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Describe or Narrate? A Problem in Realistic Representation*

Svetlana Alpers

WHEN GIOVANNI PIETRO BELLORI, the leading Roman art critic and theorist of the second half of the seventeenth century, came to write his *Lives* of the greatest artists of his time, he somewhat grudgingly, and against his taste, included an account of Caravaggio. He admitted Caravaggio's greatness but disputed his art. In Bellori's view Caravaggio's art was remarkable for its descriptive or imitative powers, though it offended by its emphasis on the low and the vulgar, and it was surprising to him in at least one instance for its lack of narrative action. Bellori calls Caravaggio's *Conversion of St. Paul* (Fig. 1) a work "truly without action"—an "istoria . . . affatto senza attione,"¹ and his observation is true of other works of Caravaggio's as well—for example, the *Crucifixion of St. Peter* (Fig. 2) on the opposite wall of the little Cerasi chapel.

Bellori is right—and he is the only critic of the time I know who found a phrase to describe this striking aspect of Caravaggio's art. But this singular combination of an attention to imitation or description with a suspension of narrative action is not an isolated feature of some works by Caravaggio. It is also a characteristic of some of the greatest works of the other leading seventeenth-century realist painters—Velázquez, Rembrandt, and Vermeer. Further, this phenomenon seems not to be limited to the seventeenth century, for it reappears once more in French realist art of the nineteenth century—in Courbet and Manet.

This pictorial point is made clearly by putting a nineteenth-century work of this kind next to Caravaggio. Compare, for example, the *Crucifixion* by Caravaggio with Courbet's *Stone-Breakers* (Fig. 3). It is not the similarity between the simple, or what we would call in the seventeenth century low-life, aspects of the figures to which I want to call attention, but the manner of the handling. In each work there is a deliberate suspension of action achieved through a fixity of pose and an avoidance of outward expression (note that the gestures do not convey feelings and that faces are hidden in both works) combined with an attention to the description of the material surface of the world—the mottled surface of rocks, the complex life of the

* This paper was written for delivery before the English Institute meeting in Cambridge, Massachusetts, September, 1975, in a session entitled "Literature and the Visual Arts" and chaired by Stephen Orgel of The Johns Hopkins University. It is to be part of a book of studies on realism in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century art that I am presently preparing for publication.

folds of cloth, and so forth. Although there are obvious differences between the works (note the emphasis on the landscape in Courbet and the absence of setting in Caravaggio), in these respects they are similar.

The starting point of this essay was my identification of this parallel choice, on the part of realist artists of the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, to emphasize description and to de-emphasize or suspend narrative action in their works.² The status of the choice remains unclear—in some sense it is perhaps a constant option in an imitative narrative art such as we have in the West from the Renaissance into the nineteenth century.³ But my own thinking about this realistic representational mode in seventeenth-century art has been fed or encouraged by the suggestive parallel in the nineteenth century. It is not only a matter of a pictorial parallel. The most highly developed critical discussion of the phenomenon of realism, the imitative aspect of art and literature, has been prompted by the nineteenth-century novel and recently by nineteenth-century art. But so far the fruits of this criticism have not been made use of in dealing with earlier art; I think because the students of seventeenth- and nineteenth-century realisms feel themselves to be dealing with irreconcilably different materials. Put succinctly, it is claimed from the supposed vantage point of the nineteenth century that “real” realism only occurs in the nineteenth century. To quote a recent writer, “We must stop using *realism* as a synonym for representational and imitative art of other periods which is, on the whole, usually idealistic.”⁴ In keeping with this view, students of Dutch seventeenth-century art offer their recent findings about the emblematic meaning of genre painting as confirmation that we are dealing with only an apparent, not a real, realism. What then, one might well ask, is the function of the dazzling descriptive surface of Dutch painting?⁵ By focusing on the striking pictorial similarity between these descriptive representational modes, I hope to be able to gain access, for the seventeenth century, to current insights into nineteenth-century realism and perhaps in turn to suggest some new ways of seeing nineteenth-century realistic paintings.

Let us return to where we started. We can see that Bellori is right, critically speaking, to point to the lack of action in Caravaggio’s work. But why does he make this point? What assumptions about art lead him to criticize an artist who concentrates on description and suspends narration?

Although it might appear that painting by its very nature is descriptive (an art of space, not time), Bellori’s comment must be understood against the background of the Renaissance commitment to a narrative art—a commitment which continued to challenge ambitious artists well into the nineteenth century. *Ut pictura poesis* is an argument not for pictorial poetry but for narrative painting. Even Lessing, in his famous essay delineating the limits of the arts, does not rule out narrative in art but is at pains to specify the conditions under which painting can narrate while remaining true to its descriptive strengths. Let me expand a bit on this point in respect to Renaissance art.

It was basic to the Renaissance aesthetic that imitative skills were bound to narrative concerns, as means to an end, and on this was based the notion of

the appeal of art. As Gombrich suggests in his *Art and Illusion*, the very perfection of imitation in ancient and Renaissance art was in order to achieve the end of intelligible and convincing narratives.⁶ Writers in the Renaissance agreed that it was specifically through the movements of the body that the passions (or movements of the soul) were made visible. It was from this that the appeal of art followed, on this that the appeal of art depended. The *istoria*, as Alberti wrote, will move the soul of the beholder when each man painted there clearly shows the movement of his own soul.⁷ When we read sixteenth-century descriptions of paintings, such as the numerous ones in Vasari's *Lives of the Painters*, we find a casual mixture of praise for imitative details and a reading of the expressive gestures and expressions of the figures who tell the tale. For example, Vasari praises the very real cambric tablecloth at the end of his description of the feelings of Judas and the Apostles in Leonardo's *Last Supper*. But there is never any question that imitation is the handmaiden of narrative concerns: "All their faces are expressive of love, fear, wrath or grief at not being able to grasp the meaning of Christ, in contrast to the obstinacy, hatred and treason of Judas, while the whole work, down to the smallest details, displays incredible diligence, even the texture of the tablecloth being clearly visible so that actual cambric would not look more real."⁸

One would not be far wrong to say that what distinguishes the achievement of Renaissance picture-making from medieval art, what bound it, in their own view, to the art of antiquity, was its susceptibility to such narrative verbal evocations—to the rhetorical device known by the name of *ekphrasis*.⁹ It is thus that the biblical story of the massacre of the innocents, with its hoards of angry soldiers, dying children, and mourning mothers, was treated as a kind of proving ground by countless Renaissance artists. This was the epitome of what, in their view, pictorial narrative could be. In contrast to this, the widely appreciated coloristic and imitative richness of the great Venetian artists of the sixteenth century puzzled and even raised the anger of those Roman and Florentine critics who predictably found these works incomprehensible. Vasari praises the imitative power of some Giorgione frescoes, but despairs of figuring out what they depict: "Giorgione set to work, but with no other purpose than to make figures at fancy to display his art, for I cannot discover what they mean, whether they represent some ancient or modern story, and no one has been able to tell me. . . . There are heads and parts of figures which are excellently done and brilliantly coloured. Giorgione was careful in all that he did there to copy straight from living things. . . ." ¹⁰ Vasari is saying in effect that he cannot understand the picture if he cannot read the action, if it is not susceptible to *ekphrasis* (an experience that has incidentally been repeated by modern viewers of Giorgione).

It is precisely in these terms in fact that Boccaccio had celebrated the achievement of Giotto and distinguished him from the art that went before: "Giotto had returned art to the light after many centuries of error by those who preferred to delight the eyes of the ignorant rather than addressing the intelligent with recognizable figures."¹¹ Invoking the traditional hierarchy of

mind over sense, the argument for an intelligible narrative art is coupled with an attack on art which delights the eyes of the ignorant. The assumed linking of the imitative or descriptive means of art to narrative ends and the attendant notion of the appeal of the narrative to the mind of the viewer was seen, in other words, as the very basis of the great Renaissance rebirth of ancient pictorial art.¹²

No wonder then that Bellori is disturbed by Caravaggio's emphasis on description at the expense, so to speak, of narrative action. Caravaggio is engaged in a reversal in some significant sense of the priorities of Renaissance art, and his work leaves the viewer uncertain as to the nature of its appeal.

The only discussion of the pictorial phenomenon we are considering here has been in some recent writing on nineteenth-century French art. On the one hand there is Michael Fried, who has argued that there was a conscious strategy on the part of avant-garde artists—Courbet and Manet—that provides "a new paradigm for ambitious painting that no longer *essentially* comprised the representation of action."¹³ To simplify a complex argument, Fried sees in the frozen figures an acceptance of the artifice of representation itself that is the genesis of what we call modernism in art. A most famous example of this frozen style is Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* (Fig. 4). On the other hand there is an argument, best put forward by T. J. Clark in his fine study of Courbet, that the freezing of narrative action and the turning to description is related to a perception about the quality of modern life.¹⁴ Dispensing with action leaves us not with art but with the fragmented actuality of modern life. Again the *Déjeuner* seems to provide an example. This argument about art has close analogies in the analysis of the nineteenth-century novel in the writings of both Lukács and Auerbach.

Both these arguments assume that narrative action as such is totally rejected in nineteenth-century realist art. And for this reason they are unacceptable as an explanation of the realistic mode in seventeenth-century painting. For the *oeuvres* of Caravaggio, Velázquez, and Rembrandt offer ample evidence that these artists still subscribed to the Renaissance narrative tradition. We have, after all, been comparing the realism of a monumental picture of a saint's martyrdom to the depiction of two impoverished laborers at their work and to some people on a picnic. Is it not curious that characteristics which by general agreement seem to mark the breakdown (for better or for worse) of the established artistic tradition in the nineteenth century should occur *within* that tradition in the seventeenth?

With this nineteenth-century realistic mode still in mind, let us now look at four or five paintings by perhaps the greatest realists of the seventeenth century—paintings which I think can justly and profitably be said to involve the decision to emphasize description rather than narrative action—and then try to understand this realist mode in the framework of Renaissance views of art.

Returning to Caravaggio's *Conversion of St. Paul* (Fig. 1), consider what the effect or appeal of the work was meant to be. Caravaggio has reduced a normally active and dramatic narrative of numerous figures (compare it, for

example, to the famous precedent of Michelangelo's late fresco representing this scene in the Pauline Chapel) into this still scene of three figures. The fallen helmet, clothing, and arms of the Saint share our attention with the great brown and white flank of the horse and the leg of the groom. If, as has been suggested, the light in this dark world is a heavenly one (replacing the dramatic presence of Michelangelo's God), it illuminates and thus involves us in the material things of this world rather than in the miracle of another. The fallen body of the Saint falls out into our space: a characteristic illusionistic device of Caravaggio to make us physically part of the event that took place on the road to Damascus.

It is clear that for Caravaggio the road to salvation is through immersing oneself in this world. Various religious sects of the time have been offered as an explanation of this view.¹⁵ But it is simultaneously clear from his descriptive realism that the appeal of his art as depiction is direct and immediate. He is pictorially playing with the possibility of breaking down the barrier between artifice and life, between the fictive world and the actual world of the beholder. Even the lack of any easily comprehended composition—the odd off-center hole between Saint and horse, the exaggerated foreshortening of his body, and the asymmetry of horse and fallen rider in relationship to the picture surface—has been rightly shown to be a function of Caravaggio's concern with how the viewer sees the work. As Leo Steinberg has argued, it is only from the point of view of the worshipper in the chapel—necessarily not in front of the work but at an angle to it—that the hole and figures make compositional sense.¹⁶

The handling of the composition suggests a further relationship between the realists of the nineteenth century and those of the seventeenth. Courbet, like Caravaggio, was accused of not knowing how to compose his works. It has been shown that Courbet intentionally achieved this effect of non- or decomposition by adopting the simple, reductive formats of popular prints. By this choice he at once defined the artifice of past art and proposed an artistic truth such as could be true to, and be perceived as true by, the people rather than an elite.¹⁷ Caravaggio, on the other hand, still working within the established tradition, is moved less by suspicion of composition as such than by the aim of designing his work to address, forcefully, the eye of the beholder. Rather than observing composition and order from the outside, we are in an extraordinary way made participants in the work of art. In ordering, as in descriptive handling, the work challenges the barriers between art and life, between the saint's experience and ours.

To the suspension of narrative action and the concentration of description, we can now add a further characteristic to this seventeenth-century realist mode: its radical commitment to the engagement of the viewer. These works appeal to the viewer most paradoxically through the asserted real presence of a fictive world. And they offer this as an alternative to appealing through the enactment of a narrative action. Caravaggio drove this appeal to the viewer further than any other artist at the time. There was a profoundly iconoclastic streak in his art as there was, not irrelevantly, in his life. Imitated life constantly threatens to break through art in all of those figures and objects which

are thrust out toward our space—Matthew's stool, the arms of the Apostles at Emmaus, here Saul's body. Finally, in the image of the *Victorious Amor*, a naked boy seduces us by his glance and the invitation of his body to join with him in the destruction of the fruits of civilization and culture. We are party to the undoing of art as the tables are turned by life. The extraordinary antagonism with which Caravaggio's art was met at his time is in a sense quite justified: he threatens not only Renaissance notions of art, but all art as such.

Velázquez' *Water-Seller*, to turn to another example, shares with Caravaggio's painting the suspended action, lack of expression, and passion for description (Fig. 5). Although there is properly speaking no established narrative subject which is being represented, a comparison with the kind of image to which this subject belongs—the representation of different trades—reveals that Velázquez too has moved away from an action to this stillness (Fig. 6).¹⁸ The descriptive mode of this work is not the "how" of even an anecdotal narrative action but the "what" of a human presence. The effect of the stilling of the action is to focus our attention on the fact of the water on the surface of and by implication held within the jug, in the glass, and being drunk—as it is related by (though hardly experienced by: note the lack of expression on the faces) three distinctly portrayed figures—a boy, a youth, and an older man. Velázquez has turned a depiction of a trade transaction into a portrait of a water-seller and his clients which distinguishes between them in terms of the traditional ages of man. But portrayal for Velázquez is inextricably involved with a problematic sense of what it is to portray. Caravaggio recognizes the presence of the viewer by reaching out to and including us within the implied space of the work, while Velázquez, offering us as he does a drop of water poised on the great outward curve of the jug, marks from within the work that otherwise imperceptible barrier that divides the fictive reality from ours. Whereas Caravaggio threatens to burst out through the picture plane to make the picture real, Velázquez moves back from that plane through ever-flattening forms—the drop of water, rounded jug, and water-seller in full light, the boy in half-light, the rear figure grounded in the very shadowed surface of the paint itself. We see reality become paint before our eyes. Velázquez has, as it were, made a work of art which articulates with fullness and with subtlety the implications of a represented presence.

There are two questions this work raises in the historical framework of seventeenth-century art. First, what kind of work is it (what genre of work), and secondly, how could an artist in the seventeenth century give such monumental presence to an image of common people?

There is much to be said for an answer based on Velázquez' extraordinary human sympathy and perception, a central element which surely informs almost all of his works—and the argument that his feeling for common men simply broke through the conventions and expectations of the art of his time. It was in fact much in this spirit, it has been argued, that Courbet overturned the artistic conventions and expectations in the *Stone-Breakers* to get at social and human truth. However, this is just where I think the nineteenth century

is distinguished from the seventeenth. What I am at pains to argue here is that Renaissance artistic practice and Renaissance assumptions about art—the concern for the imitative nature and fictive presence of art—contained within them the possibility for making such an apparently unprecedented image. In turning an anecdotal genre scene into a portrait, Velázquez is treating with profound seriousness the descriptive instead of the narrative aspects inherent in such a scene. It is as if he posed the question, “What would it be to *portray* a Water-Seller?” The monumentality and the subtlety of the rendering of the figures and their accouterments are part and parcel of the seriousness with which Velázquez took the problems of the status and presence of a pictorial representation. There is in other words a potentially levelling aspect—in terms of genre and in terms of social class—in the art itself if one takes the subject of art to be portrayal or representation in its fullest sense. For a Renaissance artist like Velázquez to be fully engaged in the problem of the representation of a water-seller is thus to take him seriously. At this point, it seems to me, art and its subject are truly one. This is a fit between art and life that the nineteenth century found it impossible to sustain.

The example of the way in which Velázquez comes to represent a simple man seriously—through that levelling aspect of art which is inherent in the Renaissance commitment to imitation—seems to suggest that an adjustment is needed in Auerbach’s powerful formulation of the ways in which the literature of the time—and by extension, the art—could and could not treat ordinary life. Auerbach argues that in the seventeenth century a subject from “practical reality” could be treated comically, satirically, didactically, moralistically, or—a somewhat curious class—pathetically, but *not* realistically.¹⁹ The *Water-Seller*, however, seems to be none of these. It does not, in other words, employ those distancing conventions (common to both literature and art) which Auerbach argues the seventeenth century commonly employed in dealing with ordinary life. And yet surely this is not like a nineteenth-century work. For all the problematic nature of nineteenth-century realism, there are moments like Manet’s *Street Singer* when an artist can deal directly with the presence of an ordinary, yet particular human being (Fig. 7). The casual intimacy of such a work—just there, felt, art absorbed in the life—is not found in the seventeenth century. The realistic mode of the *Water-Seller* is not, to use Auerbach’s term, emancipated from the notion of the hierarchy of styles, nor does it mix styles as a sign of such an emancipation. Like certain other great realist works of the seventeenth century, the *Water-Seller* is rather produced out of a concentration on that imitation which is recognized as the basis of all styles in the Renaissance view of art. I am in effect proposing another dimension in which to consider the conventions of Renaissance art: as a commitment to representation as such which cuts across the hierarchy of styles without, as it were, disposing of them.

Levelling by description. In saying this we are on our way to isolating and defining an important aspect of this seventeenth-century mode of pictorial realism and also articulating the close and confusing parallel this offers to

nineteenth-century realism. This phrase summarizes much of what the foremost critics of literary realism have said about the nineteenth-century novel. Levelling by description puts in a nutshell what Auerbach celebrates as realistic description and what Lukács in his *Theory of the Novel* deplors as fragmentation in the nineteenth-century novel. Again, parallel to our observation about seventeenth-century art, both Auerbach and Lukács connect this phenomenon to another—the absence of the narrative impulse found in earlier literature. Once again this absence of narration is deplored by Lukács and celebrated by Auerbach. Lukács' suggestive dictum about literature, "Narration establishes proportions, description merely levels,"²⁰ might be applied also to art in these terms. The question is, then, how are these realisms of the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries different?²¹

One way to answer this is to see whether, given that the levelling effect of description is a major similarity between the art of the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, there is a difference to be found in the nature of the artist's and viewer's engagement with that description. Velázquez' *Water-Seller* shares with the other works in this realist mode a serious, contemplative tone (think of Caravaggio, Vermeer, or Rembrandt in this regard) which engages specific concerns and insights. How do we locate this seriousness of tone? In what respect is the *Water-Seller* a serious treatment of an ordinary man? Velázquez is perhaps more consistently concerned with the issues of representation itself than perhaps any other seventeenth-century artist with the exception of Vermeer. He is in an essential sense a portraitist whose paintings explore the depths of the issues presented by the act of portrayal. Thus the seriousness of his depiction can be understood as being identified with the manner in which he contemplates such issues.

The clearest evidence that such concerns lay at the heart of Velázquez' works is to be found in the puzzling *Spinners*, or *The Fable of Arachne* as it was originally referred to (Fig. 8). I say puzzling because if subject is an issue in works in this realist mode, surely this picture is unprecedented. This is a large canvas which devotes itself to a presentation of the women preparing the wool for weaving in the royal tapestry workshops in the foreground and gives way, through a doorway, into a room hung with completed tapestries. The one tapestry visible shows the Rape of Europa (woven after Titian's painting now in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, but previously in the Spanish royal collection), one of the tapestries that was woven, according to Ovid's account, by Arachne in her ill-fated competition with Minerva—both of which mythological figures appear (Minerva with arm raised to strike the girl) in the distant room before the tapestry. By lighting, and by handling of brush, Velázquez has distinguished this world from the real life of the foreground. This effect would be even clearer if we were to remove the strips added at a later date to get back to the original format. (I have indicated the major addition with arrows.)

But what is this a picture of? Is it a genre scene or a mythological representation? It might do to interject here a reminder that very much the same kind of questions have been raised, and appropriately so, about some great realist works of the nineteenth century, Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, for example: is

it narrative, portrait, landscape, or still life?²² There is precedence for the format of the *Spinners* in Velázquez' earlier works. Take, for instance, his *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha*, with the two unidentified women with foodstuffs in the foreground and Christ, Mary, and Martha seen through a window to the rear (Fig. 9). Its sources can be traced back to sixteenth-century Flemish works where, it is argued, rightly or wrongly, artists used elevated narratives in the background as excuses for painting the foreground genre scenes that really interested them. But never was this admittedly hybrid genre raised to such heights of art as by Velázquez. The question is less what he got from the device than what he quite literally saw in it.

Think back to the sequence we noted in the *Water-Seller*: from the illusion of reality in the foreground drop of water slipping back into the frankly painted presence of the man in the background. The same sequence is made visible here. Velázquez employs the same pictorial strategy in regard to the investigation of representation, although in *The Spinners* he has amplified and more fully articulated the issues by moving us from a portrayed reality back to an imagined one—and a complex imagined one at that, with the world of art present in the distant tapestry and in the myth enacted in and before it. (Although it would be good to know what “really” is going on—is it a theatrical presentation?—its status as the world of art seems to me not to be at issue.) One might say that instead of arresting the narrative action as in the other works we are discussing here, Velázquez has used other means to detach the action from the *act* of portrayal. By pushing the narrative to the background, and separating it from the real foreground through light and brushwork, Velázquez is able to render the problem of representation as such, separate from the issues involved in narrative action.

The Spinners can I think be seen as a pictorial meditation on the nature of artistic representation viewed in terms of the relationship between the real world and an imagined one, reality and imagination: a meditation made more complex because the real world portrayed here is that of women who themselves are fabricators, or makers, at the most primary level of art, and in the imagined scene behind, another fabricator, Arachne, meets her destruction. But perhaps it is truer to formulate this in just the opposite way. For Velázquez, the problem of representing the tapestry weavers set off his chain of picture-making. In effect ordinary figures are given importance in a picture which in a most unprecedented way combines a portrait of ordinary people at their work with an elevated narrative. Representation as such, the imitative or descriptive side of art, is clearly set forth here as the basis of the elevated fiction of art. This is a working out of the assumptions about art that begin to be unfolded in the *Water-Seller*. It is an extraordinary demonstration, to continue our response to Auerbach, of the conditions under which a serious treatment of ordinary life can be sustained within a Renaissance conception of art.

I have intentionally put off a discussion of Rembrandt, perhaps the most notorious example of an artist who eschewed narrative action, because I think it will prove profitable to see him in the context of this realistic descrip-

tive mode. It is a commonplace that Rembrandt's works move from a full presentation of narrative action to a composure and the avoidance of any movement. This change is usually analyzed as the result of what is loosely called his humanism. Let us compare, for example, two representations of *David and Saul*: the early one in which the King, raised to fury by the calming effect of David's music, prepares to strike him, and the later work where all action, including facial expression, is stilled (Figs. 10, 11). Saul smolders—a King caught between sorrow and power, looming over the small David who is absorbed in the making of his music. Consider this now less as a retreat from outward dramatic action—which of course seen one way it is—than as a kind of description. Intensely described though his figures are, Rembrandt, unlike Caravaggio or Velázquez, does not still their action in the interests of surface description. The setting of the action, the placing of the figures, the details of their faces and clothes are less articulated in the late work than in the early one. Although this late work shares with the others that we have considered a still, contemplative tone and great presence, the descriptive power, rather than emphasizing the surface, as we assume pictorial description should do, seems to efface the surface with paint and brush. Psychological depth is suggested by a new kind of pictorial depth. Insofar, then, as Rembrandt trusts to the representational power of art, he is redefining what it is to represent, suggesting things that lie beneath the surface. Coming out on the far side of representation, as it were, he is suggesting that this in-depth portrayal must replace narration as the expression of serious human interest. The narrative action pushed into the background by Velázquez or made to break out to the viewer by Caravaggio is here bound up in an extraordinary way with the new handling of the representational aspect of art itself. In substituting portrayal for narration Rembrandt has levelled his perception not only with regard to physical imitation or description (as in Velázquez or Caravaggio) but also with regard to human realities. Narration, to paraphrase Lukács' statement, has lost its proportion: first, in that it is hardly separable from the fact of a human presence; secondly, because each man or woman has his story even as he has his portrait. Presence, so to speak, representation fully realized, is all art can offer, and it is common to all men and women. Caravaggio and Velázquez and, to anticipate our next example, Vermeer, all produce paintings which avoid narrative action to concentrate on imitation without questioning the basic commitment to narration. Rembrandt, however, profoundly suggests that narration as conceived of by Renaissance art is impossible. Seen in the context of our subject, seen in other words as description rather than as a peculiar development of his own narrative technique, we can argue that Rembrandt is contributing less a new kind of narration than a new kind of description. If this analysis appears strained or out of line with what we know about seventeenth-century art, we should recall the portraitlike quality of Rembrandt's late work which leads on the one hand to the depiction of individual figures, apostles, for example, who bear extraordinarily particularized, real features (I have in mind the *Apostle Bartholomew*, in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California), or, on the other hand, to images which present enormous prob-

lems in identification because of their lack of telling action, expression, or setting. (A painting in the Hermitage, recently on loan in the United States, has been variously titled *The Disgrace of Hamann*, *Hamann Recognizes His Fate*, *David and Uriah*, and *Elijah and the Feast of Purim*.) While Caravaggio brings his art out to assault us, and Velázquez meets us at the border of life and art, Rembrandt as it were asks us in—to reflect, to consider.

There is a somewhat fragmentary aspect about the series of deep, descriptive portrayals that make up Rembrandt's late works. But the pictorial distance between people—the lack of compositional or dramatic relationship between David and Saul or the three figures in the Leningrad work, the isolated quality of the figures in the late portraits—is less a testimony to the fragmentation of human experience than a means of giving room to each person to be fully himself or herself. Time and experience, not distance, separate these people from one another. We are closer to the realism of the Old Testament as so splendidly described by Auerbach in his opening chapter than to the isolated, problematic individuals of nineteenth-century art and literature: “the externalization of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative, all else left in obscurity; the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is nonexistent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal . . . remains mysterious and ‘fraught with background.’”²³ It is not Auerbach's final and characteristically pictorial phrase which reminds us of Rembrandt, but the entire evocation of the biblical style, more native a motivation to Rembrandt than to any other painter.

In each painting that we have discussed so far, disengagement from narrative action has played a significant role in the engagement with realistic description. Or to put it differently, the new emphasis on representation as such is still understood as connected in some way to the narrative concerns of art. This is even true, I think, of the most balanced and perfected examples of this descriptive mode of seventeenth-century realism as we find it in the works of Vermeer. Take his *Woman with Scales*, for example (Fig. 12).

It is best to approach this work through consideration of an interpretive problem. It seems to me odd to claim, as recent interpretation has it, that this picture of such considered formal perfection, representing a woman absorbed in a task specifically characterized by an absence of self-regard or pride, is a representation of vanity.²⁴ Is vanity intended by a mirror not looked at, or pride by jewels displayed but left untouched on the table? We note the care with which the left hand steadies the weight of the woman's body and the grace with which the glance attends to the hand so delicately balancing the scales. Compare this to Pieter de Hooch's version of the theme, in which the woman leans forward, out of balance, and is seen actually to place an object in the scale to be weighed (Fig. 13). Is Vermeer's still, subtly balanced figure intended as an image of radical imbalance, of sin?

The clue to the current interpretation is not only the traditionally vain act

of weighing valuables but also the painting of the *Last Judgment* on the wall which is understood as rendering a judgment on the woman. But does not her action—testing the accuracy or balance of the scales, not weighing valuables—and the order of the composition suggest that she herself is a just judge? A most common image of justice is, after all, a woman holding scales. The Christ in the painting, on the other hand, is represented with the other traditional image of justice, the raised sword. Far from judging this woman, the painting on the wall would appear to assist us in seeing the woman herself as the kind of justice (justness) possible on this earth, in the Dutch home, of the woman.

It is true that in the past few years more and more women in Dutch genre paintings have turned out to be whores or at least guilty of promiscuous thoughts or letters.²⁵ Vermeer, however, though he repeatedly starts from such anecdotes of sin, permits his representation of the women involved to take over from these essentially narrative points. Vermeer's description of these quiet, self-absorbed, self-possessed women, who are the center of their pictorial worlds, so present to our sight but somehow so inviolate behind the barricade of objects and space with which Vermeer removes them from our touch—Vermeer's depiction replaces the anecdote as their attribute. The mistake in the interpretation of the *Woman with Scales* has been to interpret the presence of the pearls and the painting on the wall, against the evidence of the entire work before our eyes, as a fixed clue to the meaning rather than as a part of the process of pictorial invention. In this work (as in others by Vermeer) emblematic elements like the scattered pearls and the mirror are vestiges of narrative action or anecdote which Vermeer's representation replaces. In a most profound way his art, but of course also his view of women and life, replaces an anecdotal action with description and leaves us with that powerful, self-contained presence which is so characteristic a feature of this seventeenth-century realistic mode.²⁶

Let me now try to place this realist mode in the history of Renaissance art. My feeling is that it reflects a seventeenth-century displacement in the subtle balance, the assumed partnership, between imitation and narration and the attendant notions of artistic address that was the basis of the great Renaissance rebirth of ancient pictorial art. This could be demonstrated by pointing to the historical fact that in the seventeenth century, most notoriously in some paintings by Poussin, we find narration becoming as isolated a concern in art as we have seen representation to be in the works we have just considered.²⁷ In this characteristically seventeenth-century reworking of Renaissance assumptions about art, representation and narration pull away, though not apart, from each other.²⁸ It is perhaps possible to view the new seventeenth-century interest in the descriptive modes of landscape and still life as part of this process. But I think it will provide a more suitable conclusion to a discussion of the mode to see how this phenomenon was acknowledged in the writings on art of the time.

Let us take as a start the anecdote told by the great French critic and theorist Roger de Piles, the first writer as far as I have discovered who tried to articulate verbally what had happened in seventeenth-century painting.

De Piles tells us in his *Cours de Peinture* of 1708 the story of a friend's visit to the Vatican to see Raphael's famous frescoes.²⁹ M. de Valincourt, like all *gens d'esprit*, admired Raphael enormously and wanted to see for himself the master's most admired works. However, when he was taken to the Vatican he walked right by the Raphael frescoes, not even noticing that he had reached his goal until his guide said, "Où allez-vous si vite, Monsieur? Voilà ce que vous cherchez, & vous n'y prenez pas garde." He had, so de Piles explains, expected to be surprised by Raphael and simply was not. De Piles tells this story, and significantly tells it on Raphael, the model of perfection for artists of the time, because he wanted to pinpoint the importance of that power in a work of art that addresses the viewer, that takes him by surprise. Most remarkably for his time but most germanely to my argument, de Piles offers a Rembrandt portrait he owned as a counter to the Raphael as an example of a work of art which properly surprises the viewer.³⁰ In this essay on painting, the emphasis on the appeal to the viewer is coupled by de Piles, and an essential coupling it is, with the argument that the first aim of a work of art is to fool the eyes of the beholder (*tromper les yeux*) with its imitative power rather than, as the Renaissance had generally assumed, using its imitative power to move the viewer's soul with expressive figures. Now keeping in mind, or more properly holding in our eyes, the presence of the works that we have been looking at, consider the appropriateness of de Piles' description of true painting: "je conclus que la véritable Peinture, doit appeler son Spectateur par la force & par la grande vérité de son imitation; & que le Spectateur surpris doit aller à elle, comme pour entrer en conversation avec les figures qu'elle représente."³¹ De Piles links imitation and the presence of the work to the viewer, giving full weight to representation as such without mentioning narration. In arguing for an art which primarily does something other than narrate, de Piles embraces just what the Renaissance chose to ignore, or, rather, to subsume into narrative.

The interpretive term on which de Piles is able to hang, is able to formulate his new sense of artistic possibility, is color. In his analysis it is the great colorists who call the viewer into conversation. Color is perhaps the least discussed and the least well-defined aspect of pictorial art. Generally I think this is because it is so hard to describe it in words and its effects are so uncalculable. Color-field painting has today posed the old problem in a newly puzzling way. Once again the tendency on the part of critics is to retreat to a discussion of design and composition rather than to try to face up to the presence of color. The modern art historians who avoid the very presence of color (as some few still do by refusing to use color slides and reproductions) have good precedence in Renaissance art theory, which also generally avoided the issue. Even de Piles in speaking powerfully for color in art is less concerned with the actual use and effect of color than with those general phenomena with which color had come to be identified. On the one hand, color was seen as the ornament of art—mere appeal—and on the other, as the basis of imitation, specifically as in Vasari's account of Giorgione, imitation which appears to be operating in a vacuum—imitation, in other words, as *mere* imitation with no narrative end in view. (In the Renaissance,

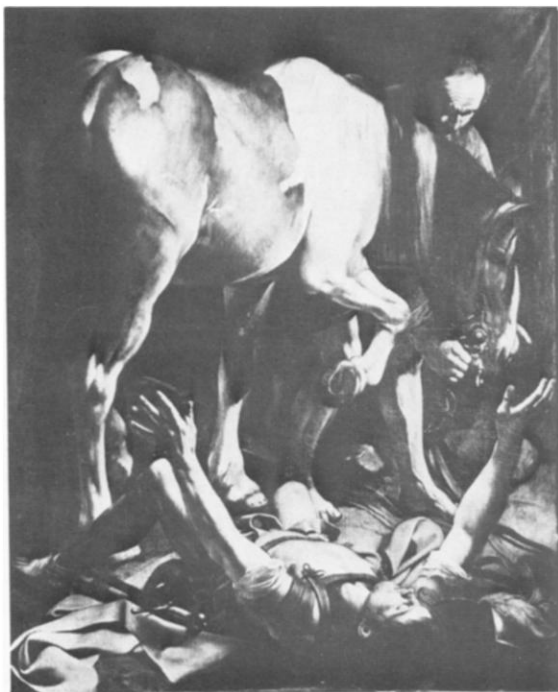
imitation with a narrative end in view was immediately absorbed into the notion of design, *disegno*—and it is for this reason that although he speaks about imitation in art Vasari hardly ever comments on color.)

It is on the basis of the assumed link to imitation that those seventeenth-century artists whom we have already discussed—Rembrandt and Caravaggio, for example—were repeatedly described in the seventeenth century as colorists.³² Color is used here as a term referring to their absorption in the act of representation or imitation. To praise an artist for his color was, in the seventeenth century, a kind of booby prize awarded to those who, it was thought, could not narrate.

It is surprising to us today to think of the brownish canvases of Caravaggio and Rembrandt in terms of great color because we tend to think of great color as colorful. To our eyes it would perhaps be Rubens, not Caravaggio or Rembrandt, who would be a great colorist because, to put it in seventeenth-century terms, we tend to associate color with the ornamental or even frankly decorative appeal of art (with Matisse, for example) rather than with imitation. Impressionism is perhaps the one style in which we clearly recognize that color functions as the basic imitative means of art. De Piles, and this is the strength and subtlety of his analysis, called both Rembrandt and Rubens colorists for an essentially single reason: because he sees the imitative power of one and the coloristic appeal (what Reynolds was to call the “eloquence”)³³ of the other as engaged in an essentially common concern for representational force. De Piles is the first critic to link up in a positive and powerful way the two traditional aspects of color: (1) its link with imitation and (2) its powerful appeal to the eyes. In arguing that imitation leads to a desired end of fooling the eyes and calling on the viewer, de Piles validated imitation in a new way by tying it to a desirable and newly defined end of art. He is thus able to give full recognition and full weight to the representational power of the work of art as such.

It would take us too far afield to discuss fully the application and ramifications of de Piles’ insight. One remark, however, might be in order. It is not by accident that de Piles’ positive invocation of color in painting is expressed with the image of “calling the viewer into conversation.” Rhetoric had long served as a model for picture-making (see above, n. 12). In accepting the deceptive colors of art, de Piles is also accepting the deceptive colors of rhetoric. He does not share the deep suspicion of rhetorical deception that Descartes had put forth, nor, on the other hand, does he embrace the idea of rhetoric as sheer artifice. De Piles’ image of the conversation between work and viewer offers the model of a middle road, a kind of natural speech or natural artifice, the rhetorical analogue to that mixture of life and art, imitation and presence, which all the artists we are dealing with have been at pains to consider as representation.³⁴

I am conscious that in the discussion of de Piles many of the issues that were important in the consideration of the works of Caravaggio, Velázquez, Rembrandt, or Vermeer have dropped out of sight. The comparison to nineteenth-century art has also been left far behind. The reason, I think, is simple but worth noting. Although de Piles addresses himself to a major



1 Caravaggio, *The Conversion of St. Paul*. Rome, Sta. Maria del Popolo (photo: Alinari).



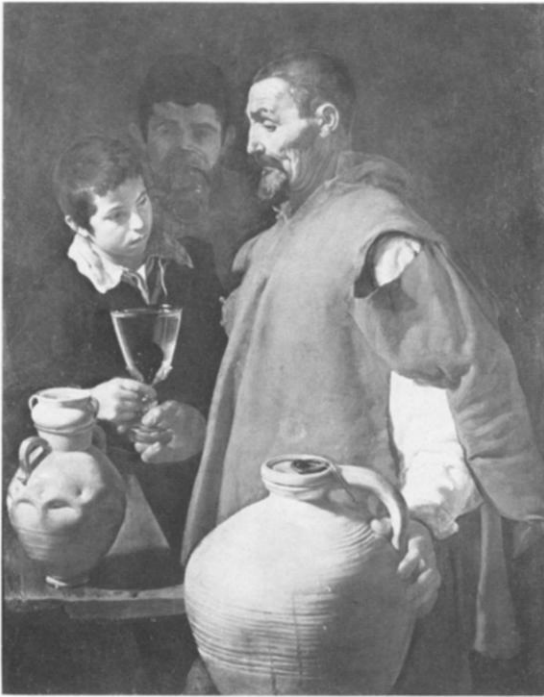
2 Caravaggio, *The Crucifixion of St. Peter*. Rome, Sta. Maria del Popolo (photo: Alinari).



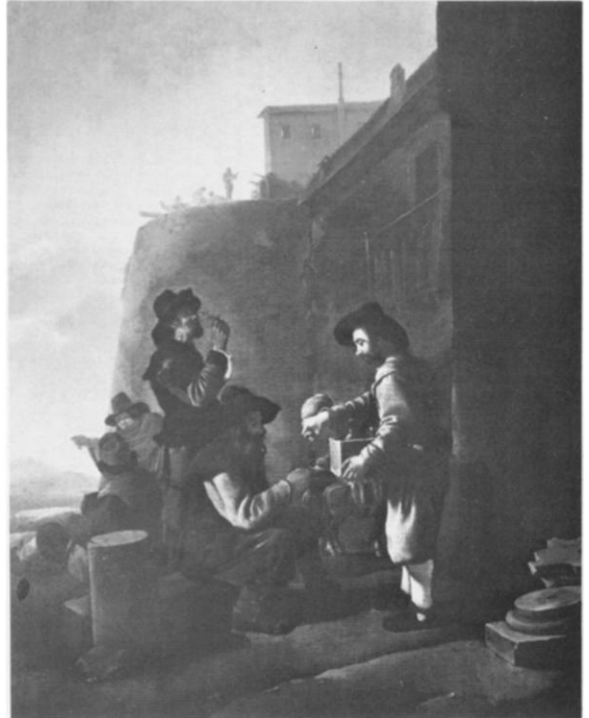
3 Courbet, *The Stone-Breakers*. Lost.



4 Manet, *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*. Cliche Musées Nationaux Paris.



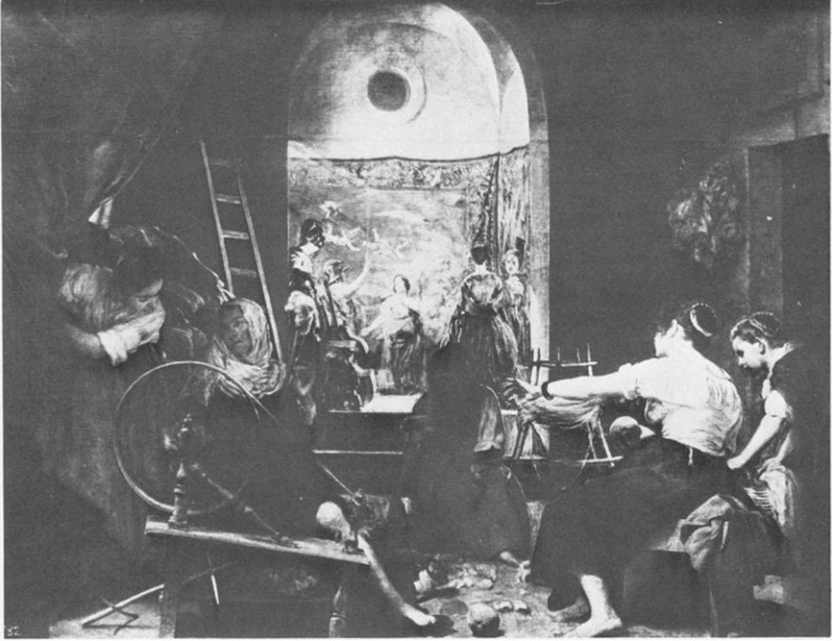
5 Velázquez, *The Water-Seller*. London, Victoria and Albert Museum. Crown copyright.



6 Pieter Van Laer, *The Water-Carrier*. Rome, Galleria Nazionale.



7 Manet, *The Street Singer*. Boston, courtesy Museum of Fine Arts Bequest of Sarah Choate Sears in memory of her husband, Joshua Montgomery Sears.



8 Velázquez, *The Spinners*. Madrid, Prado.



9 Velázquez, *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha*. London, The National Gallery. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees.



10 Rembrandt, *David and Saul*. Frankfort, Städliches Kunstinstitut.



11 Rembrandt, *David and Saul*. The Hague, Mauritshuis.



12 Vermeer, *A Woman Weighing Gold*. Washington, National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection.



13 de Hooch, *Woman Weighing Gold*. Berlin, Gemäldegalerie.



14 Manet, *The Ragpicker*. Los Angeles, The Norton Simon Foundation.



15 Seurat, *Stonebreaker*. Paul Mellon Collection.

critical question posed by the art of his time, although he apparently accepted lack of action (it is not irrelevant here that de Piles was one of the first to define and describe landscape painting as a genre), he remained basically unsympathetic to the levelling tendency of these works. Although his insight allowed him to give unique praise to Rembrandt, Rubens remained his hero. De Piles preferred Rubens' eloquence of address to what he saw as Caravaggio's or Rembrandt's imitative power. In effect we are saying that de Piles, like the artists themselves, still accepted the Renaissance hierarchies, both social and stylistic, and the Renaissance assumption about the preeminence of an elevated narrative art. De Piles' insights operate within this system. For all his recognition of the power of representation, it would have been impossible for him, or for any critic of the time, for that matter, to perceive the artistic power of Vermeer's portrait of a Dutch woman at her scales or Velázquez' *Water-Seller*, or to accept the lowly appearance of Rembrandt's David. The fact that the artists we have studied here were ahead of the critical discourse of their time is not to say that they consciously challenged its assumptions. To understand the *Water-Seller* or the *Woman with Scales* as a challenge, socially or aesthetically, to elevated narrative would be an error. Rather, one would have to say that with their extraordinary confidence in the compatibility of life and art, these artists have simply moved ahead to encompass new aspects of human experience out of the fullness of the representational possibilities inherent in art.

This then is the precise point at which the nature of nineteenth-century paintings with a similar visual appearance is to be distinguished from those of the seventeenth century. For it is much harder, almost impossible in fact, to account for what they are about.

Is the action suspended in Courbet or Manet in order to turn the work into a newly self-conscious art object, or to represent life truly, that is, the modern world, descriptively, in fragments? Are the figures contemplative to establish their painted presence, or to suggest their human isolation from one another, and above all from us? Does the descriptive handling of Manet's *Beggar* (Fig. 14) testify to the equality of men or is the equality (his life-size, his facing of us) an achievement only of the artifice of art? The look of these works is by now in a way familiar to us—suspended action, quiet figures, attention to description—but the same confidence in representation exists no longer. Which has failed, art or life? Are we looking at art or at life? The answers are not clear. When Zola protested in one of his *Salons* that what he wanted above all in a painting was to see a man and not a painting, he spoke right to the issue. But of course he demanded an impossibility and went against his time. Impressionism reduced art to that color of which de Piles spoke. Compare a *Stonebreaker* by Seurat (Fig. 15) to Courbet's (Fig. 3) and cast your mind's eye back to Caravaggio, Velázquez, or Vermeer. We cannot tell in the Seurat how color as imitation (the artist's claim) is related to color as ornament. From representation as we have seen it in the seventeenth century, we finally reach the point where to represent is itself acknowledged as the making of an artifice. Realism turns into artifice—and so goes the

course of art into modernism where paint, not man, is the reality represented.

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NOTES

1 For the most easily available text of Pietro Bellori's *Vite de' Pittori, Scultori et Architetti* of 1672, see Walter J. Friedländer, *Caravaggio Studies* (Princeton, 1955). This phrase appears on p. 241.

2 I want to make clear at the start that for the purpose of my argument I am intentionally not making a distinction between the representation of a known (textually established or traditional) narrative and the representation of action as such—or between Peter's crucifixion and the stone breakers at work. With reference to seventeenth-century painting, my purpose here is to cut across the normally accepted (and acceptable) division of art into "history" and "genre" subjects in order to point to a common emphasis on what I am calling description.

3 We might also point to this phenomenon as it appears in the works of Jan van Eyck. Panofsky (*Early Netherlandish Painting* [Cambridge, Mass., 1953], I, 182) referred to what he called the "de-emotionalized" nature of van Eyck's figures as the price he paid for his kind of attention to description. The metaphor of price paid seems to me to avoid the issue of how and why such stilled action combined with attention to description occurs in van Eyck's art.

4 This is quoted from Gerald Ackerman's interesting review of Linda Nochlin's *Realism* (Baltimore, 1971), the one recent general study of realism in nineteenth-century painting that we have. See Ackerman, *The Art Bulletin*, 55 (1973), 469.

5 As a result of isolating this problem in the course of working on this essay, I have been studying the extent to which one can understand Dutch art of the seventeenth century in terms of its descriptive functions (landscape painting as mapping, for example) and the artistic assumptions of such a notion of art.

6 E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (New York, 1960), p. 129.

7 Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture*, tr. Cecil Grayson (London, 1972), pp. 80-81. The Latin word *animus* which I have translated as "soul" is rendered as "feeling" by Grayson. Perhaps the best translation would be Descartes' "les passions de l'âme," which, as it were, combines both.

8 Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, & Architects*, tr. A. B. Hinds (London, 1927), II, 161. I am quoting from this translation, rather than from the standard Milanese edition, as the one available to most readers.

9 I have discussed this at some length in my "Ekphrasis and Aesthetic Attitudes in Vasari's *Lives*," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 23 (1960), 190-215.

10 Vasari, *Lives*, II, 170, 171

11 *Il Decameron*, ed. C. S. Singleton (Bari, 1955), II, 15 (Bk. VI, Ch. 5). The translation is mine.

12 Boccaccio was one of the first to state the accepted Renaissance view that medieval art had charmed the eyes of the simple folk by nurturing a decadent interest in pretty colors rather than addressing the minds of intelligent people with narratives. In claiming this, Renaissance theorists and critics were repeating commonplaces about the value and the nature of the appeal of art that are first found in ancient rhetorics, in Quintilian and Cicero. It is there that the dependence on many, and by implication,

eye-flattering colors is first used to make an illustrative analogy between the decline of art and the decline of oratory toward mere ornament. Part of my argument in this essay is that in the seventeenth century the concerns, effects, and appeal seen as being related to color in art play a new (and newly significant) role in the works of certain artists and that this is one way to understand the new descriptive mode.

13 Michael Fried, "Thomas Couture and the Theatricalization of Action in 19th Century French Painting," *Artforum*, 8, No. 10 (1970), 44.

14 T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (Greenwich, Conn., 1973).

15 Friedländer in his *Caravaggio Studies* (pp. 120ff.) argues that the particular relationship of "the human and the supernatural" that we find in Caravaggio's religious works cannot be understood without considering the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola and the teachings of San Felippo Neri, the founder of the Oratorians.

16 To stand before this work as before an easel painting would necessitate climbing up onto the altar platform or circling around the altar in the small chapel. Leo Steinberg's argument is that Caravaggio offered the composition with reference to the viewer situated at the angle of vision to the painting he would have in the chapel, before the altar. I cannot improve on Steinberg here, "Now their [the Saints'] brutal foreshortenings no longer seem due to any grossness in them, nor to willfulness in the painter, but wholly to our standpoint and distance; they become a function of our situation." See Leo Steinberg, "Some Observations in the Cerasi Chapel," *The Art Bulletin*, 41 (1959), 183-90.

17 Linda Nochlin, in her "Gustave Courbet's *Meeting*: A Portrait of the Artist as a Wandering Jew" (*The Art Bulletin*, 49 [1967], 209-22), identified the source of the composition of this painting in a popular woodcut representing the Wandering Jew. The attempt to find popular sources for other works by Courbet (such as the *Burial at Ornans*) has been less successful. Nochlin argues most forcefully for the breakthrough that this represented in artistic terms: "that courageous confrontation of reality, that sounding of the hollowness of rhetoric, outworn traditions and formal conventions which is the realist's mission" (p. 221). T. J. Clark (*Image of the People*, pp. 157ff.) emphasizes rather what he defines as the political value and force of such a work: Courbet's making of an image treating social realities with a mass appeal.

18 It is surprising to see from what humble models Velázquez developed this extraordinary portrayal. The tradition of depicting street sellers is part of the complicated history of the depiction of trades and professions. This tradition first blossomed in northern Europe in German prints of the sixteenth century. Street sellers were established as a subject in their own right in Italy with the publication in 1646 of the engravings of Annibale Carracci's *Le Arti di Bologna* which started a tradition continuing well into the eighteenth century. The Pieter van Laer painting (by a Dutchman living in Italy) is meant to serve as an example of this type of work, although it in fact postdates the painting by Velázquez. It is most likely that Velázquez actually based his work on a northern print—where sellers were often shown with their customers rather than alone as in Italian examples—though the particular source, if there was indeed one, has not been identified.

19 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, tr. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 1953), p. 481.

20 Georg Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?," *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, ed. and tr. Arthur D. Kahn (New York, 1970), p. 172. The title of my own essay is taken from the polemical contrast Lukács sets up, though my interpretation is not his.

21 For Lukács' account of the fragmented nature of the novel as a representation of the world, see his *The Theory of the Novel*, tr. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass., 1971) esp. pp. 78-79. This seems also very suggestive about the conditions of French

nineteenth-century pictorial realism. If we take an overall view of the nature of Manet's subject matter—portraits of friends, the Tuileries garden concert, the Universal Exposition of 1867, beggars and others off the streets, a sea battle, the shooting of Maximilian—we can identify an analogously fragmented attempt to produce an account of the life of his time. Conversely, it seems to me that Lukács' definition and defense of the epic form (and of the historical drama and Scott's historical novel insofar as they succeeded it as true realism), with his emphasis on its public, historical, narrative, and monumental nature "in which the world of man is realized *exclusively* through the portrayal of man himself," serves as one of the most articulate analyses by a modern writer of the Renaissance conception of the realism of the genre of history painting. See Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, tr. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1969), p. 138, for the above quotations. My argument here, as distinct from both Auerbach and Lukács, is towards the definition of a kind of serious, levelling, descriptive representation, a mode of realism that was produced by certain painters in the seventeenth century.

22 Michael Fried, in "Manet's Sources, Aspects of his Art, 1859-1865," (*Artforum*, 7, No. 7 [1969], 78, n. 228), argues that Manet is doing at least three of these: landscape, still life, and portrait.

23 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, pp. 11-12.

24 See for example John Walsh, Jr., *Vermeer* (New York, n.d.), part 7. (This is a splendidly illustrated small booklet on the artist put out by the Metropolitan Museum where the *Woman with Scales* appears in a section entitled "Vanity.")

25 The first comprehensive argument to this effect was made in Eddy de Jongh's fascinating, very influential, but unfortunately still untranslated *Zinne-en minnebeelden in de schilderkunst van de zeventiende eeuw* (Nederlandse Stichting Openbaar Kunstbezit, 1967), which first demonstrated the close relationship between many common themes of Dutch genre painting (women with letters, birdcages, and so forth) and the moralistic devices so popular in contemporary Dutch emblem books. It has gotten to the point now, however, that even Vermeer's women are in danger of being seen simply as "queens of pleasure."

26 I am not prepared at this point in my own thinking to deal fully with the painting of the Last Judgment on the wall, though I feel sure that I am right in my interpretation that it is not rendering a judgment on the woman. The whole problem of the manner (in the sense of the actual rendering of the paint—often applied so as to emphasize the artifice involved) and meaning of the works of art (maps as well as paintings) found on the walls of Vermeer's painting must be dealt with first. In this, as in so many other respects—the anonymity yet powerful presence of the women, the value given to the interiors, the handling of traditional emblems, the attention to the very presence of the paint on his painted surfaces—Vermeer in an extraordinary way reworks, restates, validates for us many of the common preoccupations of Dutch art of the time.

27 I am thinking here particularly of the reading that Poussin, in a well-known letter, suggests that a friend can do of his painting of the *Fall of Manna*. It is as if the painting were designed to fit an *ekphrasis*, rather than vice versa. A translation of this letter is published by Elizabeth Gilmore Holt, *A Documentary History of Art* (Garden City, N. Y., 1958), II, 146-47.

28 The artist who preeminently held together this developing split between narration and description was Rubens. Seen as too much of a realist by the conservative critics of his century (paradoxically, he is disliked today for the opposite reason, for his flamboyance and extravagance), Rubens can be said to have been the painter who confidently and inventively continued the traditional linking of imitation and narration on which Renaissance art was based.

29 Roger de Piles, *Cours de Peinture par Principes* (Paris, 1708), pp. 14-17.

30 It is generally agreed that the Rembrandt in question, a painting of a servant looking out of a window that, when placed in a window, is supposed to have fooled the passersby (de Piles, pp. 11-12), was in fact not by Rembrandt but by another Dutch artist. This does not, however, alter the significance of the fact that in a climate of opinion that did not know quite how or for what to honor Rembrandt (though he had an international reputation at the time, he was hardly thought of as in the same class with Poussin or Rubens), de Piles admiringly connects his name with this address to the viewer.

31 de Piles, p. 6. For a somewhat different view of de Piles in the context of eighteenth-century art, see Michael Fried, "Toward a Supreme Fiction: Genre and Beholder in the Art Criticism of Diderot and his Contemporaries," *New Literary History*, 6 (1975), 543-85.

32 Thus Bellori, with whose comment on Caravaggio's lack of action we began, also wrote, "E perche egli [Caravaggio] aspirava all' unica lode del colore, sicche paresse vera l'incarnazione, la pelle, e'l sangue, e la superficie naturale, à questo solo volgeva intento l'occhio, e l'industria, lasciando da parte gli altri pensieri dell'arte." See Friedländer, *Caravaggio Studies*, p. 238.

33 Sir Joshua Reynolds, "A Journey to Flanders and Holland," *Works*, 4th ed. (London, 1809), II, 309.

34 The important issue of the relationship between theories of rhetoric, language, and art in seventeenth-century France seems to be very much of the moment. See, for example, Annie Becq, "Rhétoriques et littérature d'art en France à la fin du XVII^e siècle: le concept de couleur," *Cahiers de l'Association des Études Françaises*, No. 24 (Mai 1972), 215-32.