

# The Wednesday



Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group at Albion Beatnik - Oxford

## Editorial

### *The Struggle of the New*

Introducing a new perspective is always a problem. Nietzsche nearly ended his academic career after publishing his book *The Birth of Tragedy*. He was trained in Philology and he was expected to follow the normal procedure of this science; detecting and collecting facts. But he didn't. It is not the single facts or a group of facts that interested him but the explanation of these facts which can't be more fact. He had to step back from the mountain of facts to see what they all mean. Here Nietzsche came up with a theory of the structure of the Greek tragedy and its role in Greek life. But this attempt infuriated the establish trends of philology of his time. His view came under a strong attack by follow philologist Wilamowitz-Moellendorff who accused him of following Wagner and forgetting the historical facts. It was a struggle between the visionary and the scholar.

Wilamowitz-Moellendorff and other objectors were not interested in the relation between science (knowledge in a broad sense) and life. They are also not aware of a century of the debate on the Greek in German culture, from Winkelmann to Goethe, Schiller, Schlegel and Holderlin. This debate was outside their specialised field and they restricted themselves to their professional occupation. They had fallen into what Nietzsche calls the *Ascetic ideal*; the separation of knowledge and life.

What Nietzsche asks of the scholar, scientist, artists is that they put all their work in the service of life and the production of a higher culture and higher type of persons, in their own lives and society. However, he is not a Prophet calling all to his prophecy but building on an elite of

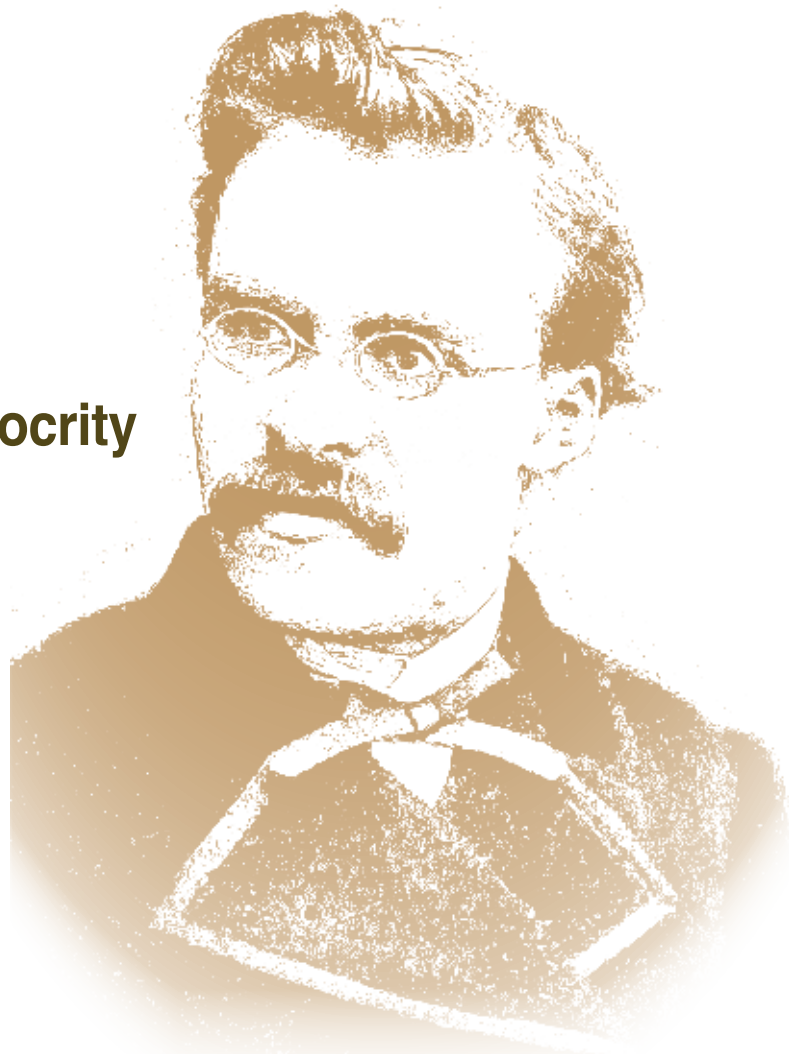
*Free Spirits*. I can see an objection coming, and I have heard it before, that he had failed in this project. I can forestall this objection by stating it in stronger terms than the objector would want it. True, Nietzsche had not achieved what he called for in his life. His books were not selling well. His readership was limited and his circle of friends was shrinking and he saw himself let down by his people just as Jesus on the cross.

This is all true but irrelevant. Nietzsche also identified with *Dionysus* and believed in his resurrection in *Apollonian* forms. There will be generations of the *Free Spirits* that will come up in each age bringing up vitality and regenerating culture and society. Nietzsche saw that the Ascetic ideal would lead to *Nihilism*. It is only the one with a Dionysian spirit who can see the darkness of Nihilism and go through it to the other end. He would become the prophet of the future. Those who became stuck in their facts, collecting and ignoring the relevance to life as a whole, are Nihilists who don't care which way life and society go. It is in such opposition to blind scholarship and Nihilism that Nietzsche has stayed relevant until now and will stay in the future. The blind scholars and philosophers will pick on technicalities in his view and ignore the essential message that life renews itself and ideas should be put in the service of life and generation. Novelty is not a side issue but something at the heart of nature and life and that is where Nietzsche positions his thought and gains immortality. The opposition sought to overthrow his view but they only sided with death and oblivion.

*The Editor*

Nietzsche's War on Mediocrity

# The Affirmative Perspectivism of Nietzsche



RANJINI GHOSH

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche has been considered as an iconoclast who had tremendous influence on generations to come. His views on morality, perspectivism, eternal recurrence and superman have changed the thinking of philosophers. This article discusses his war on all otherworldly conceptions of Truth, Values, Political Utopias and Religion. He considers them weak because they deny life and he calls for higher affirmative perspectives that allow differences and vitality.

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The Humanist credo which dominated Europe from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries put forward the belief that the human individual is at the center of the world and this was the basis of all political and moral values and reason would emancipate human beings. The humanist creed of individualism and rationalism were critiqued by post-modern philosophy, the foremost being Nietzsche. **Nietzsche more than anyone else, attacked the humanist project. For him though the humanists**

**questioned blind faith in God, yet they continued to be believers.** They were believers not in their worship of God but that **they continued to create new illusions which were the values of the rights of man, science, reason, democracy, equal opportunities, socialism and so on.** They advocated that these values were superior to life itself and that we must conform to these higher ideas which Nietzsche believes are no better than illusions of the early philosophers. **This vision of the world is essentially theological.**

In his book *Ecce Homo* he specifically sets out his anti –humanist agenda by saying that the godless religion which proclaims the value of science, history, politics to be higher ideals is a kind of “Idol” he wants to break by “philosophizing with a hammer”. Democracy is also a religious illusion among many others. He says in his book *Beyond Good and Evil* that **democratic phenomenon is not merely a form of political organization but also reduces human beings to mediocrity and debases his value.** As Luc Ferry (*A Brief History of Thought*, 2011) says, **the central tenet in Nietzsche’s philosophy is the deconstruction of modern moral and political utopias.** Nietzsche believed that all ideals share the same theological world-view in that they posited values which are supposedly superior and external to life itself or **transcendental values.** This was giving people false realities and denying them the actual truth. One should accept the real as it is. What Nietzsche meant by “nihilism” is the negation of this real in the name of the ideal. He said that there was nothing outside of this reality, nothing superior to this life and all the ideals of religion, ethics and politics are merely false metaphysical projections and fables or ‘Idols’. **Therefore, the post-modern agenda of Nietzsche was a full-blown attack on scientific truth, reason, Kantian morality, democracy and socialism.**

### Theory of Knowledge

As adumbrated above the *leitmotif* of the philosophy of Nietzsche is that there is no philosophy external to or higher than life itself. He said in his book *The Twilight of the Idols* that **the value of life cannot be assessed and not by living person because he is an interested party. There can be no objective or disinterested value judgements.** There are no universally valid facts. “There are no facts, only interpretations”, he said. That is all our truths and facts are subjective interpretations



Nietzsche as a young man

since they are products of our values. Hence, when science proclaims universal or objective truths we cannot accept the same. As he says in his book *Beyond Good and Evil*, “every philosophy also conceals a philosophy .... Every word is also a mask ”.

Nietzsche’s view of the world was opposed to the view of the **Stoics** who held that the world was a cosmos in harmony and unity. But Nietzsche believed that **the world was in a state of perpetual flux and in a state of chaos. He distinguished between two contradictory forces in the universe or two ‘drives’ or ‘instincts’; one is ‘reactive’ and the other ‘active’.** Reactive forces are based



upon the 'will to truth' and the democratic ideal in politics is based on such belief. Active forces on the other hand are to be found in art. **Reactive forces basically achieve their effect by repressing other forces i.e. to say they succeed only by opposing. They seek to establish the truth by a method which is based on finding errors and contradictions in arguments or opinions.** He refers to the dialogues of Plato and Socrates where by the method of 'dialectic' Socrates tried to prove his opponent wrong by pointing out the inherent logical contradictions of the opponent's arguments. Nietzsche saw this to be negative or reactive. **For him the search for true knowledge is doubly-reactive. It is not only through finding errors and contradictions but also by positing an 'intelligible world' in opposition to the 'physical world' in such a manner that the physical world is shown as inferior to the other real world.**

If we recall **Plato's theory of Ideas** where he said reality is a shadow of Ideas, he is actually putting Ideas on a higher pedestal than the reality we find ourselves in and this is the point Nietzsche is precisely making. **He attacks all scientific and religious views which devalues the body and the senses in relation to reason, rationality and God.** He puts religion and science in the same category in that they both aim to discover ideal truths or knowledge which are superior to our senses. For example, water appears in any forms such as ice, snow, rain etc.; in truth, it is the same substance. So, we are asked to believe in the idea of water which we don't understand through our senses. The 'will to truth' of science and philosophy is to convince us to rise above our senses and grasp the hidden reality which, as per them is a higher form of knowledge. Hence whatever is represented by art is essentially a sensory perception and so cannot be the higher truth which can only be given by science and philosophy. Nietzsche believes that there is a hidden agenda behind

the humanistic and rational enterprise and that is of putting 'the beyond' on a higher plane than the present. **The truths of science or humanism are essentially democratic truths since one value applies at all times and places like  $2+3=5$ . This is true under all circumstances irrespective of class, time and space and so Nietzsche calls them anti-aristocratic.**

Nietzsche consistently argued that modern philosophy was made weak by their belief that there was a higher absolute idea or truth. **This error comes down to us from Socrates and Plato. Plato's concept of eternal Ideas like beauty, justice, good created this false illusion in the minds of people. Nietzsche believes that there cannot be any absolute truth higher than life itself.** He said that the truth of a transcendental world was the invention of Judeo-Christian morality that emphasizes values of asceticism, meekness, piety and renunciation of worldly ambition. This was a perspective to create a new kind of truth whose purpose was to oppose the aristocratic values of courage and enjoyment of life. **Christianity was a Platonism for the people.** It is a decadent version of life which represses any attempt at affirmation of life. From his study of history, Nietzsche claimed the Ideas of truth, good, genuine were described as foundational values by this religious morality and these were seen to be in direct opposition to false, evil and counterfeit. **He says that the division between truth and falsehood is only created by a certain perspective and it is only a perspective.**

### **Aristocratic Vision**

**Nietzsche believes that the 'active' forces do not repress other forces and can be best seen in art. The artist opens up various perspectives before us and presents his truth or value without imposing it or repressing other values. This is like aristocracy where one commands respect without argument.**

When one listens to Chopin, Bach, or Beethoven or enjoys a painting by Picasso or Van Gogh one is not asked to choose one over the other. **Different perspectives or truths can be enjoyed at the same time without requiring us having to choose one to the exclusion of the other. But in science there is only one truth.** If Copernicus is right then Ptolemy was wrong. The history of science progresses by removing errors or contradictions from earlier viewpoints or truths. But aesthetic truths do not resolve into which is right and which is wrong. **Various opposing views exist. It is never that Picasso is right and Van Gogh is wrong. Nietzsche is against this reactive form of truth which science and philosophy try to thrust upon us.**

### **Eternal Recurrence and *amor fati***

**Luc Ferry** (*What Is The Good Life*, 2013) has noted that like Spinoza, eternity occupies a decisive place in Nietzsche's thought. Nietzsche considered his doctrine of **eternal recurrence** to be his most original contribution. He had debunked any concept of transcendence or a notion of beyond, whether it was humanity, justice, revolution or any other moral ideal. He emphasized that it was the present life that is important. And we must separate **the mediocre and weak forms of life** from the intense and **the grandiose form of life**. The famous Nietzsche scholar **Gilles Deleuze** has commented that Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence gives us a ***criterion of selection***. The formulation given by Nietzsche is that we must live life in a manner that we must want to live again. The criterion of selection involves choosing those instants or moments of life that are worth living to us. **The categorical imperative given by Nietzsche is that we must live life in a manner without any regrets or remorse.** Once we have separated the mediocre instants of life then we should want the grandiose moments to recur eternally. **Though Nietzsche**



Nietzsche in his final days

**rejected the concept of God yet he did not reject the concept of eternity.**

This doctrine was given by him in place of traditional metaphysics and religion which promises a better after-life. He says there is no concept of transcendence or ideals or even God since God is dead. Then where should we look to? All political utopias like democracy, socialism, etc. have failed. **We must look to this life on the earth to find out what part is worth living and what part should be allowed to perish.** The life that is mediocre, weak, reactive, lacking in vitality must be allowed to perish in contrast to life which is lived intensely and courageously. There can be no salvation. There is no higher ideal to this life which we live. There is no perspective which is superior to this life. He says that life should be lived in a way that one must wish to live it again. Therefore, all that the doctrine says is which moments in life are worth living and which are not. We should not live life in a manner where at a later point we regret it. if we are given an option to live our life again eternally then we should have no hesitation in choosing these moments again and again since we do not regret these moments. He says in his



Nietzsche in his happy days with Paul Rée and Lou Salomé

book *Ecce Homo* “my formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: to want nothing, to be other than as it is, neither in the future, nor in the past, nor in all eternity “. He wants us to embrace a ***Dionysian affirmation of the world***. We should accept life the way it is given to us with full vigor and joy.

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But there appears to be a contradiction in this formulation given by Nietzsche. Eternal recurrence requires us to choose certain instants in our life which we desire to recur eternally. But the concept of *amor fati* requires us to accept whatever moments we have been given by fate. The problem is how to reconcile the two? Some philosophers have interpreted that it is only after we have made our selection of the moments we want to

recur that *amor fati* can operate. Once we have lived our life in a grand and intense manner that we can then accept whatever fate gives us.

Nietzsche’s criteria of good life comprise of Truth in art, intense and grand life and eternity. Nietzsche wrote in the preface to *Ecce Homo* that philosophy meant voluntarily living among ice and high mountains. It was the search for a higher truth. Nietzsche condemned the type of truth for the objective and the ideal that science and philosophy sought to propound. He considered the aesthetic truth to be more true. He decried any attempt to posit an ideal truth and any claim to transcendence and objectivity. For him, aesthetic truth did not claim to present any objective view but instead presented only a point of view or a perspective. Art does not make any claim to truth and hence it is more true. He had said that “My philosophy is an inverted Platonism”. He considered the good life to be the life which has been lived intensely. All the opposing forces have to be harmonized into something more constructive. In his book *The Will to Power* he wrote that the greatness of an artist cannot be measured by the beautiful feelings he arouses but rather in the artist’s ability to become master of the chaos.

## Conclusion

Nietzsche’s formula for good life lies in the ability to lead a more intense life, and a life where one chooses to reject all the mediocre and weak forces and instants so that one can pick the grandiose moments of intensity and passion which one would desire, given a chance, to live again and again. We have to harmonize the active and the reactive forces within us and master the chaos so that we can arrive at greatness and intensity.





*“New life inside”* by Anona Greening



## The Play Between Art And Everyday Life

# Taking issue with the Impressionists

PETER WOOD

**The paintings of the Impressionists were the subject of a comment in Issue 6 which in turn followed our debate on the work of Casper David Fredrich. This article is in part a reply to other participants in the debate but also extending the discussion of both into their time and concerns. Part of the comment in the last issue has been reproduced with (•) in front and underlined:**

**I**t has been said that: “The Impressionists in the late 1800s were appreciating the world in a new way.” I would like to qualify this by saying that they did it by being more obtuse than the average person, they did not appreciate the world any differently than other people: they merely painted it differently from most artists of the time. In fact, they were not appreciating the world at all, but *running away from that nasty, dirty world full of nasty, dirty people and escaping into lily-gardens with nithe pretty lilieth*. Their so-called ‘appreciation’ was in fact an obtuseness to the reality around them. To have someone dying beside you and to completely ignore them and instead waffle on about the pretty colours of the flowers is hardly a new leap in mankind’s consciousness – rather a regression to infantile solipsism. 99% of the world of mid-late 19<sup>th</sup> century France – *the world in which these painters actually lived* - is absent from Impressionist art, for Impressionist painters such as Monet and Renoir were solipsistically concerned only with themselves and their own bourgeois pleasures. Total egotism as a giant leap in consciousness? Monet had two great passions: his own sensations (totally divorced from the objects that produced them) and his own money (he was mean and grasping). For him, other people did not exist,

which is why they did not exist in his pictures. If you believe that the only person who has ever existed was Monet, then you can accept his vision of reality.

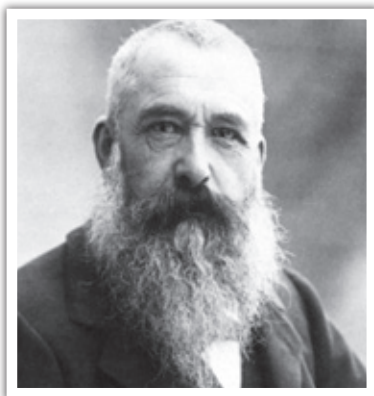
- They were not looking for the ‘meaning of life’, they were more concerned with the ‘here and now’.

The writer appears to assume that life is in another world apart from ‘the here and now’. The meaning of *life* is all about the meaning of the ‘here and now’; after all, that’s where life is. Shakespeare, for example, has a lot to say about the meaning of life, which was also the here and now as experienced in Elizabethan England by a Catholic on the run from the torturing authorities.

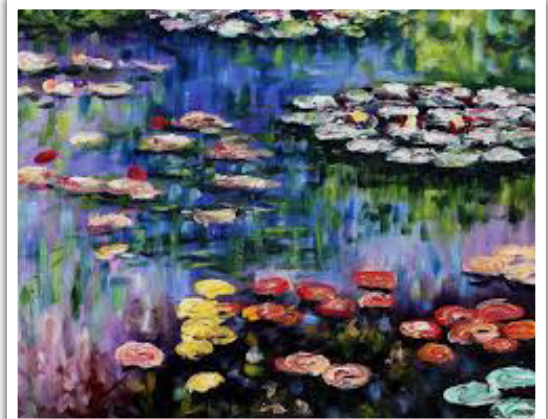
- Europe was feeling much more settled; Germany was lately unified and France a republic.

It is rather difficult to see the great uprooting of peoples from their traditional lives and the subsequent starvation of many of them, and the wage slavery and destitution of the rest, as ‘feeling much more settled’. Perhaps the writer thinks lying in a ditch and starving/freezing to death is being ‘settled’. I refer to Daumier’s works, and those of Dore (e.g. his depictions of





Claude Monet



Monet paintings

London) to show that many French artists of the time were *not* oblivious to the conditions in which they lived and didn't flee into an unreal world of *the pretty lilieth*. The fact that Bismark was oppressing German peoples and many of the French people were reduced to destitution did not (I imagine) make those peoples feel happy and settled. One might think, with a little imagination (something the Impressionists singularly lacked) such oppression made them feel decidedly *unhappy* and *unsettled*. Where does any of the actual life of the population appear in Impressionist art? Could late 19<sup>th</sup>-century France *really* be described as a pretty little lily?

- As with many things in art one needs an open mind to accept changes in ideas and ways of presenting them.

This would imply that all change is either for the better or at least, as good as the past, which in turn implies a total lack of value in art: it is all as good as the rest just because it is different. After all, one must retain an open mind and accept it all as just a new *form* – and any form is, apparently, as good (or bad) as any other. Beaumont and Fletcher brought in changes to the form of drama after Shakespeare, and therefore, being newer, were at least as good as Shakespeare (isn't it strange how people continue to love Shakespeare but not Beaumont and Fletcher – after all, everything's as good as anything else). My cough is as good as Hamlet and I really don't see why people the world

over shouldn't buy copies of my cough rather than that old-fashioned stuff. I know why they don't: they don't have open minds and are prejudiced against the new. This might seem an exaggeration, but in the valueless estimation of art, anything new is as good as anything old. Additionally, one must note that, if art is seen as nothing more than an expression of its time, it follows that the figurative art of late-19<sup>th</sup>-century France is as much an expression of its time as the avant-garde Impressionist stuff.

In any case, the Impressionist manner of painting was not new. The French Impressionists copied it from Turner and Constable, as was stated in some of their letters (recently burnt by the honourable French Academy in a vain attempt to persuade the world that it was an original invention of the Impressionists).

- To suggest Impressionists are 'weak-minded' is to miss the point.

Surely it is not to miss the point to point out that the work of an artist (of whatever medium) is brainless, solipsistic, mean-spirited, heartless, with not the slightest understanding of his times, other people, or, in fact, *anything* (except his own money). If one were to apply such terms to a novel it would imply a total condemnation – why not then re work in another medium?

- They represented life itself

Monet does not in any way present a living



**Renoir: The Frog Pond (La Grenouillère)**

breathing object. In fact, in his solipsistic self-engrossment he is utterly unconcerned with the object itself – any object and any person (except his own money: they only *real* thing in his world). He is not even concerned with lilies or haystacks *as objects in themselves*. When his wife was dying, he was utterly unconcerned with her as a person – as a living, breathing object – and only concerned with the different shades of red on her dying flesh. Is he able to create the ‘living, breathing object’ that was his wife – a real object? No. Rather than the object itself, he is only concerned with his own sensations, which the light falling on the object stimulates; however, after carrying out this function, for Money the object has no *raison d’être*.

For Monet, all other human beings have no reason to exist except as they stimulate his eyes with sensations. This is the reason he did not ‘copy from nature’ – he was total uninterested in nature, or in anything except himself.

First we were told that the Impressionists were uninterested in the meaning of life, but now we are told that they were concerned with ‘life itself’. The opposition of ‘meaning’ to ‘energy and vitality’ is crass. But the meaning of life is bound up with life itself and cannot be separated: if you represent one fully and adequately then you will also represent the



**Renoir: The two sisters**

other. And quite noticeably, in *great art* – in fact, in any even good art - they can’t be separated. Daumier and Dore did this, representing ‘life itself’, including its meaning as well as its energy and vitality. Daumier and Dore had inordinately more energy and life than Monet’s lilies.

Where is the energy and vitality of life in a dreamy little lily which can hardly even be recognized as a flower; and certainly not a living breathing object.

- [The writer asserts that impressionism first appeared in late 1800s?]

In fact, it didn’t: even within the French tradition, Chardin invented impressionistic painting a century before. And then there was Titian many centuries before the so-called ‘revolutionary’ Impressionists.

- Because many developments in the worlds of art and science come together at this point. Scientifically, it was an expanding world:
- Darwin over-turning religious concepts.



Darwin said nothing about any religious concept: he was a naturalist; indeed, his work was immediately taken up by a number of conventional religious believers as confirmation of God's providence. Of course, atheists often misrepresent history in order to further their own ends but really this view is repudiated a knowledge of the actual history and not by interpretations.

- Hering in 1892 on 'Opponent Colour Theory' allowing colour to physically work on the canvas.

An anachronism, 30 years after the Impressionists began. It is also doubtful that they have studied Goethe's (1810) work on the physiological effect of opposed colour.

- The introduction of paint tubes enabling work to be done 'en plein air'.

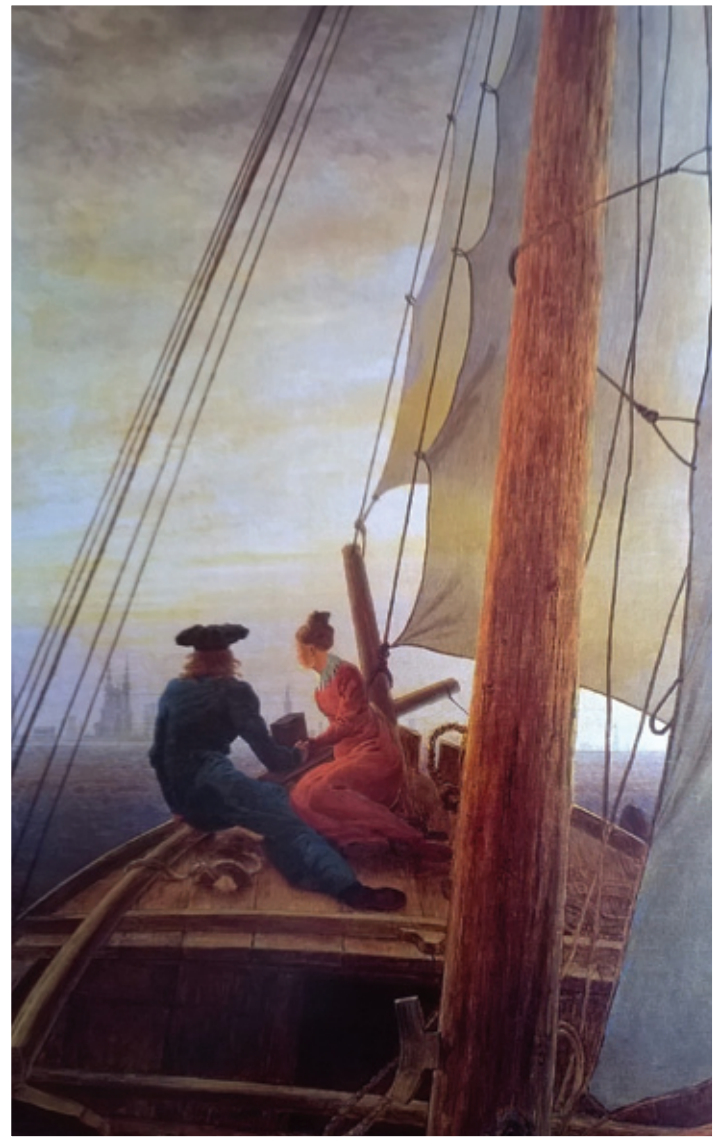
Claude Lorrain had already done painting 'en plein air', two centuries before.

- Impressionist painters now found beauty in the commonplace and the labour of the common man.

On the contrary, the 'common man' certainly finds no place in Impressionist painting, and the odd work in which he does happen to get into he is reduced to nothing but a blob. The almost total lack of the common man in Monet's work is quite notable – the common man is extinguished as something of no significance at all.

- One might ask how Friedrich would have painted if he had himself been born into the late 1800s.

As he was in 1800, being much more a man than Monet, he would have been concerned with the world he lived in, and what was happening to it, and the Satanic values of its rulers, just as he was in 1800. And, one might add, as Shakespeare would have been, and



**Friedrich: On a sailing ship**

Beethoven. And, indeed, as many painters and artists in other mediums were at the time of Monet. This was the time of Dickens great works like *Oliver Twist*, in which the artist, far from fleeing from the nasty dirty world to hide in a flower garden, presents that world with great understanding, the greatness of his art apparent in his revelation quite precisely of its *meaning*. Dickens' life and energy is immensely more than that of Monet.

A much greater artist than Monet has actually produced a work in which he quite precisely gives us the meaning of plein-air impressionism': here is Rockwell's *Wet Paint* or *April Showers*, together with an analysis of the critique of Impressionism it contains:





## Norman Rockwell's *Wet Paint / April Showers*

In this picture, we see a girl who is an aficionado of plein-air painting – Impressionism – and has been in the open air in order to capture the exact shades of the sky and the light etc. The result, which she is so concerned with protecting from the rain that's starting, is of course nothing but an attempt at an empty reflection of these elements – totally devoid of meaning or significance. Her painting contrasts sharply with Rockwell's portrayal of her, which was produced not outside but in the studio: it isn't concerned with exact shades of momentary light but is full of human interest and significance.

Whereas the impressionistic picture of landscape is dead and lifeless, just a play of colours, with both human and even natural vitality expunged, Rockwell's picture is highly dynamic, capturing a whole human situation and its psychological, artistic, human, and natural significance. The ground underfoot, for instance, indicates this difference: the girl's back foot almost touches the ground on the right, where Rockwell's name is set, and is associated with the storm and with *reality* (yes, the storm was real!). In contrast, the foot on the left, in the area of the painting associated with

Impressionist art, is in the air and dissociated from the ground and from reality. The girl's head is 'in' the rain-clouds – she's worried about the spitting rain, and consequently she hasn't noticed that she's lost her artist's hat. Similarly, her concern with 'outside light effects' means she's lost her true artistic concern with 'saying something', with expressing a view of life – expressing what she herself *is*. One could even suggest that the rainstorm symbolizes the fates, or heavenly powers, that are not smiling on her attempt to paint in this way. Moreover, ironically, she is unable to capture *the actual reality of the atmospheric situation* – the rainstorm! In the open air, she is unable to paint what is taking place in the open air! She can only reproduce those set, established, conventional elements that are permitted in Impressionist painting. She is allowed to paint nice, pretty, sunny scenes, but nothing else – nothing with any dynamism or life to it, nothing of the *actuality* of the world she inhabits. In fact, if she were to carry what is in her head – the rainstorm – back to the studio, she could then really capture and reproduce what is going on outside.

Rockwell is able to include all this meaning in a subtle and organized way precisely because he isn't trying to slavishly copy a pretty, conventional, two-dimensional scene in front of him like a gormless Impressionist. Rockwell is the true artist, not the Impressionists who just paint conventional externals to a formula, without any imagination or understanding of life, reality, or themselves.

Rockwell portrayed the life of the people of the nation – all sorts of ordinary people. And he was loved by them (as Shakespeare was loved by the groundlings, who made him the great success he was). The Impressionists, by contrast, were touted by the 'elite' rich, who wanted to show their superiority by appreciating an art that the common people rejected.

## A Single Clear Moment

Poem *by* DAVID BURRIDGE

1.

*Alone among those mossed stained trees  
that soared up beyond my squinting eyes.  
My heartbeat marked the rhythm  
of their heavy sway and sigh.  
Above me a phantom sea dragged  
thought's echoes from shores of silence.  
All feeling was purged by this greater fury.  
I stood corrected like a twitching stallion,  
that had lost its passionate purpose  
and waited to be told.*

2.

*Perfect stillness; sounds, colours, shapes, crystallised,  
Like ornaments to be picked off a shelf.  
Here I felt reverence like no church could impose.  
Lofty man-mades can't vie with the sky,  
or the high curves of the canopy.  
The last light splintered with more power  
than iron and wood trinkets.  
I bent my head as if in devotion.  
No organ played, nor angelic chorus raised.  
But in that moment,  
when day and night briefly collided,  
I almost found faith.*



## History

# The Kronstadt Rebellion

RAYMOND ELLISON



**In March 1921, the Russian state, newly re-established following the Revolution in 1917, was shaken by an uprising by sailors from the naval base at Kronstadt. Kronstadt was strategically situated on an island in the Gulf of Finland about 20 miles west of the then capital city, Petrograd. But traditionally, sailors from this base had stood in the vanguard of the revolutionary movement in Russia. What then has happened?**

In March 1921, the Russian state, newly re-established following the Revolution in 1917, was shaken by an uprising by sailors from the naval base at **Kronstadt**. Kronstadt was strategically situated on an island in the Gulf of Finland about 20 miles west of the then capital city, Petrograd. But traditionally, sailors from this base had stood in the vanguard of the revolutionary movement in Russia. In 1905, the first national upheaval in twentieth century Russia, the sailors rioted against the conditions of their service, and in 1917, Kronstadt was a centre of revolutionary activity. A local soviet was formed in May, enthusiastically supported by the sailors, and at the key moment in October when **Lenin** seized power, the sailors joined in the attack on the **Winter Palace**. Most recently, during the Civil War of 1918-20, sailors from the Baltic Fleet were at the forefront of the struggle against the **anti-Bolshevik** armies.

Nevertheless, in 1921, the insurgents drew up a list of grievances. These were partly economic, relating to the abolition of privileges for government officials, some related to the restrictions on peasant activity (since most of the sailors had originated as peasants). But some related to political freedoms, such as freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, both of which had been curtailed under the **Bolshevik** dictatorship. And it was these political demands which the Bolshevik government were unable to tolerate. In fact they had already begun to address the dire economic situation by the adoption of the **New Economic Policy**, announced by Lenin at the 10th Party Congress, then sitting in Moscow.





Consequently, the Bolshevik government determined to quash this open resistance to their authority. The rebel leaders had adopted the provocative title “**Provisional Revolutionary Committee**”, and they demanded fresh elections to the soviets (local councils) on the grounds that the present rulers were no longer acting according to the will of the workers. Further, **Lenin, although prior to the revolution he had adopted the slogan “All power to the Soviets”, had never in practice favoured a mass democracy, which he feared would lead to social chaos.** There was also some suspicion (encouraged by the authorities) that the revolt had been provoked by exiles from the recent civil war.

The government moved rapidly, since with the retreat of Winter, the ice was poised to *dialectically* melt, following which the battleships would be free to move. The whole weight of the military machine available to the government was deployed against the rebels, including artillery and air-power. In the absence of any help from outside, the end result could not be in doubt, and the surviving defenders surrendered after about two weeks of resistance. Both sides suffered heavy casualties.

What is perhaps less well known is that in the brief time available to them the rebels organised the daily life and defence of Kronstadt. A revolutionary committee was elected by delegates from Kronstadt’s factories and military units, and from this committee officials were chosen to direct civic affairs such as food supply (dispensing equal rations) and transport. This set-up looks back to the **Paris Commune** some 50 years earlier, an observation made by activists throughout Russia at the time. And indeed, it sets out some pointers as to how a future socialist would operate.

**Further Reading:** *Paul Avrich, Kronstadt 1921, Norton Library, 1974*

## The Wednesday



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Please keep your articles, artwork,  
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