



CONSTANTIN GUYS: *In the Row, Hyde Park*. Pen and water-colour. London, Mr. Tom Girtin.

THE PAINTER OF MODERN LIFE AND OTHER ESSAYS

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III. THE ARTIST, MAN OF THE WORLD,
MAN OF THE CROWD, AND CHILD

¹ Constantin Guys (1802-92).

The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world—such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spec—tator is a *prince* who everywhere rejoices in his incognito. The lover of life makes the whole world his family, just like the lover of the fair sex who builds up his family from all the beautiful women that he has ever found, or that are—or are not—to be found; or the lover of pictures who lives in a magical society of dreams painted on canvas. Thus the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. Or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multi—plicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life. He is an 'I' with an insatiable appetite for the 'non-I', at every instant rendering and explaining it in pictures more living than life itself, which is always

unstable and fugitive. 'Any man,' he said one day, in the course of one of those conversations which he illumines with burning glance and evocative gesture,¹ 'any man who is not crushed by one of those griefs whose nature is too real not to monopolize all his capacities, and who can yet be *bored in the heart of the multitude*, is a blockhead! a blockhead! and I despise him!'

When Monsieur G. wakes up and opens his eyes to see the boisterous sun beating a tattoo upon his window-pane, he reproaches himself remorsefully and regretfully: 'What a peremptory order! what a bugle-blast of life! Already several hours of light—everywhere—lost by my sleep! How many *illuminated* things might I have seen and have missed

¹ The following passage from the Goncourts' Journal (23 April 1858) gives an interesting account of Guys at about the same time:

'We came back from Gavarni's with Guys, the draughtsman of the ILLUSTRATED LONDON.

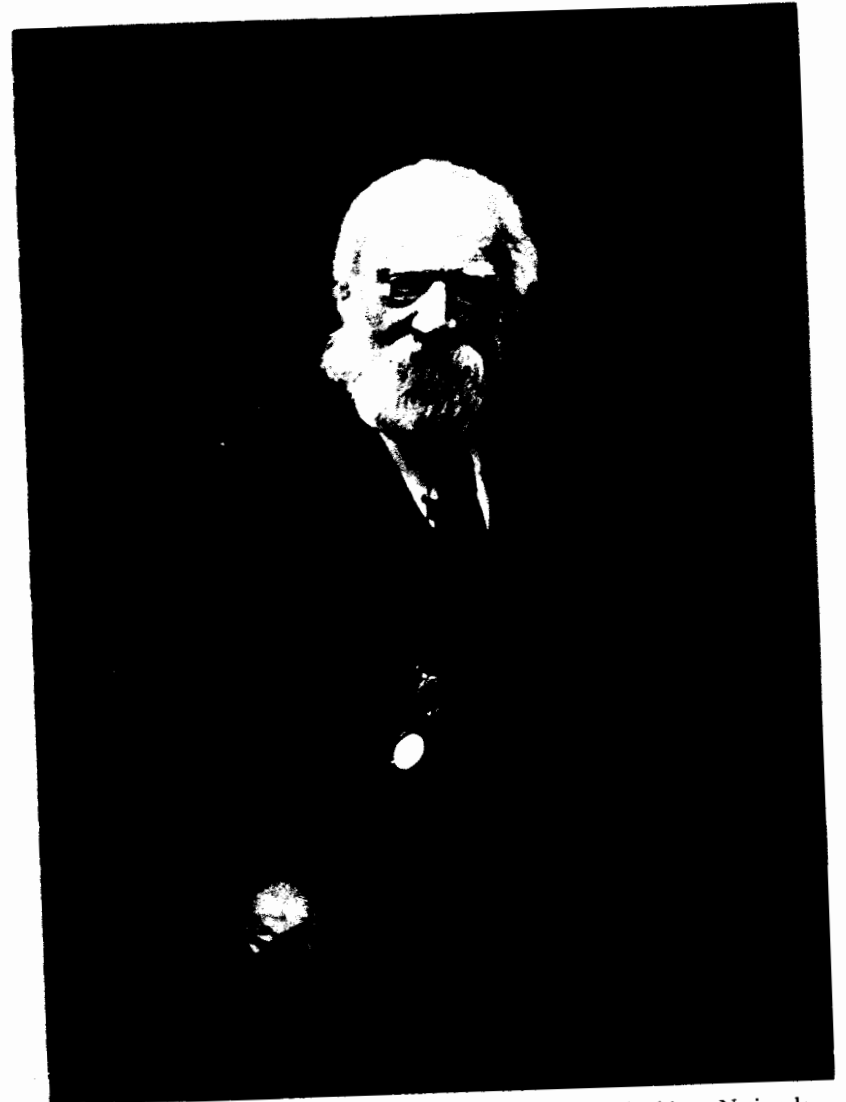
'A little man with an animated face, a grey moustache, looking like an old soldier; hobbling along, constantly hitching up his sleeves on his bony arms with a sharp slap of the hand, diffuse, exuberant with parentheses, zigzagging from idea to idea, going off at tangents and getting lost, but retrieving himself and regaining your attention with a metaphor from the gutter, a word from the vocabulary of the German philosophers, a technical term from art or industry, and always holding you under the thrall of his highly-coloured, almost *visible* utterance. He evoked a thousand memories on that walk, throwing into the conversation handfuls of ironical observations, sketches, landscapes, cities riddled with cannon-balls, blood-soaked, gutted, and ambulances with rats beginning to gnaw at the wounded.

'Then on the other side, rather like in an album in which you find a quotation from Balzac on the back of a design by Decamps, there issued from the mouth of this extraordinary fellow social silhouettes, reflections on the French and the English races, all new, not one that had grown mouldy in a book, two-minute satires, one-word pamphlets, a comparative philosophy of the national genius of the peoples.

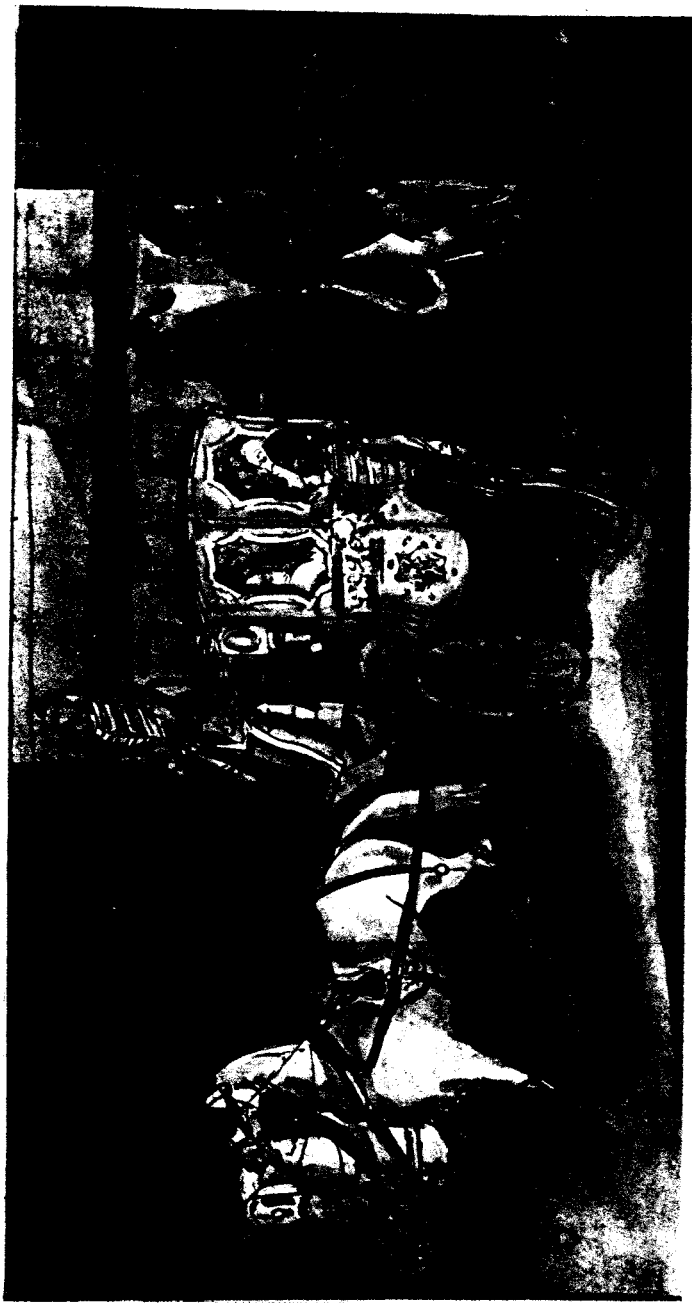
'Now we were at the taking of Janina, a river of blood with dogs splashing about in it, flowing between the legs of the young Guys. . . .

'Now it was Dembinski, wearing a blue shirt, his last shirt, tossing a coin, his last coin, on to a green table and nonchalantly forcing the betting up to 40,000 francs.

'And now it was an English castle, with immemorial oaks, a hunt, three *toilettes* a day and a ball every evening, a royal life led, conducted and paid for by a gentleman called Simpson or Tompson (sic), whose twenty-year-old daughter travels to the Mediterranean to inspect her father's eighteen ships of which not one is less than two thousand tons, 'a fleet such as Egypt never had', says Guys. Then he compared *us* to the English—us!—and cries: 'A Frenchman who does nothing, who is in London quietly to spend money—an unheard-of thing! The French travel in order to get over an unhappy love-affair or a gambling-loss, or perhaps to sell textiles, but to see a Frenchman in London riding in a carriage, a Frenchman who is neither an actor nor an ambassador, a Frenchman with a woman at his side who might be his mother or his sister, and not a whore, an actress or a dressmaker—no, that could never be!'



1. Photograph of Guys as an old man, by Nadar. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.



8. Guys: *The Sultan's Wives in their Carriage*. Pen and water-colour. Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs.

seeing!' So out he goes and watches the river of life flow past him in all its splendour and majesty. He marvels at the eternal beauty and the amazing harmony of life in the capital cities, a harmony so providentially maintained amid the turmoil of human freedom. He gazes upon the landscapes of the great city—landscapes of stone, caressed by the mist or buffeted by the sun. He delights in fine carriages and proud horses, the dazzling smartness of the grooms, the expertness of the footmen, the sinuous gait of the women, the beauty of the children, happy to be alive and nicely dressed—in a word, he delights in universal life. If a fashion or the cut of a garment has been slightly modified, if bows and curls have been supplanted by cockades, if *bavolets* have been enlarged and *chignons* have dropped a fraction towards the nape of the neck, if waists have been raised and skirts have become fuller, be very sure that his eagle eye will already have spotted it from however great a distance. A regiment passes, on its way, as it may be, to the ends of the earth, tossing into the air of the boulevards its trumpet-calls as winged and stirring as hope; and in an instant Monsieur G. will already have seen, examined and analysed the bearing and external aspect of that company. Glittering equipment, music, bold determined glances, heavy, solemn moustaches—he absorbs it all pell-mell; and in a few moments the resulting 'poem' will be virtually composed. See how his soul lives with the soul of that regiment, marching like a single animal, a proud image of joy in obedience!

But now it is evening. It is that strange, equivocal hour when the curtains of heaven are drawn and cities light up. The gas-light makes a stain upon the crimson of the sunset. Honest men and rogues, sane men and mad, are all saying to themselves, 'The end of another day!' The thoughts of all, whether good men or knaves, turn to pleasure, and each one hastens to the place of his choice to drink the cup of oblivion. Monsieur G. will be the last to linger wherever there can be a glow of light, an echo of poetry, a quiver of life or a chord of music; wherever a passion can *pose* before him, wherever natural man and conventional man display themselves in a strange beauty, wherever the sun lights up the swift joys of the *depraved animal*!¹ 'A fine way to fill one's day, to be sure,' remarks a certain reader whom we all know so well. 'Which one of us has not every bit enough genius to fill it in the same way?' But no!

¹ The expression derives from Rousseau; cf. also Brierre de Boismont (*De l'Ennui*): 'L'homme qui pense est un animal dépravé.'

Few men are gifted with the capacity of seeing; there are fewer still who possess the power of expression. So now, at a time when others are asleep, Monsieur G. is bending over his table, darting on to a sheet of paper the same glance that a moment ago he was directing towards external things, skirmishing with his pencil, his pen, his brush, splashing his glass of water up to the ceiling, wiping his pen on his shirt, in a ferment of violent activity, as though afraid that the image might escape him, cantankerous though alone, elbowing himself on. And the external world is reborn upon his paper, natural and more than natural, beautiful and more than beautiful, strange and endowed with an impulsive life like the soul of its creator. The phantasmagoria has been distilled from nature. All the raw materials with which the memory has loaded itself are put in order, ranged and harmonized, and undergo that forced idealization which is the result of a childlike perceptiveness—that is to say, a perceptiveness acute and magical by reason of its innocence!