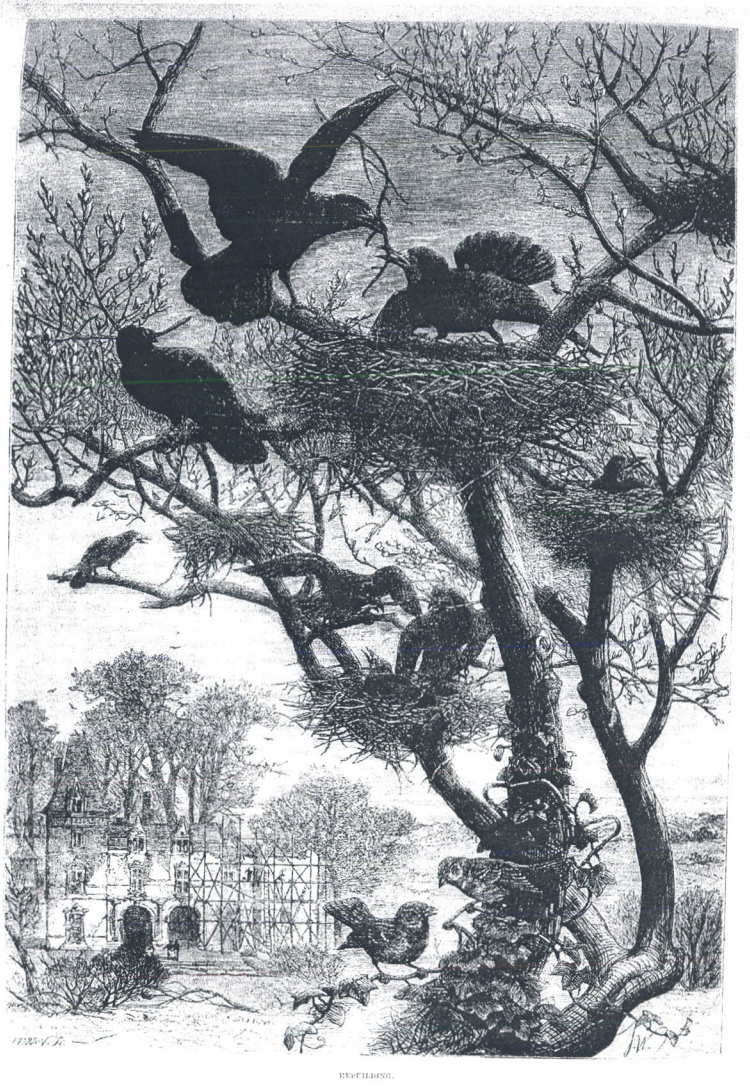
Metaphorical allusions, whether textual or visual, to convalescence, purification, restoration, and regeneration are signifiers for the early Impressionist era. Conversely, it was the emblematic image of ugly ruins that was used to stigmatize the horrors of the insurrection, as in the case of the witty caricature by Cham that parodied Courbet's exhibits at the Vienna Exposition of 1873 as burned-out buildings (fig. 24). Themes



24. Cham, *M. Courbet et ses associés envoyant leurs produits à l'Exposition de Vienne*. Wood engraving reproduced in *Le Monde Illustré*, 5 April 1873.

of rehabilitation, on the other hand, identified the bourgeois recovery from the savage vandalism. The *Illustrated London News*, closely monitoring events in France, published an image of birds cooperating in the restoration of a previous year's nest, while in the background we see the ravaged grounds and château of a wealthy estate enveloped in scaffolding (fig. 25). The accompanying article is "narrated" by a French rook who establishes the blackened ruin as the work of "cowardly Prussians" angered at the refusal of the owner to accede to their demands. The narrator states: "Both men and birds are at the same work, that of *rebuilding*."[19] Although published the month before the suppression of the Commune, the image catches the predominant metaphor of the French social mood.

By year's end, *L'Illustration* could publish a cartoon showing a bed-ridden France being attended to by a pair of physicians each grasping one of her wrists and uttering their pronouncements (fig. 26). The pessimistic "Docteur Tant-Pis" (Doctor Much Worse) and the optimistic "Docteur Tant-Mieux" (Doctor Much Better) fill out this attitude in the wake of the hammer-like blows of the two sieges. Doctor Much Worse intones: "The crisis has been terrible! So much the worse! Such a crisis will inevitably be followed by others. Lost health, debilitating infirmities, foreseeable disorganization, shock to the moral system, sick brain, lack of energy, beliefs destroyed, deplorable symptoms; everything must be changed, everything to be redone, little hope." But



REBUILDING.

25. *Rebuilding*. Wood engraving reproduced in *The Illustrated London News*, 8 April 1871.

26. Bertall, *Le Docteur Tant-Pis et le Docteur Tant-Mieux*, 1871. Wood engraving reproduced in *L'Illustration*, 1871.

Doctor Much Better delivers the benign diagnosis: "The crisis has been serious! So much the better! henceforth, her health can only improve. Forewarned by the past, she will follow a wise diet; she will avoid imprudent actions, deviations, and mistakes; a little reflection, plenty of work, and everthing will be restored to normal."[20] The need to find a visual solution to the mutilation of the national entity and the loss of its members Alsace-Lorraine led one satirist to adjust the new contours to the torso of the Venus de Milo (fig. 27). The text beneath the image suggests that the nation, like the sculpture, remains an "admirable masterpiece" despite their shared mutilations: "Akin to this artistic marvel, France has fallen into the hands of the barbarians, who, without respect for its beauty, have tested on her the temper of their swords; but no matter, the body remains splendid, and, as always, earns, and will earn the admiration of the entire world."

Degas internalized this psychological state in the immediate aftermath of the two sieges, escaping to the United States in the autumn of 1872 at the suggestion of his brother René to recover and reorder his priorities. Americans were for Degas a "new people" who had forgotten more of "their English origins" than he expected. After a short stay in New York, he made his way to New Orleans where his mother's family lived, and his brothers Achille and René worked in the cotton trade owned by their uncle. The uncle, Michel Musson, was a wealthy cotton broker and exporter of cotton to France and England. Coincidentally, Degas arrived at a time when Louisiana and, indeed, the entire South itself were still recovering from the devastating effects of the Civil War and trying to find its way through the chaos of Reconstruction. Thiers himself had likened the Communards to the southern Confederacy, and perceived himself as a sort of French Lincoln.[21] Degas' family had been pro-slavery and had joined other brokers in encouraging French intervention in the Civil War in favor of the Confederacy. In punishment, Major General Butler—the ruthless Union officer charged with the occupation of New Orleans after its capture—taxed Musson's firm (along with the others who joined the boycott) to help relieve the city's starving populace.[22] Degas' correspondence demonstrates that he shared his family's racist position, attesting as well to his conservative social bias. He seemed genuinely amused to learn that the Louisiana press deigned "to give Mr. Thiers expert advice on republicanism." He delighted in seeing blacks still serving whites, especially the women "of all shades," and responded warmly to the "contrast between the business offices with their bustle and order and the immense, black animal vitality."[23]

"I am thirsty for order" (*J'ai soif d'ordre*), Degas writes to his friend and patron Henri Rouart on 5 December 1872. And he closes with a show of pride in his brothers' success: "They will make a great fortune."[24] The novelty and possibilities of the United States fascinates him, and at the same time he feels a need to discipline himself to emulate the business success of his brothers. His mind is teeming with fresh ideas ("that would take . . . ten years to realize") and he plans a series of sketches later to be reworked in Paris. A subsequent letter of 18 February 1873 to his friend James Tissot in London likens his valuable mental assets to an insurable cotton bale, and expresses the wish that there were insurance companies who dealt in his particular brand of assets.[25] Here Degas consciously conceives of his ideas as commodities to be disposed of as


N° 818. Prix du numéro : 35 centimes 4 Mai 1872.
Dans les gares des Départements : 40 centimes.
20, Rue Bergère. JOURNAL AMUSANT Rue Bergère, 20.

Il nous a semblé que la forme de notre belle France, toujours si belle malgré sa mutilation, s'adaptait presque parfaitement, comme contours, à l'admirable chef-d'œuvre, également mutilé, découvert en Grèce par le capitaine Dumont d'Urville, et connu sous le nom de *Vénus de Milo*.

Quoique nous ayons été forcé de changer un peu la pose du torse pour mieux faire comprendre notre idée, le lecteur pourra trouver bien des rapports entre notre belle patrie et le célèbre antique. — Comme cette merveille de l'art, la France est tombée aux mains de barbares, qui, sans respect pour sa beauté, ont essayé sur elle la trempe de leurs fers ; n'importe, le corps est toujours splendide, et, toujours, fait et très l'admiration du monde entier.

Les points principaux sont :

Lille.	*La pomme d'Adam.*	Montpellier.	*Le nombril.*
Péronne.	*L'attache des clavicules.*	Bayonne et Nice.	*Les hanches.*
Angers et Épinal.	*Les seins.*	Brest.	*L'épaule droite.*
Moulins.	*L'estomac.*	La Lorraine et l'Alsace.	*L'épaule gauche.*

Ce magnifique morceau a été récemment enlevé, un jour que le gardien était sorti. — Pourra-t-on réparer la statue ! — Espérons-le et n'en doutons pas.

G. Lavoye.

27. Cover of *Le Journal Amusant*, 4 May 1872.

those of his brothers, thus declaring himself as an emerging entrepreneur in his own right.

It is no coincidence that in this same letter Degas announces to Tissot that he is in the process of completing a major picture provisionally called *Intérieur d'un bureau d'acheteurs de coton à Nlle. Orléans, Cotton Buyers' Office* (fig. 28). He stated that it was "destined for Agnew," and that it should be sold in Manchester, "to any cotton spinner" particularly desirous of having a fine representation of his trade. He even knew that in Manchester there was "a wealthy spinner, who has a famous collection. A fellow like that would suit me perfectly, and Agnew even better. But let's be cautious about it, and not count our chickens too soon." Despite the cautionary note, it is clear that Degas has exploited his brothers' business both as subject matter and as conduit to an expected Manchester buyer—who is both purchaser of the family's cotton and a collector of art! The painter used his time in America to launch a new entrepreneurial venture and carefully selected the content with an eye to the client.[26] As he wrote to Tissot on 19 November 1872, "Here I have acquired the taste for money, and once back

28. Edgar Degas, *Portraits in an Office, New Orleans*, 1873. Musée municipal, Pau.

I shall know how to earn some. I promise you."[27] Akin to Monet and Renoir, the dislocation and economic hardship caused by the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune predisposed Degas to begin his career afresh from the ground floor up. He had originally planned to take the work directly to London, and at Tissot's prompting he even considered settling in London where his friends were already selling their work at high prices. He makes the cryptic remark that if he did go there he would first have "to sweep the said place a little, and clean it by hand."[28]

I would argue that the remark, like the painting itself, is a displaced metaphor of his own desires for a "reconstructed" life in post-Commune Paris. Degas described his image of the interior of a cotton-broker's office as a "picture of the locality if ever there were one," with about fifteen figures energetically grouped around a table covered with cotton samples. The picture, completed in 1873 but not exhibited until the second Impressionist show of 1876, gives us a rare insight into the briskness of new urban industry recovering from the onslaught of civil war. It represents the Degas family enterprise in full force: his uncle is seated in the foreground carefully inspecting a

cotton sample, his brother René is seen scanning the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* for the current market report, his brother Achille leans against an open window at the left while awaiting the outcome of a transaction, while others examine the cotton at the central table, wait for an appointment, look at ledgers at a desk, or engage in miscellaneous clerical tasks behind the cashier's window. Although not everyone is busily at work, what struck critics was the sense of bristling energy coming through the unusual depiction of the office. This sense of activated space is accomplished by two powerful axes established by the figures, one moving laterally across the picture through the isocephalic positioning of the heads, and the other by the sharp diagonal intersecting this movement launched by the seated uncle and brother behind him. The figures appear, however, unrelated compositionally, randomly scattered throughout the scene and falling into casual poses that seemed both peculiarly American and bourgeois at the same time.

Degas' picture is a clinical case study of how an Impressionist deals close-up with the motif of work in the public sphere, when not viewing social relations from an elevated and distanced standpoint. The picture is as much allegorical as it is realist, informed as it is by a Thomas Nast cartoon and other reportorial illustration, as Zola himself recognized.[29] Degas shrewdly analyzes the specialized functions in an office space, devoted to coordinating, accounting for, and organizing the distribution of the multifarious activities involved in a vast enterprise essentially dependent on back-breaking labor. What we see, then, is a glimpse of a bourgeois world as a signifier of all the labor involved, but whose actual signs allow for only a narrow band of the work hierarchy—that encompassing the owners, managers, and clerks. Behind this white-collar team, the blue-collar labor force is occluded if not entirely erased (the cotton samples function there as metonymic awareness).[30] Nevertheless, Degas still wants to show this bourgeois realm as democratic and egalitarian by commingling managers and clerks, and suggesting the possibilities for advancement. Musson's partner, John E. Livaudais, is seen at the right in shirtsleeves examining ledgers just like one of his clerks. In bourgeois business you may work up from the bottom and aspire to the boss' position. Thus Degas evacuates the potential of class opposition by concentrating exclusively on white-collar signifiers in a bureaucratic space, attesting to how shrewdly Impressionist realism could neutralize the kind of disruptive social messages in Courbet's realism and Manet's naturalism.

Degas' bourgeois work realm is exclusively male, and it is noteworthy that his only images of the proletariat are female. In the 1876 show he exhibited four studies of laundresses, much more sketchily executed than the *Portraits in an Office* (figs. 29, 30). Ironically, he was homesick for laundresses while in New Orleans, and wrote Tissot: "Everything is beautiful in this world of the people. But one Parisian laundry girl, with bare arms, is worth it all for such a pronounced Parisian as I am."[31] Traditionally, the laundress was represented as a coquettish, sexual being, a lower-class woman vulnerably exposed to the better-off males whose clothes she washed and ironed.[32] Thus Degas' proletariat signifier, the sexualized female, symbolized the labor force reduced to subjugated status. It is no coincidence that laundresses were among those identified as *pétroleuses* during the Commune, including the notorious Eugénie Suetens, who

29. Edgar Degas, *A Woman Ironing*, ca. 1874. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929. The H. O. Havemeyer Collection.

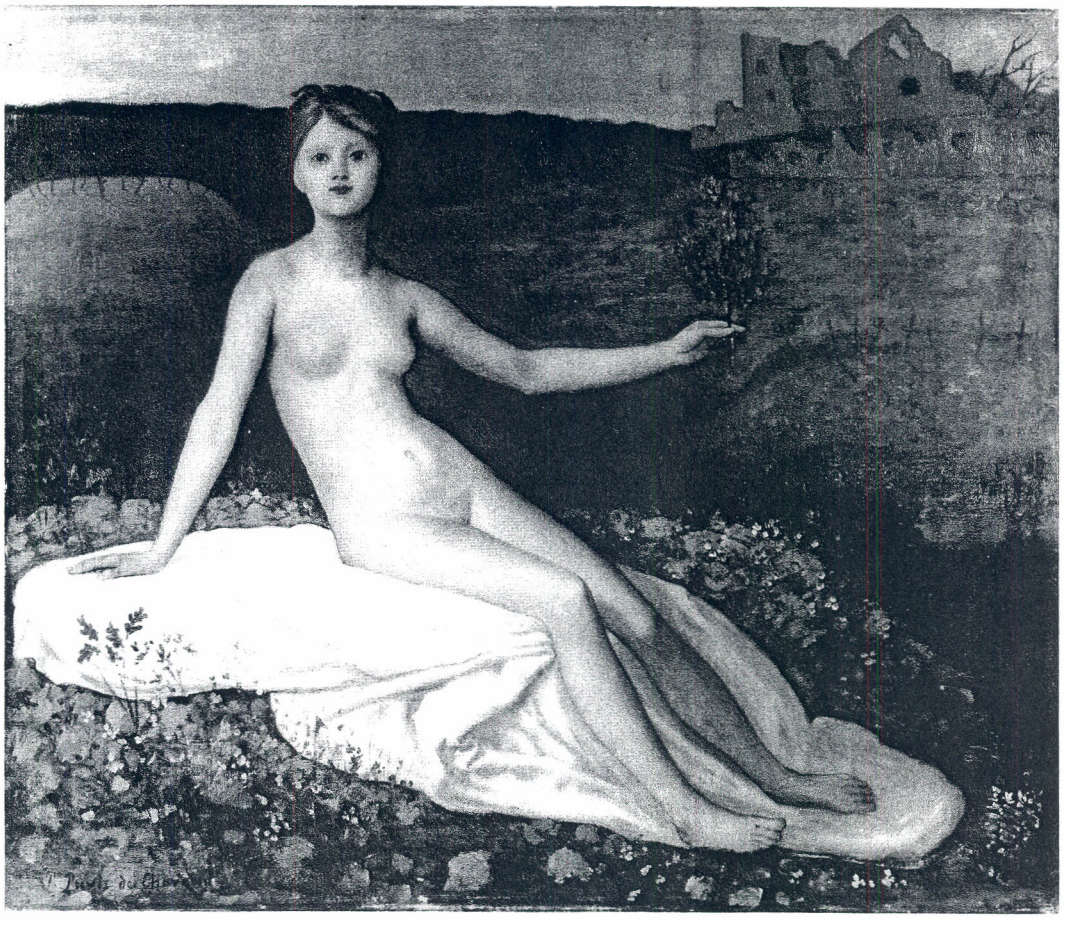
30. Edgar Degas, *The Laundress*, ca. 1873. Norton Simon, Inc., Museum of Art, Pasadena, California.

brought food and water to the Communards, tended to the wounded, and participated in the building of the barricades.[33] By sexualizing sweated labor and submerging it in a dazzling network of open brushwork and daring colorism, Degas constructed an image of dominated labor whose lightness of execution belies the laboriousness of working women and, by extension, men as well. Impressionist disembodiment (whether conscious or unconscious) served the purpose of occluding an uncomfortable and contradictory reality.[34]

By the late 1870s, the reading of modernism could shift from a radical social emphasis to that of a primarily technical and decorative interpretation, where emphasis was placed on its originality and liveliness in opposition to the dry formalism and conventionality of academic production. It is no coincidence that Degas' *Portraits in an Office* became the first Impressionist work to be purchased by a major museum, the Pau Musée des Beaux-Arts in 1878. The town of Pau was then undergoing the throes of extensive urban renewal, with a republican mayor organizing streets, promenades, sidewalks, expanded gardens, and greenbelts, thus stimulating an economic boom and land speculation, in which American investment played an important role.[35]

One critic observed that the scattered and detached figures reminded him of "a wholesaler's shop on the rue du Sentier"—the Parisian garment district.[36] This allusion to the frenetic activity of the rue du Sentier thus suggests a larger frame of reference for Degas' picture. It is located in the second arrondissement not far from the Bourse, or stock exchange, the financial heart of the capital. It is bounded on the north by the grands boulevards and on the east by the Boulevard de Sébastopol. During the Commune, the Bourse was cordoned off by the National Guard and the neighborhood sealed off except to inhabitants and shop owners. Its strategic location brought down heavy fighting all around it in the final days of May, especially in the vicinity of the barricaded zones on Sébastopol and rue Montmartre.[37] Almost all retail and wholesale commerce had ceased during the Commune, decisively affecting one of the Impressionists' major patrons, Ernest Hoschedé, a textile merchant who owned a shop on the rue du Sentier and was a potential purchaser of Degas' painting.[38] Although set in the United States, Degas' scene exploits American alacrity and diligence as a model for a French regeneration, and its many traits of self-identification attest to his own desire for an entrepreneurial jump-start. It is in this sense that we may understand his active role in the organization of the first Impressionist exhibition, a cooperative business enterprise legally authorized under the rubric Société anonyme des artistes peintres, sculpteurs, graveurs, etc. He and his colleagues were embarking on a commercial venture with brand new "commodities" targeted for a middle-class clientele. This was their collective participation in the rebuilding and healing process, for themselves as well as for the nation.

Although lacking a willing dynastic head, the conservatives expressed their position through a call for a revival of the *monarchie chrétienne*. Everywhere in France pilgimages were organized to famous shrines and the Church preached a vertiable crusade. The Assembly, dominated by monarchists, voted on 24 July 1873 to erect a great basilica of the Sacred Heart (*Sacré Coeur*) on Montmartre—the site of the Commune's origins—to expiate the sins of the nation and the crimes of the Communards. France



31. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Hope*, 1872. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

had to atone for the frivolity of the Second Empire, the modern Babylon whose disorders brought down the fires of heaven.

Zola observed the ethereal qualities of Puvis de Chavannes' *L'Espérance* in the Salon of 1872, a sort of compromise image of the period striding both official and avant-garde camps (fig. 31). Puvis' picture tries to counter the negative stereotypes of a prostrate Paris then circulating in popular illustration, but is itself steeped in the visual rhetoric of these allegories (fig. 32). He deployed conventional allegorical language to make the point about the recent travails, a pubescent girl whose immediate space is surrounded by signs of regenerative springtime holds an olive branch as token of peace against a backdrop of low-keyed emblems of waste and ruin. It may not be a coincidence that one of the earliest patrons of the Impressionists, Henri Rouart, owned a replica of this work whose original title was *Hope Blossoming on the Ruins*.[39] It was sold to him by Durand-Ruel and was praised by Armand Silvestre in his preface to an album of prints of the paintings in the dealer's gallery including the young Impressionists. Silvestre's

HISTOIRE

DE LA

RÉVOLUTION DE 1870-71

Par JULES CLARETIE

PRÉFACE

Je dédie ce livre à la France nouvelle, dont je suis, et qui n'ayant rien commis des impardonnables fautes qui ont amené notre décadence, en a cependant plus douloureusement que les générations ses aînées et plus durement qu'elles supporté le poids accablant.

Je dédie ce livre au peuple qui, généreux, donnant en prodigue l'enthousiasme de son âme et le sang de ses veines, mais se payant trop souvent de mots, doit à présent être avide de connaître des faits et d'apprendre comment, et jusqu'à quel gouffre il a pu être conduit par une de ces mains impérialement cruelles, à qui le sort, disait un grand orateur, ne semble avoir délégué la puissance que pour prouver aux hommes le peu de cas qu'il en fait.

Je dédie ce livre à tous ceux qui osent et veulent regarder en face la Vérité. Ce livre est vrai. Il sera vrai pour tous. Amis et ennemis y trouveront compté le total des responsabilités qui leur incombent dans les effroyables malheurs de la patrie.

L'*Histoire de la Révolution de* 1870-71, quelle histoire!

Je ne crois pas qu'on puisse trouver dans la succession des siècles beaucoup d'épisodes aussi dramatiques que ceux dont la patrie a vu le lugubre spectacle et des années plus remplies que les deux sombres années que notre malheureux pays vient de traverser. Quel entassement prodigieux d'événements, quels chocs épouvantables et quels jeux amers d'une ironique destinée! La France, prospère et redoutée, tombant tout à coup jusqu'à la défaite et jusqu'à la pitié des nations dont elle était jadis la protectrice et la vengeresse. Tout un vain échafaudage de fausse puissance s'écroulant avec fracas. Qui s'attendait à ce dénoûment sinistre? « Le couronnement de l'édifice » était un drapeau prussien.

Mais aussi, pourquoi la nation tout entière abdiquait-elle entre les mains d'un maître? Pourquoi, fière de sembler redoutable à l'extérieur, subissait-elle à l'intérieur un joug qui la courbait

32. Titlepage of J. Claretie, *Histoire de la Révolution 1870–1871*, 1871.

interpretation of the young girl as a "flower hanging on the lone green branch in this ravaged sector, flower drooping towards the earth, flower of the sweet soil of the Nation," recalls his metaphorical comments on the budding Impressionists gathering their forces as summer blossoms began shooting up from the cobblestones stained with the blood of the Commune.[40]

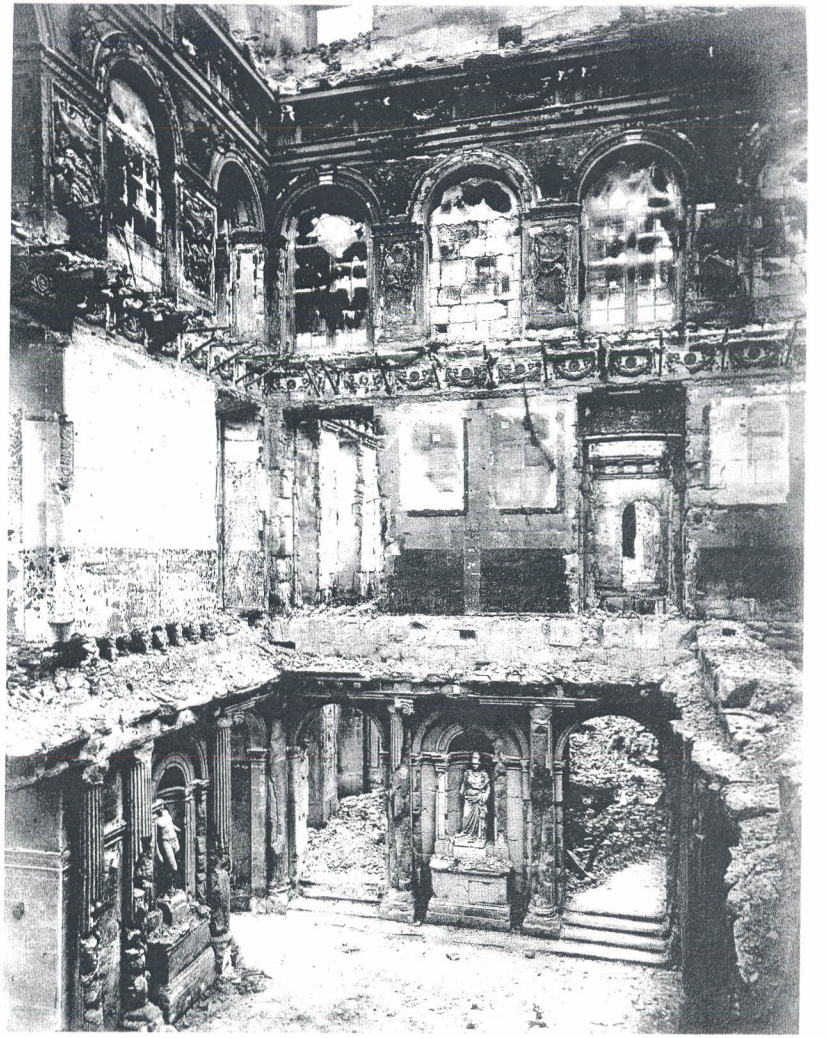
In this painting Mother Nature has been replaced by her nymphet daughter, awaiting impregnation and the conception of a revivified nation. A Parisian daughter substitutes for a virgin nymph, playing on the traditionally feminine characterization of nature and opposing the wild, uncontrollable nature of the female Communards so conspicuous in the right-wing imagery of the period. Disordered nature in the form of the female participants had to be dominated, but devastated French manhood in the period required something gentle and vulnerable like Puvis' *Hope*. Her turned-in feet and delicate gesture suggest passivity and incapacity to act aggressively as did the Communard women: less a nurturing mother than a consoling angel, she soothes the anxieties of a distraught male populace needing to restore their lost manhood.

Zola commented on the Salon of 1872 that military pictures either ignored or played down the disasters of 1870–1871, the largest one recalling a glorious moment in the expedition to the Crimea. Alsace personified or pictures of homage bestowed on the statue of Strasbourg in the Place de la Concorde also momentarily caught his attention. But what moved him the most was the sight of the burned out Tuileries in a downpouring rain as he left the Palais de l'Industrie, with its "gaping windows" against the "nasty yellow of the sky."[41]

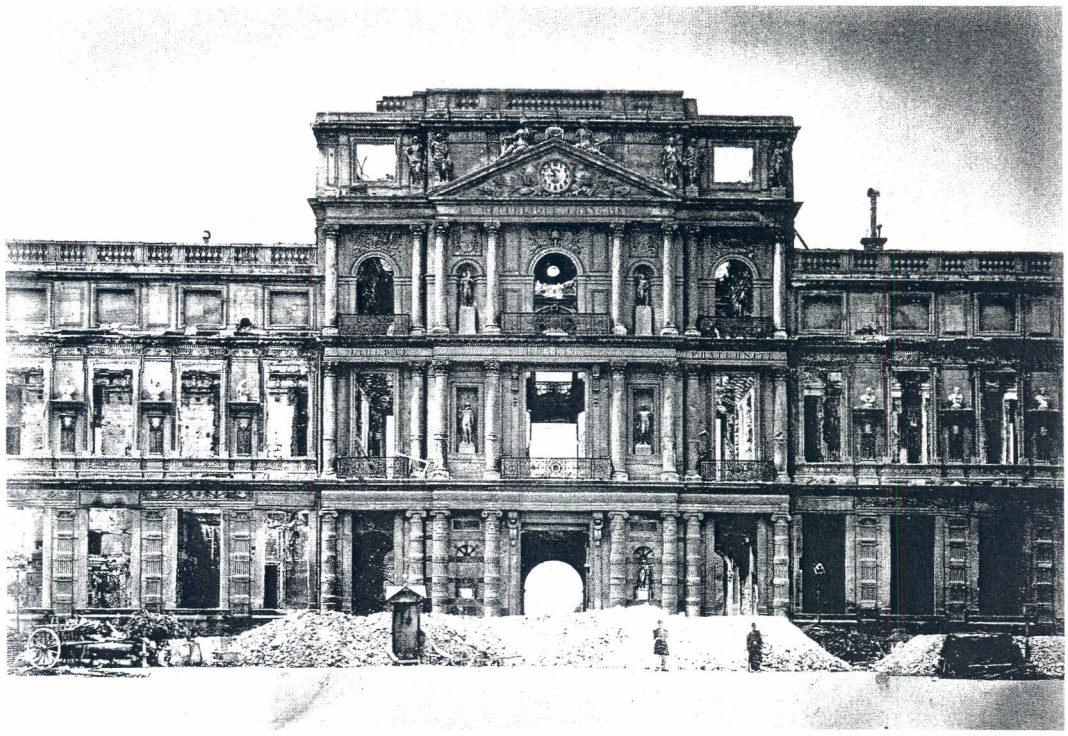
The ruins of the Tuileries were surprisingly the subject of another major official painter of the period, Meissonier, who led the opposition to Courbet's entry in the Salon of 1872 for his participation in the Commune (fig. 33). Akin to the reactionary photographers discussed earlier, Meissonier could represent the ruins from a conservative position as a warning and as an example of what French society had to surmount (figs. 34, 35).[42] (He himself associated this work with his *Barricade—Souvenir de guerre civile* of 1848 that carried a similar message.) He chose a spectacular perspective through the burned out windows of the Salle des Maréchaux, fixing on the distant quadriga atop the Arc de triomphe du Carrousel—once the threshhold of the Tuileries Palace. The far doorway through which we view the triumphal arch is flanked by two decorative shields commemorating the glorious Napoleonic victories of Marengo and Austerlitz. For Meissonier "the two words shine in history, just as they shone over the ruins of the palace." Although the quadriga is seen from the rear as if leaving the scene—the painter lamented, "Victory turns away on her chariot, she abandons us!"—it nevertheless produces the illusion that it is rising above the ruins and riding triumphantly into the future. This interpretation is confirmed by the Latin text Meissonier affixed to the bottom: "The glory of the ancients remains beyond the flames—May, 1871."[43]

Meissonier's pictorial fetishization of the Napoleonic moment of glory amidst the squalorous wreckage of the Commune was hardly unique in the period, and explains the outrage of even the conservatives over the destruction of the Vendôme Column. Photographs and popular illustration in this period focus on the Salle des Maréchaux as

33. Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier, *Ruins of the Tuileries, May 1871*, 1871. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



34. Alphonse Liebert, *Interior of the Salle des Maréchaux*, albumen photograph of the ruins of the Tuileries, 1871.



35. Alphonse Liebert, *Pavilion de l'Horloge*, albumen photograph of the ruins of the Tuileries, 1871.

an emblem of the heroic past (fig. 36). One writer noted that amid the ashes and scorched walls he could make out a decorative shield with the ineffaceable inscription "Jena"—the battleground of Napoleon's decisive victory over the Prussians in 1806—which he admonished Parisians to preserve as a precious souvenir of the "great nation."[44]

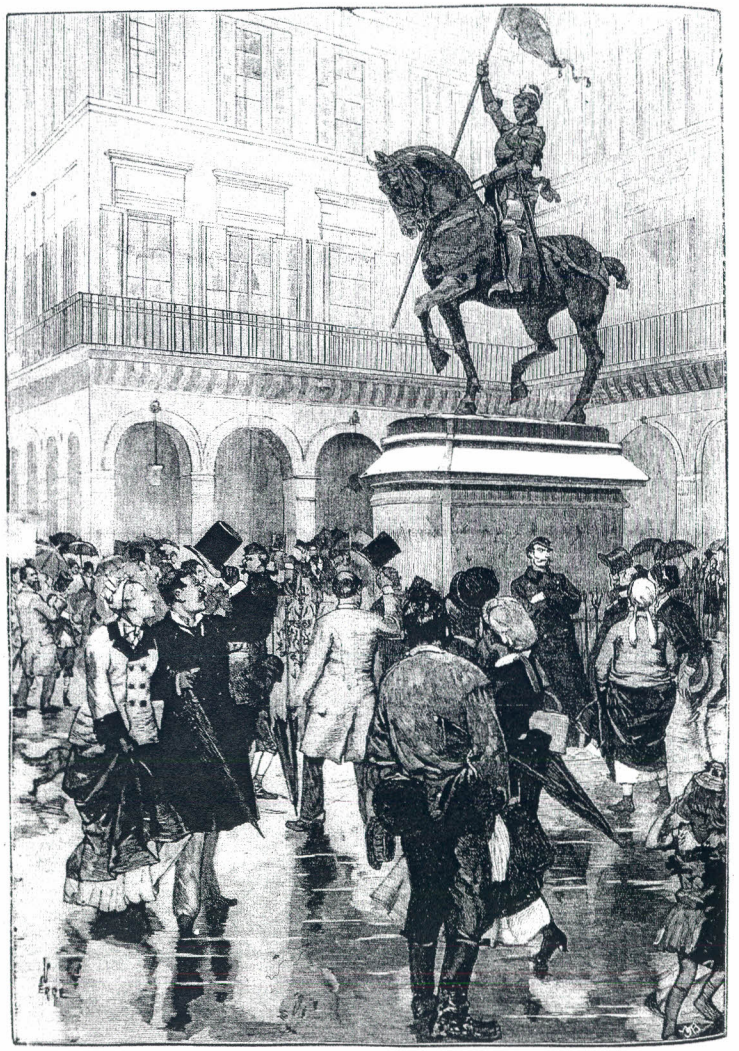
The Tuileries ruins were to stand untouched for twelve years both as a sign of Communard crimes against the nation and as a warning against future revolution, an exhibition in its own right.[45] As Deraismes had grasped, the personification of this outlook for the elite was Joan of Arc, symbol of both the militant church and the martyred victim. While she became the darling of the right wing, she could embody for all factions their longing for social stability, unanimity, and reconciliation. She represented the conservative Third Republic's answer to Carpeaux's male genius of the *Danse*, and certainly to the failed male hero at Sedan. She also represents the Christianized version of the female warrior of the Commune, a depraved prostitute and virago. A striking example of this attitude in poetry is Victor de Laparade's "A Jeanne d'Arc," which captures the mood of the conservatives in the wake of foreign and domestic upheaval. It addresses itself to French women—"sisters of Joan"—admonishing them to raise a new generation of males devoted to France and ready to engage in illustrious combats

36. M. Van Elven, *Les ruines. Intérieur des Tuileries.—Etat actuel du vestibule de la Salle des Maréchaux.* Wood engraving reproduced in *Le Monde illustré*, 1 July 1871.

in their mothers' honor. The conventional sexism of the poem explains the rush to celebrate Joan: the threat of actual women voting and soldiering in the wake of the Commune (in which they were particularly active) needed to be neutralized and displaced onto a transcendental sign which essentially safeguarded the male hierarchy. At the very moment when Joan was championed, real women's rights and feminist agitation for those rights were aggressively squelched.

During the 1870s images of Joan of Arc could be seen everywhere in Paris. The most celebrated of all was the equestrian version by the sculptor Emmanuel Frémiet inaugurated on 20 February 1874, little less than two months before the opening of the first Impressionist exhibition (fig. 37). Depicting Joan as the militant Christian, it soon became a cult object; in 1878 Bishop Dupanloup of Orléans—hero of the fusionist party and hostile enemy of the Commune—suggested that Catholic women should assemble and lay flowers at the foot of the statue as a reply to the impending hundredth anniversary of Voltaire's death (fig. 38). (Moderate republicans gained increasing con-

37. Emmanuel Frémiet, *Joan of Arc on Horseback*, 1874. Bronze, 1899. Place des Pyramides, Paris.



LE 30 MAI A PARIS. — Démonstration muette du Public devant la Statue de Jeanne d'Arc, place des Pyramides
(Dessin de M. Vierge.)

38. Daniel Urrabieta Ortiz y Vierge, *Le 30 Mai à Paris*. Wood engraving reproduced in *Le Monde illustré*, 8 June 1878.

trol of the Assembly and voted a national celebration of the centenary, and disgruntled conservatives organized a counterdemonstration at the base of Frémiet's statue.)

Erected on the Place des Pyramides near the site where the heroine was wounded during a battle against English invaders, the Joan of Arc was a highly charged political statement from the moment of its unveiling. The crowd included several outspoken revanchists like Paul Déroulède who bewailed the loss of the Alsace Lorraine provinces. Indeed, the desire for the recovery of Alsace Lorraine after 1870 was one of the main props of French patriotism in this period and immediately politicized Joan of Arc, whose native region was Lorraine. At the same time, memories of the Provisional Republic's poor handling of the defense of Orléans during the Prussian siege of Paris also caused ill feeling at the time of the inauguration, especially since the suspicion that the Government of Defense had sold them down the river fueled popular support for the Commune.

The other side of Frémiet's production are his wild beasts, the flip side of his fascination for medieval heroes and saints. From the moment of its sensational appearance in the Salon in 1887, Fremiet's *Gorilla Carrying off a Human Female* conjured up not only the "savage" of colonialized territories, but a vision "of the lowest side of human nature" (fig. 39). The appeal of Fremiet's work to the conservatives lay in its encoding of the "terrible past" now given its true identity. More than one anti-Commune writer classified the Communards with wild beasts and monsters; in an outburst of rage, Gautier wrote: "Des cages ouvertes, s'élancent les hyènes de 93 et les gorilles de la Commune."[46] Taine imagined "stampeding beasts" including "bloodthirsty baboons," while Zola's *Germinal* casts the crowd in the form of a salivating monster in heat.[47] As early as 8 June 1871, Villemessant, the reactionary publisher of *Le Figaro*, combined both the purgatorial and bestial metaphors in an editorial:

> There remains an important task for M. Thiers, that of purging Paris. Never has a better opportunity presented iteself for curing Paris of its moral gangrene that has been consuming it for twenty years. . . . What is a republican? A savage beast. Come on, honest people, a swift bold stroke to finish once and for all the vermin, both democratic and international. . . . We must track them down in their lairs like wild animals.[48]

The metaphorical representations of the crusading Joan of Arc and the rampaging Big Ape map the limits of the conservative visual regime in the post-Commune era.

A useful starting point for examining the independents' complicity in post-Commune reconstruction is the work *Place des Pyramides* by Giuseppe de Nittis, a Neapolitan painter who exhibited with the Impressionists in their first joint venture in 1874 (fig. 40). De Nittis suffered from his expatriate status, and this sensitivity perhaps explains his conspicuous appeal to French patriotism. In the background, a building burned by the Communards four years earlier is under scaffolding. Scaffolding was a pervasive sight during the building campaign that followed the devastation of the Commune, and especially associated with the official buildings and monuments of Paris (figs. 41, 42). That the scaffolding in the De Nittis scene constitutes a metonym for Paris reborn is seen in its juxtaposition with another triumphant emblem of French

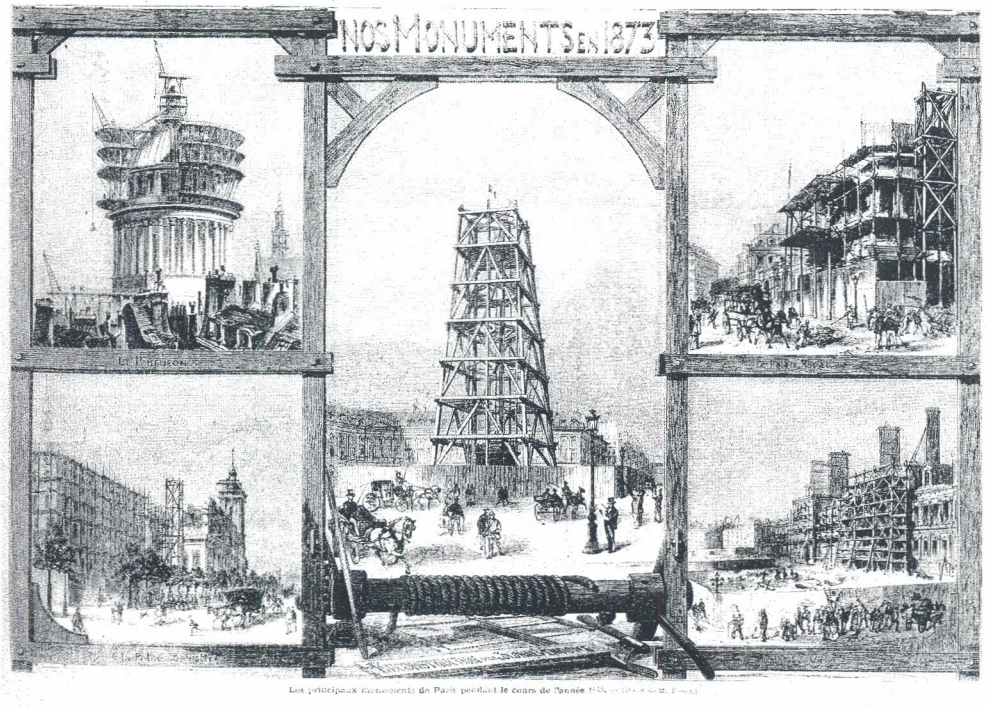
39. Emmanuel Frémiet, *Gorilla carrying Off a Human Female*, plaster, 1887. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nantes.

nationalism, Frémiet's equestrian statue of Joan of Arc. The militant Joan of Arc strides in the direction of the burnt out Tuileries, a symbol of the triumph of the French government over the forces of anarchy. The monument shows the heroine, one commentator declared just after the unveiling, "lance in hand, at the moment of taking the enemy's measure, and when she calls Parisians to their liberation."[49]

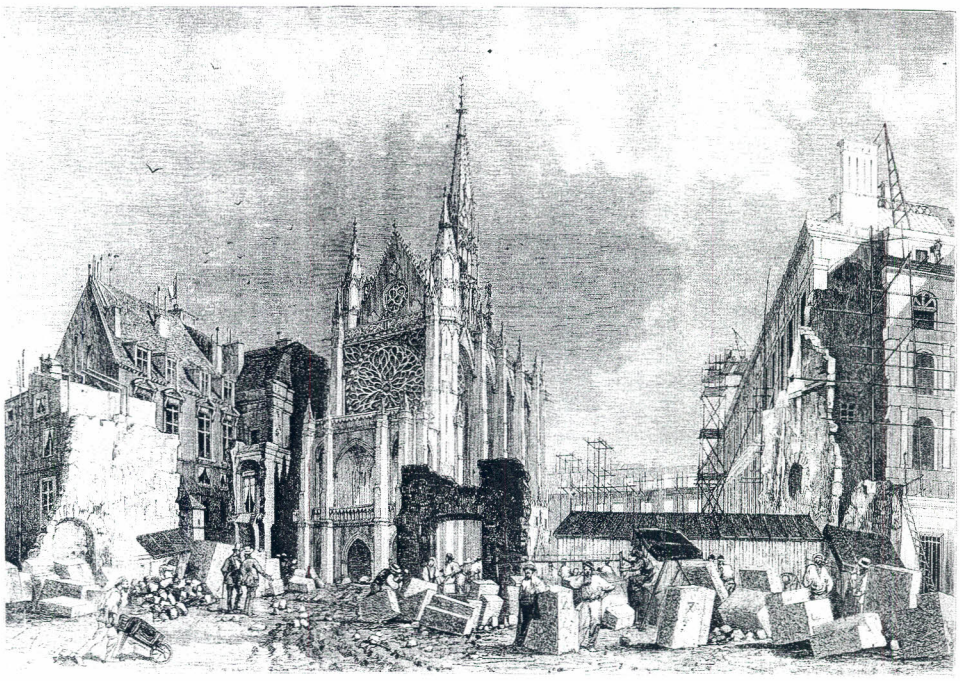
To juxtapose this image with Monet's painting of the *Tuileries* of c. 1876 may seem to be stretching it, but bear with me for a moment (fig. 43). In one of four views of the gardens he depicted in this period from the window of his patron Victor Chocquet on the Rue de Rivoli, Monet clearly avoided displaying the ruins by relegating them to a remote corner and focusing on the vast garden area between the old palace and the place de la Concorde.[50] His strategic placement is immediately apparent from contemporary photographic views of the ruins (figs. 44, 45). The garden areas of the Tuileries still evoked pleasant memories of the previous regime, especially because the emperor opened them to the public. During the Commune, the Tuileries had been transformed into an artillery emplacement that profoundly upset the park strollers and nursemaids of the well-to-do (fig. 46). That springtime, when the leaves of the chestnut trees began to bloom, upper-class mothers wondered if their children could frolic in the shaded lanes of the gardens. As one reviewer noted, "In seeing all of that military hardware [attirail], that cluster of engines of destruction, those crude wooden barracks, they despair in thinking that the torrid season will have shone with all its rays before the garden of the Tuileries will be divested of the gunners and their artillery."[51] But the author concluded that this would soon pass, "a scrape of the rake and it will all disappear."

Monet's task, like that of the gardener, was to rake over the traces of the hated insurgents. At the same time, he avoided the implications of the political controversy

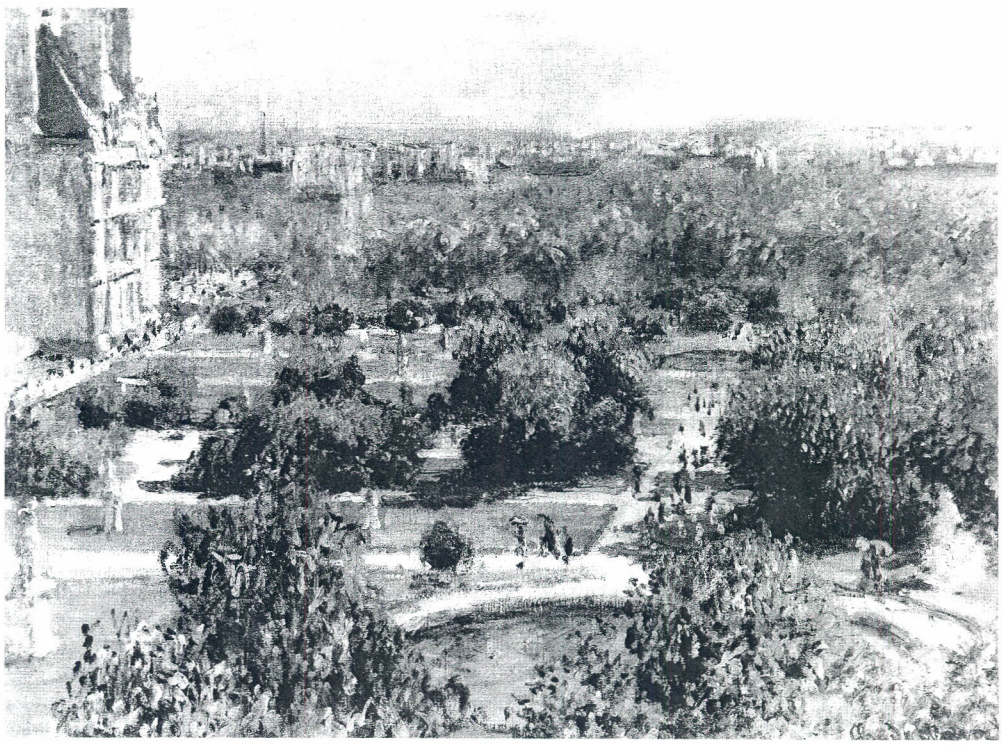
40. Giuseppe de Nittis, *Place des Pyramides*, c. 1875. Civica Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Milan.



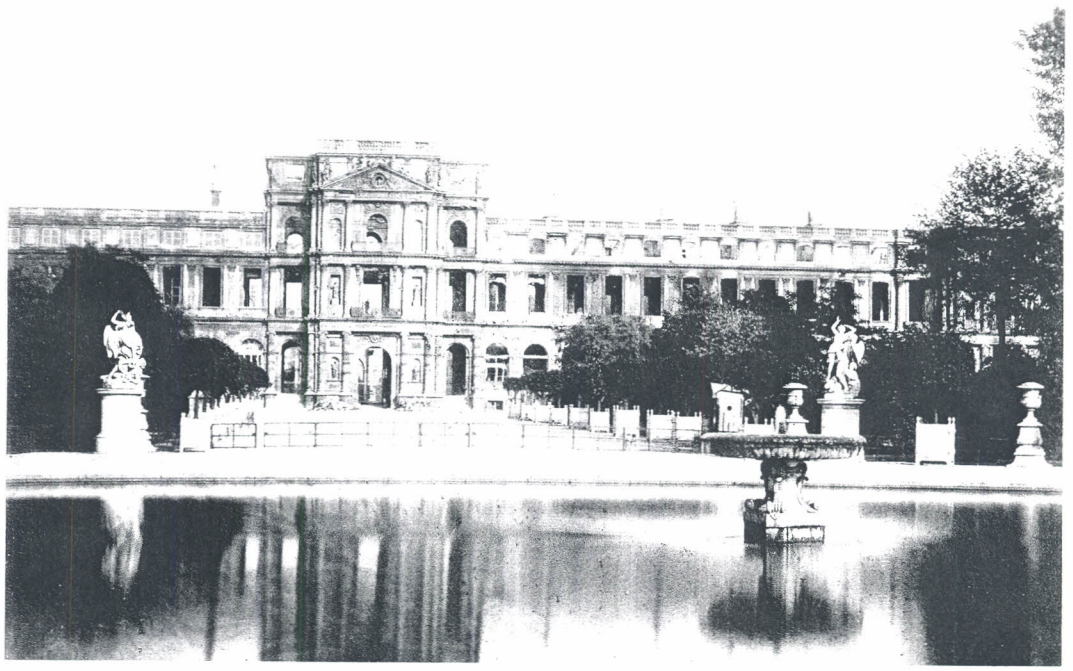
41. Karl Fichot, *Les principaux monuments de Paris pendant le cours de l'année 1873*. Wood engraving reproduced in *Le Monde Illustré*, 20 December 1873.



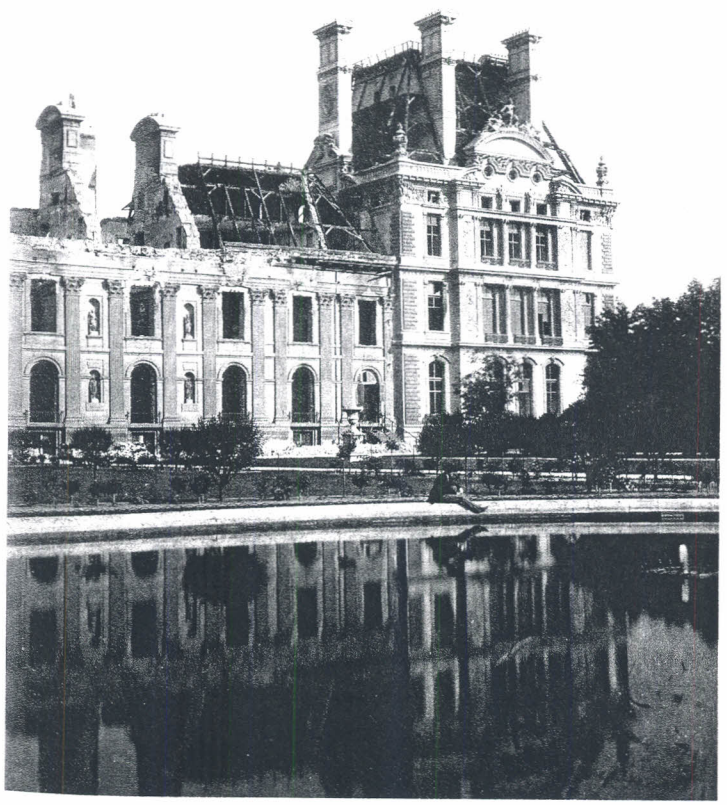
42. L. Avenet, *Travaux de dégagement de la Sainte-Chapelle et de reconstruction de la partie incendie du Palais de Justice.* Wood engraving reproduced in *Le Monde Illustré*, 1873.



43. Claude Monet, *The Tuileries*, 1876. Musée Marmottan, Paris.



44. Photograph of the Burned Out Tuileries, 1871.



45. Photograph of the Burned Out Tuileries, 1871.

46. E. Grandsire, *Paris depuis le Siège. Etat actuel du jardin des Tuileries*. Wood engraving reproduced in *Le Monde illustré*, 8 April 1871.

PRÉSENCE DES ALLEMANDS A PARIS. — Purification de la place de l'Étoile après le départ du corps d'armée d'occupation.

47. *Présence des Allemands à Paris. Purification de la Place de l'Etoile, après le départ du corps d'occupation*. Wood engraving reproduced in *La Guerre illustrée*, 1871, p. 533.

then raging over the remains of the palace, whether or not to preserve them in the form of a memorial or to raze them entirely. Monet's solution is to incorporate them into the middle zone as if still in the same state as they had been during the Second Empire. In this way, the continuity of French life is represented in an Edenic-like environment. Such an image would have appealed to Chocquet, given the proximity of his apartment to the Tuileries Palace whose infernesque appearance in May 1871 must have been a threatening sight glimpsed through the same window. Like Puvis' *Hope*, Monet's scene suggests a flourishing environment that overshadows the tragic landmarks of the past. He shares with de Nittis the manipulation of Parisian topography to fit the ideological proclivities of the early Third Republic.

Monet's avoidance of the political symbols may be contrasted with an example of the next generation's preoccupation with a restructured environment. Georges Seurat and his Post-Impressionist colleagues were children at the time of the Franco-Prussian war and Commune and traumatized by the devastation. If they managed to get out of Paris during the bombardment and final massacre, they returned to Paris only to see the streets in ruins and houses gutted by fire. They move in the direction of utopian planning and anarchist doctrine. Unlike Monet, Seurat confronted the ruins of the Commune with a sense of reconstruction (see Epilogue). His study of the remnant of the Tuileries in 1882 gives it a stateliness and order that would have been anathema to Fournel and the Impressionists. The older generation wished to restore and forget and get on with their lives, while the younger generation wanted to aid in the formation of a new social structure on the ruins of the past. In his most ambitious picture, *La Grande-Jatte*, a park devastated by the shelling of the Versaillais during the Commune, he reconfigures the landscape to conform to a geometric grid.

The attitude of the older generation in the 1870s (keeping in mind that they too underwent a change of direction in the decade of the 1880s) was simply that of getting on with the house-cleaning necessary to reestablish order. In this they shared the general need to see the traces of national humiliation and devastation come to an end. All French citizens, regardless of their political affiliation, were scarred by the brutality and civil carnage of 1870–1871. Symbolic of the popular mood was the reaction to the triumphal entry of the Prussians into Paris on 1 March, a concession made by the Government of National Defense in return for retention of the fortress of Belfort. This was taken as a direct insult to the honor of the capital, as well as a threat to its security, and was the occasion of serious disorders and a rapid decline in the credibility and authority of the government. Immediately after the exit of the Prussian occupation, scores of men, women, and children gathered and piled up hay all around the Arc de Triomphe which they set on fire (fig. 47). "Le feu purifie tout," claimed one reporter to describe this rite in the place de l'Etoile, and he probably choked on his words during the last days of the Commune. Purification first of the traces of the Prussian presence and then of the Communard presence by symbolic representation lies at the heart of Impressionist practice.

Both the Prussians and the Communards invested Paris and suburban Parisian topography with their bodies and their equipment, thereby, out of necessity or by design, laying waste to the environment. No landmark, particularly in Paris, seemed to have

48. *The Artillerymen's Breakfast Outside Paris.* Wood engraving reproduced in *Illustrierte Geschichte des Krieges 1870/71*, Stuttgart, 1871, p. 292.

49. Deroy, *Les approches de l'Armée.—Aspect du bois de Bouilogne aux abords des lacs depuis l'occupation des troupes.* Wood engraving reproduced in *Le Monde Illustré*, 20 May 1871.

Le Siège de Paris. — Avenue du bois de Boulogne, vue prise à la porte d'Auteuil.

50. Lalanne, *Le siège de Paris.—Avenue du bois de Boulogne, vue prise à la porte d'Auteuil.* Wood engraving reproduced in J. Claretie, *Histoire de la révolution de 1870–1871*, p. 365.

LAKE IN THE BOIS DE BOULOGNE, PARIS.
(SKETCH BY BALLOON POST).

51. *Lake in the Bois de Boulogne, Paris.* Wood engraving published in *The Illustrated London News*, 28 January 1871.

AU BOIS DE BOULOGNE.

— Allons, bon! voilà qu'ils ont reculé le bois au diable! il faudra maintenant faire une lieue pour aller au lac.
— On ne l'a pas reculé, grosse bébête! Cet espace que tu vois nu, c'est la zone militaire qu'on a découverte.
— Bon! mais ce n'était pas une raison pour reculer le bois.

52. Gilbert Randon, *Au Bois de Boulogne, Le Journal Amusant*, 15 July 1871.

escaped the war or the Commune unscathed. Pissarro and other artists were traumatized by the vandalism wrought by the occupying Prussians on their paintings, but the Prussians themselves acknowledged such acts as part of the vagaries of warfare (fig. 48). Bridges in and around the capital had been demolished, homes and monuments bombarded, prominent parks were places to bivouac or to mobilize or, worse, execution sites for Communard prisoners, and toward the end such a site as Longchamps could be transformed into an assembly ground for Prussian and then French troops, who suppressed the Commune, to pass in review. The radiant ecological triumph of Haussmann, the Bois de Boulogne, had been systematically stripped of its trees for firewood and charcoal, and everywhere one could see the damaging effects of shrapnel and bullets (figs. 49–51). The damage to the self-image of French people was perhaps even more incalculable, with the memory of the humiliation of the Prussian occupation and the wholesale massacres of the civil war leaving a searing scar on the national psyche. Gilbert Randon, the cartoonist for *Le Journal Amusante*, tried to find humor in the devastated site of the Bois by depicting a well-dressed couple taking their usual Sunday stroll in the park (fig.52). The woman exclaims, "What's going on? They have pushed the park back like the devil! Now we will have to walk much further to the lake." Her partner smiles at her naivete and replies, "They haven't pushed the park, Big Baby! The empty space that you see is only the clearing that was made for the military zone." But the woman has the last word: "Alright, but that's still not a reason for pushing back the park." Her ability to imagine the park as having receded rather than ruthlessly cut away is analogous to the adjustments performed by the Impressionists.