

# Writing Art Biography: *Impressionist Quartet*

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## I

**THOUGH** I was not trained as an art historian, I've always been keenly interested in art, and felt I had the qualifications to write *Impressionist Quartet: The Intimate Genius of Manet and Morisot, Degas and Cassatt*. I knew French, Italian, Spanish, and German and could do the research; but in order to make the French sources more accessible to my readers, I quoted from English translations when available, or made my own. I was familiar with all the major museums from the Hermitage to the Prado. I had published *Painting and the Novel* (1975), *The Enemy: A Biography of Wyndham Lewis* (1978), and more than thirty articles and reviews on art. My latest biography included a chapter on Maugham as art collector and connoisseur.

Most recently, in *Source* (Summer 2000), I'd shown—against the received opinion of art historians, who've mindlessly repeated an absurd interpretation—that Degas's early historical painting *The Misfortunes of the City of Orléans* (1865) had absolutely nothing to do with the American Civil War in New Orleans. It was, in fact, based on Jules Michelet's description in the *History of France* of Joan of Arc's capture of Orléans during the Hundred Years War. I'd also begun a new career as a reviewer of art exhibitions: the Los

Angeles “Impressionists from Moscow” for *Apollo*, the San Francisco “Degas Sculpture” for the *New Criterion* and recent paintings by my distinguished friend, the Nova Scotia artist Alex Colville, for the *Antioch Review*. I tried out my ideas in many stimulating discussions with Alex and with my undergraduate fine arts teacher at the University of Michigan, Marvin Eisenberg.

My proposal for *Impressionist Quartet* was straightforward. The Impressionists represented the greatest concentration of artistic genius since Renaissance Florence and are today the most popular, frequently exhibited, and universally acclaimed painters. Most people know a few colorful details about the later artists—Gauguin fled to the South Seas, Van Gogh cut off his ear, Lautrec was a dwarf—but hardly anything at all about the lives of four closely connected Impressionist painters: Edouard Manet and Berthe Morisot, Edgar Degas and Mary Cassatt. I originally planned to write about ten artists, from Manet to Lautrec, but soon realized it would be better to concentrate on these four. Manet and Degas were the most educated, intelligent, and cultured painters of the group, and I hoped to penetrate the true nature of their emotional, and perhaps sexual, bonds. In addition to the initial spurt of sales, I envisioned translations into several languages and long-term profits from museum bookstores. I even dreamed that this book might—like the biographies of Van Gogh and Lautrec—be made into a successful film in the tradition of *Lust for Life* and *Moulin Rouge*.

I thought this art biography would be easier to write, in some respects, than the life of a modern writer. Since the French archives had been exhaustively examined for more than a century, there was no need to do archival research. Since the last of the four painters died eighty years ago, there was no one to interview. This greatly reduced the time and money needed for research. I could do all my work at the library of the University of California in Berkeley and planned to write 300 instead of my usual 400 pages. Instead of hunting for new documentary material and talking to survivors, I would use published material and my study of the works themselves to illuminate, as in a classic novel, the relationships between these two remarkable couples, describe the major incidents in their lives and offer new interpretations of their art. I wanted to convey the excitement and delight I felt in the character and work of these artists, as well as connect with new readers.

It was a great pleasure to work in a new field: I collected and read delicious art books and studied the illustrations. I also hoped to do some other work: introductions to paperback editions of Manet’s

*Letters*, J.-K. Huysmans's brilliant art criticism, and the *Journal* of Julie Manet, Manet's niece and Berthe Morisot's daughter. The most tedious aspect of preparing my book for publication was getting permission to reproduce thirty-two paintings. My budget allowed the impossibly small sum of less than \$100 each, but I was surprised to find that though museum fees were high, I could negotiate most of them (as if buying a carpet in a bazaar). August institutions were always open to counteroffers.

## II

The most difficult problem was how to structure the book—as I'd done with the five poets in *Manic Power: Robert Lowell and His Circle* (1987)—and narrate the four interrelated lives in the most dramatically effective way. After a brief introduction based on my proposal, I began with the life of Manet, the dominant personality of the four and the greatest painter. I then moved on to Berthe Morisot and included a separate chapter on Morisot and Manet. The next section concerned Degas and had a chapter on Degas and Manet. The final section discussed Cassatt, with a chapter on Cassatt and Degas. Overall, the book spanned Manet's birth in 1832 to Cassatt's death in 1926, but it also emphasized—through the theme and variations structure of each linked section—the artistic and personal relations of the Impressionist quartet.

Since several competent biographies of each painter, in English and French, had already been published (of which only Roy McMullen's *Degas* was first rate), there was no need for me to follow strict chronology or attempt to cover all aspects of their lives. My emphasis would not be on the events, but on their significance. Unlike most art critics, I was not interested in the sources of the pictures, in the obtuse and often abusive criticism written by the artists' contemporaries, or in modern ideology—Marxist, Freudian, feminist, structuralist, or whatever. I tried to look at the art, with careful attention to detail, and describe exactly what I saw. I explained, within the context of the artists' life and time, what was happening in the paintings and what they meant.

Manet's revealing and devastating picture of his parents, *Portrait of M. and Mme. Auguste Manet* (1860), publicly displayed the emotional tensions, inner loneliness, and repressed anger within the family. Paralyzed by syphilis, unable to speak, and hiding the unspeakable, Manet's father, a supposedly virtuous judge, suffers for

his darkest family secret and sexual sins. This mood became a keynote of Manet's work: the strange uneasiness and isolation of people, alienated not only from each other but also, in the modern mode, from themselves. Several provocative details in Manet's scandalous *Luncheon on the Grass* (1863), as well as the wine and fruit traditionally associated with Bacchus, point to a bacchanalian revel. Manet was determined to confront respectable spectators with vibrant reality and erotic wit, and his vision of a youthful excursion to the protective forest slyly suggests the inevitable sexual climax. In the *Battle of the Alabama and the Kearsarge* (1864) Manet was drawn not only to the spectacle of a naval conflict off the coast of France during the American Civil War, but also to the natural elements and the solid weight of the ocean. He made several visits to museums in Holland, taking his unusual perspective—vast sea in the foreground, fighting ships in the middle and far distance—from seventeenth-century Dutch seascapes and from pictures of the Anglo-Dutch naval wars by Willem van der Velde and Jacob van Ruisdael.

The young man in Manet's *Chez le Père Lathuille* (1879)—who pushes his face uncomfortably close to the older woman who sits stiffly and shows no sign of interest—bears a striking resemblance to the grotesque figures in Degas's series of drawings, *Criminal Physiognomy* (1880). Like the criminals whose "stain of vice" Degas observed when they were convicted of murder after a notorious trial, Manet's young man has a low forehead, prominent nose, thick lips, and prognathous jaw. The charming garden setting and pleasant story behind the picture have blinded critics to his satiric portrayal of the ugly, intrusive, ape-like seducer. Manet's last major work, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1881–82), suggests the inexorable progress of his fatal disease. The barmaid's black dress and disillusioned expression convey deep sadness; the fashionable gentleman at the bar, approaching the barmaid from an unexpected angle and appearing in an oblique reflection, is a figure of death. The painting is Manet's farewell to the follies of love and the pleasures of life.

*Interior: The Rape* (1868–69), Degas's most fascinating and elusive painting, transforms an act of physical aggression into a moment of unbearable psychological anguish. The painting suggests his own ambivalence about sex: the cruel pleasure of brutal dominance as well as sympathy for the violated victim. *The Pedicure*, painted in New Orleans in 1873, achieves its power from the eerie contrast between the ostensible and the covert subject: a cosmetic process and a surgical operation. The old man, obsessed with the vulnerably

exposed leg and foot of the comatose girl, seems prepared to cut off her toe with his glittering instrument and throw the body part into the shallow circular tub. Degas's *Mary Cassatt at the Louvre: The Etruscan Gallery* (1879–80) shows her gazing intently at the huge painted terracotta figures of an Etruscan tomb. The enigmatically smiling Etruscan couple represent the erotic pleasure and marital bliss that Cassatt, looking at them through the protective glass, can merely observe but not experience. Cassatt's *The Caress* (1902), her clearest use of Christian iconography, imitates Italian Renaissance paintings of the Holy Family: the seated Madonna, the Christ child standing on her lap and the young John the Baptist standing on her right—and follows the quattrocento tradition of Fra Angelico, Fra Lippo Lippi, and Domenico Veneziano.

### III

I relied on my literary background and used one discipline to illuminate another, not only by explaining unnoticed allusions in the letters of the painters, but also by discussing their significant friendships with writers. Manet, Morisot, and Degas lived at the center of French culture and had strong ties with the leading authors of the time: Charles Baudelaire, who advocated the painting of modern life; Stéphane Mallarmé, an intimate friend of both Manet and Morisot; Emile Zola, the champion of Manet; the Goncourt brothers; J.-K. Huysmans; Paul Valéry; and André Gide.

Poe entered Manet's work through his French translators, Baudelaire and Mallarmé. Poe's story "The Black Cat" begins by noting that sagacious black cats are popularly regarded as witches in disguise. One of these cats appears in Manet's *Olympia* (1863) with a hostile arched back, and seems to be hissing at the client who's sent in flowers and is about to intrude in its domain. Manet did three studies of Poe in the early 1860s, one of which became the frontispiece to Mallarmé's translation of *Les Poèmes d'Edgar Poe* (1888). In 1875 he illustrated Mallarmé's translation of "The Raven" and in 1879–81 did two drawings for his translation of "Annabel Lee." In his studio Manet kept a stuffed raven sitting on a bust of Minerva. I used Poe's poem "The City in the Sea" to describe the atmosphere of Degas's early historical painting *Semiramis Building Babylon* (1860–62). Poe also turned up in Cassatt's life. Robert Weir, the father of her painter friend John, was Poe's drawing teacher at West Point and inspired "the ghoulish-woodland of Weir" in "Ula-

lume.” John Sartain, the father of her traveling companion Emily, had given shelter to the deranged, hallucinating Poe at the end of his life.

Encouraged and praised by Mallarmé, Degas wrote twenty carefully crafted sonnets on the same subjects as his paintings: horses, racetracks, ballet dancers, and the opera. I analyzed these sonnets, often quoted but never explained, which express the themes of reality and illusion, as well as permanence and transience. They acknowledge his own weaknesses and longings and show how he observed, understood, and sympathized with the vulnerable horses and dancers. Obsessed and inspired by the ballerinas’ transformation during magical performances, he captured them in words and immortalized them in painting.

Manet and Degas, whose mother was born in America, also had important contacts with British writers and painters. The Impressionists’ search for subjects northwest along the winding Seine, then to Normandy and the Channel coast, oriented them toward England. All four artists traveled to Britain; and English artists from Lord Leighton to Walter Sickert, John Lavery, and William Rothenstein visited their studios in Paris. Swinburne and Rossetti, introduced by Whistler, came to Manet’s studio and wrote about him. The Irish writer George Moore, an early art groupie, exclaimed that “it was a great event in my life when Manet spoke to me.” Manet painted Moore, and when the writer requested changes, asked, “Is it my fault if Moore looks like a squashed egg yolk and if his face is all lopsided?”

Moore also wrote six lively if unreliable essays on Degas and eventually earned the Master’s disapproval by revealing personal details of his life. The foppish dress and studied artificiality of Whistler also provoked Degas’s scorn, and he shot a few satiric shafts (knowing his missiles would find their way back to the target) in conversations with Rothenstein and the notorious journalist Frank Harris. Whistler was frightened of Degas, who once told him, “You behave as though you have no talent.” When the elaborately decked out Whistler entered a restaurant, Degas deflated him by remarking, “Whistler, you have forgotten your muff.”

The quick-witted, silver-tongued Oscar Wilde, visiting Degas’s studio with Whistler, met his match in Degas, who also pierced his façade. He remarked that Wilde, straining to make a dramatic impression, “seemed to be playing Lord Byron in a suburban theatre.” When Wilde praised his work and said, “you know how well known you are in England,” Degas, alluding to Wilde’s notorious homosexuality, replied, “Fortunately, less so than you.”

Cassatt deliberately avoided American expatriate artists, even those with backgrounds and tastes similar to her own, like Whistler, Sargent, Henry James, and Edith Wharton. She disliked her more prosperous rivals, who were greater painters, absurdly calling Whistler a “talented mountebank” and Sargent a “buffoon.” She was “disgusted” by Sargent’s slick style and financial success, had little regard for James, and loathed Edith Wharton, whose writings she condemned. Both Cassatt and Wharton portrayed, sometimes quite sharply, the same social class, and since the cultured and talented Wharton had a great deal in common with Cassatt, the novelist should have been the painter’s natural ally. But Cassatt disliked Wharton’s authoritative description of American high society, especially the satiric portraits of business tycoons, who clearly resembled Cassatt’s brother Aleck, president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, and her friend Henry Havemeyer, the sugar baron.

Cassatt’s strain of anti-Semitism and horror of lesbians help explain her hostility to another expatriate, Gertrude Stein. (Both women, oddly, were born in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania.) In 1908, when Cassatt was taken to Stein’s Paris apartment to see her great collection of modern art, she reacted to the Bohemian ambience like a disdainful dowager and exclaimed, “I have never in my life seen so many dreadful paintings in one place; I have never seen so many dreadful people gathered together and I want to be taken home at once.” Five years later, in a rare expression of risqué humor, she described the weird, Isadora Duncan–style outfits of Gertrude’s brother and sister-in-law: “Michael Stein received in sandals and his wife in one garment fastened by a brooch, which if it gave way might disclose the costume of Eve.”

Cassatt was friendly (at first) with the English novelist and writer on art Violet Paget, who wrote under the name of Vernon Lee. She had lived most of her life in Italy and was a friend of Henry James, who called her a “tiger-cat.” Lee was Cassatt’s house guest in 1895, but eleven years later, when she discovered that Lee was a lesbian, Cassatt wanted to dissociate herself from her former friend and disdainfully wrote, “Someone has just sent me Mrs. Wharton’s book *Italian Backgrounds*, dedicated to Vernon Lee; the latter once staid with me, she will never again.”

I also used comparisons with literature to illuminate the painters’ character and art. I compared Manet’s marriage to Suzanne Leenhoff with Joseph Conrad’s marriage to Jessie George, who also stabilized her neurasthenic and volatile husband, and, as Lady Ottoline Morrell observed, was “a good reposeful mattress for this hypersensitive,

nerve-wracked man.” I likened Mallarmé’s account of Manet’s impulsive method of painting: “Each time he begins a picture, he plunges headlong into it, and feels like a man who knows his surest plan to learn to swim safely, is, dangerous as it may seem, to throw himself into the water,” to the merchant Stein’s famous advice to Lord Jim, “The way is to the destructive element submit yourself.” Both statements suggest that achievement in art, as in life, demands a certain degree of risk. I mentioned that Manet’s mistress Méry Laurent was a model for Odette Swann in Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913–27); quoted Proust’s Duchess of Guermantes to show that Manet’s scandalous pictures were not accepted by the public until long after his death; and demonstrated that Berthe Morisot’s idea, in her poignant farewell letter to her daughter, that love survives death and continues after it, came from the Song of Solomon. Proust later developed this idea in an elaborate botanical metaphor.

Such connections reveal the cultural interplay between visual and literary art that specialized studies usually ignore. Hemingway’s account in *In Our Time* (1925) of the November 1922 execution of the Greek royalist ministers, one of whom was gravely ill and had to be carried to the site, conveys, like Manet’s *The Execution of Maximilian* (1868), sympathy for the victims while objectively narrating their death. The atmosphere of Hemingway’s “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” (1933), in which the older writer sympathizes with the traumatized client and shares his fear of the threatening darkness, recalls the strangely modern mood of Degas’s *The Absinthe Drinker* (1875–76). The hostile confrontation of husband and wife in Degas’s *The Bellelli Family* (1867) seems to confirm the opening sentence of *Anna Karenina* (1877): “All happy families are alike, but an unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” In Morisot’s most famous painting, *The Cradle* (1872), a mother gazes down at her newborn infant. Tolstoy’s novel suggests what she might be thinking when the autobiographical hero Constantine Levin reacts to the birth of his first child with an uneasy mixture of pleasure and fear. In a similar fashion, Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs* (1870) and Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” (1915) reveal the sexual, even perverse, significance of fur in Manet’s *Berthe Morisot with a Muff* (1868–69). Gregor Samsa, having been transformed into a gigantic bug, “was struck by the picture of the lady muffled in so much fur and quickly crawled up to it and pressed himself to the glass, which [. . .] comforted his hot belly.”



When taking an old-fashioned carriage ride to a friend's house in Normandy, Degas read a French translation of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) to vivify the people and environment. Fielding's use of the congenial stagecoach journey as a metaphor for entertaining readers may have reflected and enhanced Degas's pleasure: "Let us behave to one another like fellow-travelers in a stage-coach," Fielding observed, "and mount, for the last time, into the vehicle with cheerfulness and good humour."

Like the writer-hero in Henry James's "The Lesson of the Master" (1888), Degas believed that marriage interfered with the artist's quest for aesthetic perfection. When the aspiring young writer in James's story asks, "Are there no women who really understand—who can take part in a sacrifice?" the great solitary author responds, "How can they take part? They themselves are the sacrifice." Completely absorbed in his art, Degas told a French journalist an improbable anecdote, taken from an unnamed biographer, about how Charles Dickens broke through his imaginative roadblocks by making models to represent his fictional characters. Degas did not find this story in a biography of Dickens, but in a chapter on Dickens in Hippolyte Taine's *History of English Literature* (1863). He identified with Dickens but, forgetting the actual details of Taine's description, assumed that Dickens's method matched his own practice of using little wooden horses when painting the racetrack. In his endless quest for perfection and lack of interest in the finished work—the very heart of his aesthetics—Degas resembled Giorgio Vasari's description of Leonardo da Vinci: "his mind formed such difficult, subtle and marvellous conceptions that his hands, skilful as they were, could never have expressed them."

#### IV

I also used literary analysis to probe more deeply than previous biographers of the four artists into the most important events of their lives. Manet's interference with Morisot's painting and his mutilation of Degas's work caused quarrels with his two friends. When Morisot completed *Reading* in 1870, she asked Manet's opinion. Instead of telling her what had to be done, he began to retouch it, got quite carried away and tried to make her work his own. She called him a madman, resented the imposition of his style on her art and, though terribly upset, felt unable to prevent his overwhelming intrusion. By taking possession of her painting, Morisot felt as if

Manet had violated her, and her anguished response reveals the depth of her feelings for him.

Manet and Degas's most serious quarrel took place in 1869 after Degas had painted a portrait of Manet and Suzanne, *M. and Mme. Edouard Manet*. When Manet saw the finished work, he was furious and swore that Degas had distorted the features of his dear wife. He retaliated by slashing out a third of the picture—obliterating the front of Suzanne's face and body, as well as her hands and the piano she was playing. Shocked by Manet's violent overreaction, Degas seized the painting, left Manet's house and felt honor bound to return Manet's gift of *Plums*—though he hated to part with anything in his collection.

This bitter quarrel erupted from personal, not artistic differences. Manet was notoriously touchy about his fat Dutch wife, who was mocked by the Morisots and others in his social circle. He suspected that Degas was parodying his own recent painting *Mme. Manet at the Piano* (1867–68), in which he'd idealized his wife and portrayed her with delicate fingers on the keyboard. In Degas's double portrait, Suzanne also sits erect and in profile at the piano. But on the left, the nattily dressed Manet sprawls on the sofa. Manet took offense not only at Degas's depiction of Suzanne's face, but also at the portrait of himself, which he thought made him look like a philistine, bored and dozing off during his wife's performance. In a fury, Manet attacked the portrait—the psychological equivalent of stabbing Degas himself. Degas's main regret was that he gave up the precious *Plums*. When a friend expressed surprise that Degas had resumed their friendship, he admitted that he'd succumbed to Manet's famous charm and said, "No one can remain at outs long with Manet." Paradoxically, the mild and gentle Manet behaved violently, while the bitter, irascible Degas accepted the insult and smoothed things over.

The paternity of Suzanne's son Léon Leenhoff, the liaison of Manet and Morisot, and the personal relations of Degas and Cassatt are the three most enigmatic aspects of their lives. It would seem that by marrying Suzanne, who'd been a piano teacher in his family's home, Manet tacitly acknowledged that Léon was his own son. Yet there is strong evidence to suggest that Manet's father Auguste was in fact Léon's father. Manet knew his father had syphilis and had reason to believe he would inherit the disease. Fearful of passing it on to his wife and children, he was reluctant to have a child of his own. The estrangement, fear, and barely suppressed rage in the portrait of his parents may have been provoked by Léon's secret and

by Manet's bitter resentment that he had to step into the shoes of his father—who as a judge heard paternity suits and was enormously self-righteous—in more ways than one. Manet seems to have inherited his father's mistress as well as his fortune, and felt dishonored at home as well as humiliated by the condemnation of the work he exhibited in the Salons. Manet's desire to preserve the family's honor, his inability to legitimize Léon, the stipulation in his will that Léon inherit from Suzanne, Mme. Manet's condemnation of Suzanne's "crime" and her statement that Manet had no children all strongly suggest that Auguste was Léon's father.

Between 1868 and 1874, when Morisot was in her late twenties and early thirties, Manet became obsessed with her striking beauty, magnetic presence, and elegance, which was a perfect match for his own. He expressed his love for her, and revealed her love for him, in series of eleven portraits, with variants in watercolor, lithograph, and etching. The sheer number and beauty of these portraits naturally arouse curiosity about the intimate relations of Manet and Morisot. She was certainly in love with him, jealous of his pupil Eva Gonzalès and his wife Suzanne. George Moore, always a close observer, stated "there can be little doubt that she would have married Manet if Manet had not been married already." One modern critic naively claimed that "as a gentleman, an 'honnête homme,' [Manet] would never tarnish her respectability by suggesting an illicit liaison." But liaisons, if discreet, had always been tolerated in good society, and overwhelming passion, especially in artistic circles, often defied social conventions. Manet's friend Théodore Duret pointed out that after her sister married in 1869, Morisot "used to work with Manet in his studio. From that moment she passed under his immediate influence." Her letters show that her love for Manet was the most passionate experience of her life.

Morisot's letters and Manet's many portraits of her strongly suggest that they were lovers. Manet admired her work, relished her talk, and fell in love with her. Often alone together in his studio, they had ample time for intimacy. They burned each other's letters when she married his brother, both because they had something to hide and as a sign that their intimate relationship had come to an end. Though Manet did not paint Morisot after her marriage in 1874, their close friendship continued. She remained devoted to Manet during his lifetime and did everything she could to enhance his reputation after his death. Manet's erotic portraits not only reveal the talent of the painter and beauty of the model, but also seem to express their deepest feelings.

Degas and Cassatt were too temperamental and independent to get married, but could they have been lovers? He threw some light on the sexual question. By paradoxically stating, "I would have married her, but I could never have made love to her," he emphasized their intellectual affinity and admitted that he did not find her physically attractive. Degas might have been too shy to express his feelings, and his way of life was too bohemian to suit her taste. When they first met, his clothing and behavior were quite gentlemanly, and she was delighted to socialize with him. As he got older, however, his tramp's dress and miserly way of life strongly contrasted with her self-indulgent luxury. She was not entirely conventional and (like Degas with his models) was capable, when infuriated, of the crudest profanity.

In later years, one of her bold relatives dared to ask the formidable Cassatt if Degas had been her lover. Her reply was predictably indignant as well as surprisingly snobbish: " 'What, with that common little man; what a repulsive idea!' Apparently the idea itself did not bother her as much as the fact of his 'commonness.' " Degas was as well born as Cassatt, and his Neapolitan aunts had aristocratic connections (Rosa married an Italian *duca*, Laura a *barone*, Stefani-na a *marchese*). As she became familiar with Degas and lost her youthful awe of the Master, it was his behavior, not his background, that she found common. She was deeply offended by his cutting remarks (which quickly got back to her); by his portrait of her, which she found repulsive; and by his shabby, even dishonest dealings with patrons like her brother Aleck and the Havemeyers.

Degas had an occasional sexual outlet in visits to brothels. The prudish Cassatt—with no sexual life—may well have found sex itself repulsive. She found compensation in her pets and in the maternal themes of her paintings. Though there was a romantic element in their friendship, their feelings seem not to have been strong enough for an affair. Unlike Manet and Morisot, a meeting of the minds appears to have been sufficient for Cassatt and Degas. Neither could submit to the imperious domination of the other and, it seems, both knew that conjugal, and especially sexual, life was impossible.

In the end I found *Impressionist Quartet* more difficult to write than a literary biography. I missed the thrill of the hunt for new documentary material and the precious revelations that come from personal interviews. I did not have the same mastery of the French material (though I learned a great deal while writing the book) that I always had when writing about English literature, and had seen only

a few originals of the dozens of paintings I discussed. There was a scarcity of letters; Degas and Cassatt, like Manet and Morisot, destroyed what must have been an emotionally charged correspondence; and there are still many gaps in our knowledge of their lives. It was difficult to shape four different, though closely connected careers; it was harder to extract biographical meaning from paintings than from novels or poems, and use them to illuminate the lives of the artists.

There were, however, many compensations for plunging into a new field. I was attracted to the intelligence and wit of Manet and Degas, the beauty and charm of Morisot, and the courageous determination of Cassatt. As I went deeper into the subject, my French and Italian improved, and my eye became sharper. I brought my knowledge of literature and methods of analysis to bear on the artists' lives and works and tried to explain the crucial mysteries. Without long familiarity that dulled the force of the paintings and preconceived notions from graduate school of what they meant, I took a fresh look at them, tried to write vividly about them and hope I sometimes saw more than others had.