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Ruth Bernard Yeazell: Art of the Everyday

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THE NOVEL AS DUTCH PAINTING

In a memorable review of Jane Austen's *Emma* (1816), Walter Scott celebrated the novelist for her faithful representation of the familiar and the commonplace. Austen had, according to Scott, helped to perfect what was fundamentally a new kind of fiction: "the art of copying from nature as she really exists in the common walks of life." Rather than "the splendid scenes of an imaginary world," her novels presented the reader with "a correct and striking representation of that which [was] daily taking place around him." Scott's warm welcome of *Emma* has long been known to literary historians and fans of Austen alike. But what is less often remarked is the analogy to visual art with which he drove home the argument. In vividly conjuring up the "common incidents" of daily life, Austen's novels also recalled for him "something of the merits of the Flemish school of painting. The subjects are not often elegant and certainly never grand; but they are finished up to nature, and with a precision which delights the reader."¹

Just what Flemish paintings did Scott have in mind? If it is hard to see much resemblance between an Austen novel and a van Eyck altarpiece or a mythological image by Rubens, it is not much easier to recognize the world of *Emma* in the tavern scenes and village festivals that constitute the typical subjects of an artist like David Teniers the Younger (figs. 1-1 and 1-2). Scott's repeated insistence on the "ordinary" and the "common" in Austen's art—as when he welcomes her scrupulous adherence to "common incidents, and to such characters as occupy the ordinary walks of life," or describes her narratives as "composed of such common occurrences as may have fallen under the observation of most folks"—strongly suggests that it is seventeenth-century genre painting of which he was thinking; and Teniers was by far the best known Flemish painter of such images.² (He had in fact figured prominently in the first Old Master exhibit of Dutch and



Figure 1-1. David Teniers the Younger: *Tavern Scene*, 1658. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of Robert H. and Clarice Smith. Image © 2006 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Flemish painting sponsored by the British Institution in London the previous year.)³ But nineteenth-century writers did not often distinguish closely between the Dutch and the Flemish in this connection; and Scott's allusion to "the Flemish school" serves less to evoke individual pictures or even artists than to conjure up Netherlandish genre as a whole. Like "Dutch painting" or "the Dutch school"—phrases that recur with even more frequency in the criticism of the period—it is shorthand for a type of painting that itself, as we shall see, is a painting of types. That such phrases simultaneously evoke ideas of the generic or the typical and of the meticulously detailed and particular (what Scott here calls "precision") is a seeming contradiction that goes to the very heart of the ambivalence that Dutch painting, whether on canvas or in words, could inspire.⁴

Scott's comparison of Austen's art to that of Flanders was not the first analogy between the novel and Netherlandish painting; and it was certainly not the last.⁵ At least as early as 1804, Anna Barbauld had already used the analogy to characterize the painstaking detail of Samuel Richardson: the author of *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, in her words, had "the accuracy and finish of a Dutch painter . . . content to produce effects by the patient labour of



Figure 1-2. David Teniers the Younger: *Village Festival with Aristocratic Couple*, 1652. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, N.Y.

minuteness”—a phrase that Leslie Stephen echoed almost exactly when he in turn evoked the novelist’s “Dutch painting of extraordinary minuteness” in an essay in the *Cornhill* more than half a century later.⁶ Reviewing *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* in 1821, Richard Whately repeated Scott’s comparison of Austen’s fiction to Flemish painting and added an allusion to the “Dutch school” as well.⁷ In 1859, George Henry Lewes returned to the Flemish analogy in an essay that sought to defend Austen’s art from the strictures of Charlotte Brontë—an essay that also seized the occasion, not coincidentally, to contend that Austen’s “sympathy with ordinary life” had much in common with that of the recently published *Scenes of Clerical Life* by George Eliot.⁸ As we shall see, the latter’s own defense of her art by analogy to Dutch painting in *Adam Bede* that same year predictably encouraged many of her critics to pursue the comparison in the decades that followed. Yet Anthony Trollope was also compared to a Dutch painter, and so too were Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Margaret Oliphant—whose *Chronicles of Carlingford* were implicitly chided for their affinity with that “apostle of the Dutch school, Mr. Thackeray.”⁹ Even Thackeray’s most celebrated rival was assimilated to the “school”: while one reviewer confined himself to a single scene, calling the banquet at Todgers’

in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844) a “notable . . . piece of Dutch painting,” Charles Kingsley’s impatient allusion in *Alton Locke* (1850) to “these days of Dutch painting and Boz” managed to make Dickens and the Dutch virtually synonymous, before he in turn grudgingly set out to satisfy the presumed appetite for such art with a detailed description of an “old eccentric’s abode.”¹⁰

Having evoked “the merits of the Flemish school” rather warmly in his review of *Emma*, Scott himself returned to the analogy more than a decade later—only now it was Daniel Defoe whose fictions were more equivocally praised for the resemblance:

The air of writing with all the plausibility of truth must, in almost every case, have its own peculiar value; as we admire the paintings of some Flemish artists, where, though the subjects drawn are mean and disagreeable, and such as in nature we would not wish to study or look close upon, yet the skill with which they are represented by the painter gives an interest to the imitation upon canvass which the original entirely wants. But, on the other hand, when the power of exact and circumstantial delineation is applied to objects which we are anxiously desirous to see in their proper shape and colours, we have a double source of pleasure, both in the art of the painter, and in the interest which we take in the subject represented. Thus the style of probability with which De Foe invested his narratives, was perhaps ill bestowed, or rather wasted, upon some of the works which he thought proper to produce.¹¹

There is no ambiguity here about the kind of low genre painting Scott has in mind. Defoe’s rogues and criminals would certainly seem more at home in a tavern by Teniers than would an Emma or a Mr. Knightley (see fig. 1-1). The allusion to “mean and disagreeable” subjects nonetheless helps to illuminate the faint condescension with which Scott had earlier praised Austen’s “Flemish” art for confining itself to “the middling classes of society”—while “those which are sketched with most originality and precision, belong to a class rather below that standard.”¹² His class discriminations are carefully calibrated, but in both cases Flemish painting evokes the representation of the lower orders as well as the circumstantial details of the novelists’ style.

Despite Scott’s well-known distinction between his own “Big Bow wow strain” and “the exquisite touch” with which Austen rendered “ordinary common-place things and characters,”¹³ one French authority identified the author of *Waverley* too with the tradition of Netherlandish painting

in fiction. According to Hippolyte Taine in his *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (1863), Scott was “like a painter who, having finished with great ceremonial paintings, finds an interest and a beauty in the bourgeois houses of some provincial dump, or in a farm framed by beds of beetroots and turnips”—a painter of “interior and genre pictures, so local and minute, and which, like those of the Flemish, indicate the rise of a bourgeoisie.” For Taine, Scott’s true contribution was not the imaginative reconstruction of history but the representation of “the real and modern world,” a representation that had profoundly influenced—and by no means all to the good—a “whole literature” that followed:

Miss Austen, Miss Brontë, Mrs. Gaskell, George Eliot, Bulwer, Thackeray, Dickens, and so many others paint especially or entirely, as he does, contemporary life as it is, without embellishment, at all ranks, often amongst the people, even more often amongst the middle class. And the same causes which made the historical novel by him and others come to nothing made the novel of manners by these authors succeed. They were too minute copyists and too decided moralists, incapable of the great divinations and the wide sympathies which open up history; their imagination was too literal, and their judgment too fixed. It is precisely with these faculties that they created a new species of novel, which proliferates today in thousands of offshoots, with such abundance that talents in this branch of literature may be counted by hundreds, and that one can only compare for original and national vigor to the great age of Dutch painting.¹⁴

Great as it may be, the “great age of Dutch painting” is clearly a doubtful precursor for the new age of the novel.

I shall return to the implications of Taine’s mixed assessment throughout this book. But it is worth noting here that the very numbers in which this “new species” proliferates is one source of the critic’s unease—as well as a reason for the analogy to a visual tradition famous for the very abundance of the images it produced. If Dutch painting constituted the “first mass consumers’ art market” in Europe, as Simon Schama contends, then the nineteenth-century novel was surely the second; and the popularity of both forms raised continual questions about canons of taste and hierarchies of value.¹⁵ Indeed, Taine may be writing at the moment only about English literature, but he is quite clear that Dutch painting in fiction is not confined to England. “Ask a cook which picture she prefers in the museum,” he observes caustically, “and she will show you a kitchen, in which the saucepans are so well done that one is tempted to dip into the soup.” Such cooks—or

rather, the readers for whom they stand—are now apparently everywhere in Europe: “this inclination . . . is now European,” and the novel which responds to such taste is a European phenomenon. (Where the English differ, Taine suggests, is their impulse to moralize the picture.)¹⁶

Though I shall argue that there were in fact particular reasons to connect English fiction to Dutch painting, Taine was not alone in finding such painting everywhere in the novel. He does not add any Continental names to the litany of “Miss Austen, Miss Brontë,” and the rest, but many readers thought that Balzac especially belonged in their company. In a study of Netherlandish art published six years later, Taine himself would compare Rembrandt to Balzac; but by the time that he thus reversed the direction of the analogy (Rembrandt was “comme notre Balzac”), the comparison of the French novelist to Dutch and Flemish painters had become commonplace on both sides of the Channel.¹⁷ In fact Balzac’s realist novels had scarcely begun to appear in the 1830s before critics drew on the analogy to note the extraordinary detail with which his people and places were evoked. At least as early as 1833, the *Revue des deux mondes* suggested that an old woman in *Le médecin de campagne* might have had “her wrinkles counted by the brush of Gerrit Dou,” and allusions to Dou, Teniers, Rembrandt, and others regularly recurred in the decades that followed. In France one reviewer characterized *Père Goriot* (1834) as a “tableau flamand,” and another invoked the “pinceau flamand” of *César Birotteau* (1837);¹⁸ in England *Eugénie Grandet* (1833) was “a Dutch picture of an interior”—this in a review that otherwise excoriated the novelist—while Balzac himself was “a painter of the Flemish school” or a “Dutch painter in prose.”¹⁹ As the number of volumes in the *Comédie humaine* multiplied, Balzac’s fiction became a whole gallery of Netherlandish art:

We have all passed entire hours in the galleries of the Louvre in contemplating some of those marvelous interiors by van Ostade, Metsu, or Gerrit Dou, into which our imagination enters, takes up residence, and amuses itself; M. de Balzac sometimes knows how to give to his novels the kind of mysterious attraction these pictures present. . . . The world that M. de Balzac has the gift of understanding and reproducing is the same as that of these bourgeois painters.²⁰

Balzac was not the only Continental writer to be identified—whether for good or ill—with such pictures. In 1861, for example, Flaubert was attacked for creating a world that resembled “a Flemish or Dutch museum,” and the analogy was used for other realists, some German as well as French, throughout the century.²¹ But the sheer fecundity of Balzac’s art—both the

astonishing rate at which the novels appeared and the descriptive abundance of his style—made him an especially salient figure for a kind of art that was itself strongly associated with the proliferation of detail. “Where another writer makes an allusion,” as Henry James memorably put it, “Balzac gives you a Dutch picture.” That so much of Balzac’s descriptive energy was directed toward the representation of houses and their interiors—what James called his “passion for bric-à-brac”—intensified his association with the domestic realism of so much Netherlandish painting.²² Indeed, it is very much to the point that the use of the word “réalisme” in an aesthetic sense seems to have first come into circulation with an 1846 study of Dutch and Flemish art,²³ and that its earliest migration into English seems to have been an anonymous essay on Balzac in the *Westminster Review* of 1853—an essay that partly sought to counter “the well-known comparison of Balzac to the Dutch painters.” (The comparison was fair enough, the critic conceded, “as regards the truthfulness with which he has depicted interiors, and the habits of some homely characters,” but it failed to do justice to other aspects of his art—including “his exquisite female characters.”)²⁴

That the nineteenth century saw Dutch painting virtually everywhere in the novel may suggest that the analogy was used rather loosely, but it also testifies, as I shall argue, that fundamental characteristics of the genre itself were at stake: in associating narrative fiction with the visual art of the seventeenth-century Netherlands, nineteenth-century commentators were both registering and uneasily displacing many of those elements that we have come to identify, after Ian Watt, with the “formal realism” of the novel.²⁵ Although literary historians sometimes write as if the novel were the first genre in which such realism dominates an entire work (as opposed to figuring in the margins, like servants in Greek tragedy or peasants scrupulously depicted on the borders of a medieval manuscript),²⁶ many of the images produced by seventeenth-century Netherlandish painters clearly provided an important precedent; and however vaguely they conjured with the analogy, nineteenth-century writers were well aware of the fact. The detailed rendering of material particulars, the representation of “ordinary” people and events rather than heroic and mythical ones, the close attention to the rituals and habits of daily life, especially the domestic life of the middle classes: all these familiar characteristics of novelistic realism had their visual analogues in the so-called Golden Age of Dutch painting—the approximately hundred years, from 1580 to 1680, in which artists had produced the numerous images that continued to circulate through Europe in the centuries that followed.

The productivity of those years was truly extraordinary: by some recent estimates, over five million works were painted in seventeenth-century Holland.²⁷ While many of these did not survive, others not only survived but multiplied. Both in eighteenth-century France, where the vogue for Dutch and Flemish painting first established itself among the great aristocratic collectors as well as the heterogeneous crowds who frequented the Parisian city fairs, and in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain, where many of the works from the French collections migrated in the aftermath of the Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, the taste for Netherlandish art had been further popularized by influential collections of engravings like Jean Baptiste Pierre Lebrun's three-volume *Galerie des peintres flamands, hollandais et allemands* (1792–96), or John Smith's nine-volume *Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish and French Painters* (1829–42)—not to mention the less costly reproduction of individual prints.²⁸ The very abundance of images that would prompt anxious analogies to the contemporary proliferation of the novel also meant that nineteenth-century writers could expect their readers to have some sense of what allusions to such art signified. Before there was “realism” in a literary sense there was Dutch painting, both as a phenomenon and as a paradigm for criticism.²⁹

This is not to say that “Dutch painting” (or Flemish, for that matter) always signified the same thing. Like most critical terms, including such notoriously vexed examples as “realism” or “the novel,” it named a set of family resemblances rather than a clearly defined essence—a set of overlapping and related characteristics, not all of which were necessarily invoked in any single use of the phrase. At the risk of overschematizing, let me spell out the range of lexical definitions that could be in play whenever a nineteenth-century writer compared a novel or an excerpt from a novel to Dutch painting:

Dutch painting. 1) the precise transcription of detail, especially of material surfaces, such as those of furniture or dress; more generally, the copying of such appearances. 2) an abundance of such detail, sometimes at the expense of a governing intellectual or spiritual order; by extension, an excess of the trivial. 3) an attention to transient matters of costume or custom; the recording of the historically specific and local rather than the general or universal. 4a) the representation of ordinary or common subjects, both in the class of the

persons depicted and in the familiarity of their activities; typical rather than exceptional persons or events; b) more specifically, the representation of the home, especially of domestic interiors and of women engaged in household activities. 5) the representation of low or vulgar subjects both as to the class of persons depicted and as to the nature of their activities: smoking, eating, drinking, etc. 6) in connection with landscape, the representation of the cultivated, tamed or domesticated; or of the literally or metaphorically flat. *See also* Dutch art, the Dutch school, Flemish painting, etc.

Yet even as this brief taxonomy may help to clarify some of what was meant when nineteenth-century writers reached for the analogy, it threatens to obscure the way in which such definitions overlap and entail one another, so that to make the allusion was to call up a whole set of connotations at once. Thus whether or not “mean and disagreeable” subjects, in Scott’s phrase, were overtly at issue, to compare a novel to Dutch painting was almost invariably to associate it with the comparatively low and humble—a long intellectual tradition, as we shall see, having identified the “lowness” of such painting not just with the order of people depicted but with its very attention to matter itself. So too the feminized subjects of many Dutch and Flemish paintings meant that an aura of domesticity and femininity (and their implied limitations) often hovered around the paradigm in nineteenth-century criticism—as in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s dismissive allusion to Jane Austen as a “Dutch painter” of English “middle life,” whose “*ladyhood*” was “stronger in her than her humanity.”³⁰ As if to think of Dutch painting were automatically to conjure up images of women in the kitchen, the same critic who associated the *Chronicles of Carlingford* with the “Dutch school” also scolded Oliphant for attending too much to the housekeeping side of novel writing: “the artist’s concern is like Mary’s, with the spiritual guest, not like Martha’s, with the platters and household serving.”³¹ The small scale of so many Dutch paintings, whose size was determined by the fact that they were designed for private households rather than public spaces, and the meticulous detail for which Northern art was famous, especially that of the so-called *fijnschilders* (literally, fine painters) like Gerrit Dou and Frans van Mieris the Elder (figs. 1-3 and 1-4), could easily reinforce nineteenth-century associations of the feminine with the detailed and the trivial—and of all three with certain tendencies in the novel.³² Writing of the early George Eliot, for example, the youthful Henry James characterized her “observation” as “decidedly of the feminine kind: it deals, in preference, with small things”—this in a review that began by



Left: Figure 1-3. Gerrit Dou: *Girl Chopping Onions*, 1646. Royal Collection, London. The Royal Collection © 2006 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

Right: Figure 1-4. Frans van Mieris the Elder: *A Woman in a Red Jacket Feeding a Parrot*, c. 1663. National Gallery, London. © The National Gallery, London

quoting the novelist's own defense of her art on the model of Dutch painting and that followed with praise for her scenes of "low life" after "the Dutch masters whom she emulates."³³ In a related vein, Leslie Stephen elaborated at length on how "the feminine element in Richardson's character" manifested itself in that "interest in small details, which only women exhibit in perfection," before announcing that "the result of all this is a sort of Dutch painting of extraordinary minuteness."³⁴

Of course, novels are not paintings, though they may aspire to evoke visual images; and while paintings may incorporate words and imply narratives, they have at most a limited capacity for storytelling. But the perceived limitations of painting—especially painting of a certain kind—are very much to the point: to the degree to which nineteenth-century viewers saw Dutch painting as the "mere" recording of material detail, the apparent stasis and meaninglessness of that detail could be at once attractive and disquieting. What Roland Barthes has called the appearance of "an entirely self-sufficient nominalism" in Dutch painting—"an art of the catalogue . . . of the concrete itself"—continually haunts nineteenth-century appropriations

of the analogy.³⁵ The ambivalence with which critics approached Balzac's descriptive set pieces is a case in point, as they hovered between admiration for his painterly skill and the sense that an excess of matter threatened not merely to impede the narrative but to drain it of meaning altogether. "Often when in a story the action is running thin," as Henry James wittily remarked, "he stops up your mouth against complaint, as it were, by a choking dose of brick and mortar."³⁶ While Balzac's defenders praised the verisimilitude of his detail or argued that it served to characterize his people and explain their actions, less sympathetic readers concluded that "he painted to paint," in the words of one French critic—that "the *mise en scène*" had "invaded the idea; the material preoccupation killed the intellectual synthesis."³⁷

Balzac's "mighty passion for *things*," as James summed it up, made him an easy target for such criticism.³⁸ But the association with Netherlandish painting, I would argue, often carries something of this charge—even when a novelist's detail is far less obviously material than is Balzac's. Austen, for example, is hardly a visual artist at all: so little does she indulge in physical description of any kind that Scott's comparison of her to a Flemish painter can initially seem rather puzzling. Despite the fact that Emma, like Eugénie Grandet after her, begins and ends her narrative in the paternal household, there is nothing in Austen's novel that resembles the "Dutch" interior in which Balzac sets the history of his provincial heiress. While the opening pages of Balzac's novel appear to give the reader an exhaustive account of the Grandet house in Saumur, from the stone of which it is built ("tufa—a white stone peculiar to the shores of the Loire" and "so soft" that it is now marked by "numberless irregular holes, whimsically shaped by the inclemency of the climate") and the precise configuration, materials, and state of decay of its archway and door, to a thorough inventory of the articles of furniture that occupy the large hall where much of the action takes place—not to mention the appearance of the room's walls (gray panels with ancient moldings) and ceiling (gray beams, whose interstices are filled by a mortar which has yellowed with age) or the number of its windows (two)—the reader of *Emma* knows only that Hartfield is "a comfortable home," which "in spite of its separate lawn and shrubberies and name," really belongs to the "large and populous village almost amounting to a town" that constitutes Highbury.³⁹ Since "there was scarcely an evening in the week in which Emma could not make up a card-table" for her father (*E*, 17), the Woodhouses apparently possess such an object, but it has nothing like the substance or location in space of the equivalent piece of furniture at the Grandets': "An old cardtable in marquetry, whose upper part formed a

chess board, was placed in the area between the two windows. Above this table was an oval barometer with a black border, ornamented by bands of gilt wood, on which the flies had frolicked so licentiously that the gilding was in question" (*CH* 3: 1040). Of course *Emma* does have its share of homely details, such as the "minced chicken and scalloped oysters" with which the company at the first card party are fed, or the "eight cows, two of them Alderneys" that Harriet Smith enthusiastically recalls from her recent visit to the Abbey-Mill Farm (*E*, 20, 23). But the "Flemish" precision that Scott registered is primarily a question of manners and customs, habits of speech, and nuances of character. (Tellingly, in fact, the immediate example he offers in support of his claim is an extended dialogue—a slightly irritable conversation between Mr. Woodhouse and Isabella on matters ranging from the benefits of gruel to the comparative merits of their physicians.) Like Richardson's "Dutch" minuteness, which for Stephen was exemplified in the protracted account of the preparations for the hero's wedding in *Grandison*, Austen's "minuteness of detail"—the phrase is Whately's—has relatively little to do with objects as such.⁴⁰

Yet for a long tradition of aesthetic theorizing, the very specificity of the realistic detail identified it with the historically local and the transient—and these in turn with the perishability of matter itself. When Edward Bulwer-Lytton announced in 1838, "There would be, indeed, something inane and trifling, or mean and vulgar, in Dutch copies of the modern still life," the "Dutch copies" he had in mind were contemporary novels of manners. "The young author will be surprised to find, that exact and unexaggerated fidelity has never been the characteristic of the greatest novelists of their own time," Bulwer-Lytton declared—adding for good measure that such "exact portraiture . . . revolts our taste as an effeminate attention to trifles." After all, "in a few years the mere portraiture of manners is obsolete. It is the knowledge of what is durable in human nature that alone preserves the work from decay."⁴¹ Some thirty years later, R. H. Hutton echoed this verdict, as he prematurely attributed the imminent death of the novel to the prevailing taste for "realism": "Nothing is true in most novels except their descriptions of manners, and the instant those descriptions cease, from social changes, to be true, the novels themselves disappear."⁴² Though Hutton did not specifically evoke the analogy to painting, a similar judgment was often in the air when critics remarked the Netherlandish detail of the novel.

When writers addressed themselves to the temporal character of the novel itself rather than the judgment of posterity, however, they were more likely to associate such detail with stasis than with transience. It is no

accident that Scott identified Austen's "Flemish" art with a novel that had, by his account, "even less story" than usual—as if the evocation of such images were naturally opposed to the movement of plot.⁴³ From one perspective, of course, all painting is essentially static: at least since Lessing's celebrated essay on the *Laocoon* (1766), it has been commonplace to distinguish the temporal art of "poetry" from the spatial art of images—from which generic logic it follows that any attempt to imitate the effects of painting in words will necessarily disrupt the temporal flow of narrative.⁴⁴ Yet for classical art theory, as we shall see, the great prestige accorded history painting derived in large part from its closer approximation to the status of language: unlike still life, landscape, and genre painting—the visual categories in which Northern artists were principally thought to excel—history painting evoked a narrative and thereby appealed to the more intellectual capacities of the spectator. There was painting and painting, in other words; and what "Dutch painting" signified in this connection was an art that attended only to the visible surface of things, an art of "mere" images and nothing more. Coleridge was referring to description in poetry rather than the novel when he complained that "the work was so dutchified by minute touches that the reader naturally asked why words & not painting were used"; but his deliberately awkward neologism makes all too clear the lofty contempt this "dutchified" art could inspire.⁴⁵

I shall return to such theorizing and its implications in the chapter that follows; but for now I simply want to suggest how it could be adapted for criticism of domestic realism in fiction. In an essay that appeared in *Blackwood's* in 1845, Archibald Alison explicitly invoked the authority of Joshua Reynolds, as he set out to attack the vogue for realism by mapping the generic hierarchy of neoclassical art theory onto literary distinctions between the romance and the novel. In Alison's telling formulation, "descriptions of still life—pictures of scenery, manners, buildings, and dresses—are the body, as it were, of romance; they are not its soul." While they have their place in a narrative, "the skilful artist" is to "regard them as an inferior part only of his art," duly subordinated to the grand passions that move the plot. Elsewhere in the essay Alison makes quite clear that such descriptions are the verbal equivalent of Dutch and Flemish painting—the novels associated with them bearing "the same relation to the lofty romances of which our literature can boast," in his phrase, "that the Boors of Ostade, or the Village Wakes of Teniers, do to the Madonnas of Guido, or the Holy Families of Raphael."⁴⁶ Ten years later R. H. Hutton would advance a similar argument against what he chose to call, among various other labels, "the realistic," "the stactical," and the "quiet, chatty school of novelists"—a school

of which Austen, significantly, was “by far the most distinguished representative.” Contending that “a plot of some rapid movement is of the very essence of art,” Hutton also managed to suggest that only such rapid movement could reveal the “deeper” aspects of human nature. The “more faithfully” the novelist “delineates the ordinary tone and manners of cultivated society,” on the other hand, the less likely he is to sound those depths. “As Dutch paintings of the highest imitative perfection soon weary because the mind cannot rest long on a mere lesson in accurate details,” so Austen and her school “soon weary us, because what we naturally seek after is wanting.”⁴⁷

The paradigm of Dutch painting did not always signify so negatively, however. Despite the faint whiff of condescension, Scott’s enthusiasm for Austen was genuine, as was Whately’s; and their analogies to Netherlandish art were intended as praise. In France especially, critics could evoke the comparison simply to commend the descriptive powers of a novelist, and the radical Théophile Thoré—who became perhaps the century’s most ardent champion of Dutch painting—hardly meant to denigrate Balzac when he repeatedly associated his work with that of Jan Steen. For novelists themselves, as subsequent chapters of this book will show, Dutch painting could figure the necessary grounds of their art as well as its possible limits. But I do want to suggest that a long history of theorizing about the visual arts made such painting a convenient trope for some recurrent anxieties about the status of domestic realism in fiction. What might be called the discontents of such realism were never far away when nineteenth-century critics invoked the precedent of Dutch painting, even when the overt aim was to defend the novelists in question—as in this backhanded compliment from an English reviewer in 1883:

I by no means wish to decry the commonplace, or to hint that the novel which confines itself to this sphere is a degraded type. There is room, let Mr. Ruskin say what he will, for Dutch art as well as Italian art. Miss Burney, Miss Austen, Mrs. Gaskell, Anthony Trollope, these and others have given abiding pleasure to too large a number of their fellow-creatures, for their exquisite, if low-soaring, art to be treated with contempt.

What room there was for Dutch art, in this case, was to be carved out at the expense of the “new school of fiction”—the label that W. D. Howells had defiantly adopted for the novels of Henry James, and that the reviewer turned against both Americans, who were condemned, in effect, for taking their material too seriously. Unlike Austen, who once again figured as the

“consummate master” of her art, the authors of *A Modern Instance* and *The Portrait of a Lady* had failed to learn that “the commonplace must be treated both lightly and cheerfully.” In such an art, “transcendentalism and tragedy are alike out of place. Her novels end, instead of beginning, with a wedding.”⁴⁸

This may seem a defense of realism only when it manages not to be realistic at all. But it is more useful as a reminder that there are many realisms, even if they necessarily share certain family resemblances, and that the domestic kind that the early nineteenth century associated with Netherlandish painting differed significantly, for example, from the kinds later identified with the novels of Flaubert and Zola. Indeed, by the time of this attack on the “new school of fiction” (which also included a passing swipe at Zola), British critics were more concerned to fend off the influence of the French than they were about the precedent of the Dutch; while the French themselves were as much engaged in debating their own forms of realism, both visual and verbal, as in drawing analogies to the achievement of the Netherlandish painters. From the viewpoint of the Victorians in particular, perhaps the most conspicuous difference between the fiction of their French contemporaries and the art of the seventeenth-century Netherlands concerned the representation of sexuality: unlike the French novel, Dutch painting—to put it simply for the moment—was realism with its clothes on.⁴⁹ Its verbal equivalent might constitute the “body . . . of romance,” to adopt Alison’s phrase, but that body, as most nineteenth-century viewers saw it, was not an obviously eroticized one. Whatever ambivalence the apparent materialism and even sensuality of Dutch art could inspire in the Victorians, both the domestic setting of so many images and the relative absence of the nude made its realism seem far removed from the carnal license of a *Madame Bovary* or a *Nana*. In this respect, at least, the paintings of the Dutch Golden Age seemed to have more affinities with the mainstream tradition of the novel as it had developed in Britain—affinities that can in turn be traced to their common origins in a Protestant and bourgeois culture. When Hippolyte Taine wished to set the art of the Netherlands in context, he pointedly contrasted the adulterous fictions of “Latin” countries like France with the conjugal virtues of the English novel—its “painting of chaste love and praise of marriage” serving as a synecdoche for the domestic values of Holland and Britain alike.⁵⁰

“The household,” as Martha Hollander has recently observed, was “the central metaphorical focus through which Dutch culture represent[ed] itself”;⁵¹ and while the borders that divided that feminized household from the world outside may have remained more fluid in seventeenth-century

Holland than in nineteenth-century Britain, in this connection too the Victorians might well have thought of their novels as peculiarly “dutchified.” Broadly understood, of course, the domesticity of Dutch painting was one of the principal reasons why it became a paradigm for novels on both sides of the Channel—their common subject matter perhaps owing something to the fact that seventeenth-century Dutch artists, unlike their Italian counterparts, characteristically worked, as novelists did, at home.⁵² But like British novels after them, Dutch paintings were particularly influenced by the ideals of household virtue and marital companionship that began to circulate in the domestic conduct books of seventeenth-century Europe—many of which, as it happened, first traveled to Holland from England.⁵³ When Dutch paintings traveled the other way, as large numbers did in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it is hardly surprising that the British associated them with the novels they knew so well, even if the reasons for their affinities were more often sensed than articulated explicitly. So Anna Jameson, for example, looked at Nicolaes Maes’s picture of a young woman at her needle (plate 1) and thought of the domestic virtues of a beloved Scott heroine. “The sentiment of home-felt tranquillity and feminine occupation was never more beautifully rendered,” she wrote of Maes’s *Girl Sewing* in 1844; “the same kind of feeling, produced, in another form, Jeannie Deans.”⁵⁴ It was considerably more of a stretch to associate Dutch painting with English novels that always end in a wedding, but something of the same kind of feeling, in Jameson’s phrase, apparently connected both arts with vague ideas of domesticity and contentment.

“Dutch painting,” of course, had long signified more—and other—than a tranquil domesticity. But by the time that this rather idyllic version of novelistic realism was being deployed to chastise the newer versions of the Americans and the French, such painting was also being supplanted by another paradigm for the faithful mimesis of the visible world. Where once “Rembrandt” might have served as shorthand for a certain kind of realism, more and more critics had recourse to the photograph instead—“Rembrandt perfected,” as Samuel Morse had called it in 1839.⁵⁵ Even the art of Balzac, that preeminent “Dutch painter in prose,” was increasingly compared to that of the daguerreotype.⁵⁶ For better or for worse, both mimetic accuracy, on the one hand, and “mere copying,” on the other, would become predominantly the province of the photographer—as in Charlotte Brontë’s notorious (and relatively early) comparison of *Pride and Prejudice* to “an accurate daguerreotyped portrait of a common-place face.”⁵⁷ And even as the photographic reproduction of the visible world began to occupy the rhetorical place once reserved for the virtuoso imitations of the Northern painters,

so the photographer's self-evidently mechanical apparatus absorbed much of the animus that had long been directed, as we shall see, at the merely "mechanical" skills those painters supposedly exhibited.⁵⁸ The analogy to Dutch painting did not disappear; but both the reception of that painting and the form of the novel itself changed markedly in the course of the century. When George Moore praised Flaubert's *L'éducation sentimentale* in an essay of 1897 by comparing it to the "finest work by Peter de Hooch or Van der Meer [Vermeer]," it was not the minuteness of the novel's details to which he called attention but their artful selection: "Nothing has been omitted that could be included, nothing has been included that could be omitted; every detail contributes to enforce the unity of the picture. . . . For beauty of selection, for beauty of drawing, for beauty of colour, the Dutchmen have not done better."⁵⁹ This is still the novel as Dutch painting; but we have come rather far from Taine's cook and her instinctive preference for pictures of saucepans.

The "beauty of selection" that Moore identified with Dutch painting had always been there, of course, though the recovery of the hitherto neglected Vermeer in Théophile Thoré's influential study of 1866 would have made it easier to see. Of all the major Dutch painters, Vermeer was the most gifted at the art of leaving out; and what Harry Berger has called the "conspicuous exclusions" in his work presumably taught Moore, as they have taught us, to recognize related choices and omissions in the work of Vermeer's contemporaries as well.⁶⁰ Indeed, Moore's yoking of him with de Hooch in this regard seems notably modern, even as we are likely to share his implicit ranking of both painters over eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century favorites like Teniers or Gerrit Dou. But that should not tempt us to forget that theirs too was necessarily an art of selection—as is all art, for that matter, including that of the photographer. However meticulous the details, or familiar the resulting image, the "exact copying" with which Dutch painting was often associated was an illusion.⁶¹ To the degree that Dutch art became a paradigm for unmediated transcription in words as well as pictures, it was premised, in other words, on a fundamental misconception—or at least a willful misreading—of what that art entailed.⁶²

So too with the subject matter of Dutch painting, whose reflection of daily life was far more selective than many nineteenth-century commentators were prepared to recognize. As recent art historians have made clear, many common aspects of life in seventeenth-century Holland were never pictured or pictured only rarely, while others became standard motifs,

elegantly varied from one image to another. Sailors and dockworkers, for example, rarely figure in genre scenes, despite the fact that they comprised a significant proportion of the population. For much of the Golden Age, Holland was at war, but although soldiers often appear in guardrooms, brothels, and domestic settings, comparatively little of the violence made it directly into painting. (Flemish artists, by contrast, did produce battle scenes in some numbers.)⁶³ Even when it came to the ordinary landscape-with-windmill, Lawrence Goedde has argued, “certain aspects of real mills were expected to appear in pictures and certain others were not.”⁶⁴ In domestic scenes themselves, perhaps the most conspicuous absence was typically the man of the house, whose presence was often signified only by a portrait on a wall or a cloak thrown over a chair.⁶⁵ Among the activities of the women, certain homely tasks acquired particular prominence: spinning, for example, figures frequently in genre paintings of the period, though the evidence suggests that by and large women of that time had ceased to spin for the use of their own households.⁶⁶ To note such facts is not to contend that the nineteenth century was wrong to see such pictures as vivid representations of the daily and the ordinary, only to emphasize that such representations were constructions, like any other, and that to evoke them—especially in collective phrases like “the Dutch school” or “Dutch painting”—was inevitably to conjure with a particular set of formulae and conventions. It was also, inevitably, to take a part for the whole—not just by conflating Dutch art with Flemish, but by identifying all of it with the low genres in which Northern artists were particularly thought to excel. As recent scholars have emphasized, there were also painters of historical and mythological subjects in the seventeenth-century Netherlands, as well as those strongly influenced by Italianate and French traditions.⁶⁷ Though this book will continue to use the idiom that nineteenth-century critics and theorists adopted, it should be clear that “Dutch painting” signifies what it did for them, rather than our current understanding of the historical phenomenon.

When nineteenth-century writers thought of the novel as Dutch painting, they appear to have meant above all those images we know as genre: though both still life and landscape had their roles to play, as we shall see, it was the novel’s affinity with “scenes of common and domestic life”—the phrase is Diderot’s—that most obviously prompted the analogy.⁶⁸ In truth the modern definition of genre painting and its association with the novel grew up together. When Diderot wrote his *Essai sur la peinture* in 1765, he himself did not distinguish between such common and domestic scenes and all the other types then known as *peinture de genre*—a category that had

come to include everything other than the pictures of historical or religious subjects traditionally classified as *peinture d'histoire*. Though the process by which a word that originally meant “kind” or “manner” came to mean one kind in particular remains somewhat obscure, the first attempt to stipulate a definition has been credited to the French theorist Quatremère de Quincy, who announced in 1791 that “le genre proprement dit” (genre properly so called) meant “des scènes bourgeoises.”⁶⁹ (How precisely de Quincy intended his class distinction is not clear; but rather than conclude, as does one modern scholar, that the phrase should probably be translated as “scenes of everyday life,”⁷⁰ I take the ambiguity as instructive—a similar ambiguity as between “bourgeois” and “everyday” having considerable relevance for novels of the period.) Incidental uses of “genre” in the modern sense have been traced to England in the 1820s and to Germany in the early 1830s, but even after Franz Kugler’s influential *Handbuch* of 1837 defined it as “the representation of everyday life,” the term remained in flux on both sides of the Channel for several decades, before more or less settling into its present meaning in the 1860s and 1870s.⁷¹ The same years in which the paradigm of Dutch painting most dominated criticism of the novel, in other words, were the years in which the everydayness of that painting was being progressively articulated.

This history is of more than etymological significance, because it bears on the question of just how much the everyday in this sense was a nineteenth-century discovery. Noting that some paintings we now classify as genre in fact contain elements that can hardly have been true to life—impossible architectural details, for example, or Arcadian landscapes that look more Italian than Dutch—one modern scholar has argued that it is the anonymity of the human figures in such images rather than their quotidian character that should define the category.⁷² And surely anonymity is a necessary condition of genre, distinguishing it, on the one hand, from portraiture and, on the other, from history painting—both of which depend on the viewer’s knowledge that a specific person, whether real or fictional, is intentionally represented. In an eloquent meditation on Dutch painting, Tzvetan Todorov has drawn attention to this distinction by remarking the alternative titles traditionally assigned to a picture in the Louvre by Rembrandt or his school: whether the image should be called *La sainte famille* (*The Holy Family*) or *Le ménage du menuisier* (*The Carpenter’s Household*) (fig. 1-5) is clearly a question of whether it is to be understood as history or genre. That Rembrandt rarely produced what we now call genre as such, and that the picture apparently acquired its secular title when it arrived in France in the eighteenth century, would appear to settle the question,



Figure 1-5. Rembrandt van Rijn (and pupil?): *The Holy Family* (also called *The Carpenter's Household*), 1640. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo Credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, N.Y.

even as it succinctly demonstrates how an idea of the everyday could be retrospectively imposed on an image with very different intentions.⁷³ Yet matters are not so simple, if only because Rembrandt's holy family has been so thoroughly incarnated in the humble forms of a seventeenth-century Dutch carpenter and his *ménage*. Unlike a Raphael painting of the same subject (fig. 1-6)—to invoke a comparison made repeatedly by



Figure 1-6. Raphael: *The Holy Family Under an Oak Tree*, 1518. Museo del Prado, Madrid. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, N.Y.

nineteenth-century commentators—the Rembrandt deliberately elicits the sort of confusion reflected in the double titles. His evocation of scripture is also, and simultaneously, a representation of everyday life in seventeenth-century Holland.

The possibility that a holy family might appear to be nothing but a carpenter's household goes to the heart of a controversy that long raged over

the intentions and effects of Dutch painting. Sometimes framed as a debate between iconologists and anti-iconologists, it was fundamentally an argument about the legacy of nineteenth-century realism and its appropriation (or misappropriation) of Dutch art.⁷⁴ I shall return to that debate and its origins in the following chapters. But wherever one draws the line for an individual artist or image, it is clear that to see Dutch painting as only a faithful imitation of mundane reality, devoid of any moral or spiritual meaning, was to see partially at best. As historians have been demonstrating for the last several decades, the impulse to emblem making and allegorizing—let alone simple moralizing—had hardly disappeared from seventeenth-century Netherlandish culture. Under the iconological scrutiny of modern scholars, the merry company around the dinner table is revealed as a feast for the prodigal son, or the innocent-seeming still life is decoded as a warning against vanity; viewed in the light of economic history, on the one hand, and seventeenth-century conduct books, on the other, the spinning housewife proves to be a domestic ideal rather than the representation of a daily reality. Yet if it is relatively easy to conclude that Rembrandt's carpenter is meant to be identified as Joseph, or that Jan Steen's *Easy Come, Easy Go* (fig. 1-7) illustrates a proverb, many a Dutch painting makes it far harder to decide just where symbolizing or moralizing ends and "mere" picturing begins. And even when the holy family is recognized amidst the prosaic details of a seventeenth-century household, those details still retain their "reality effect," to adopt Roland Barthes' phrase.⁷⁵ For nineteenth-century novelists as well as their critics, it was an effect their own art of the everyday had to reckon with.

Rembrandt's Joseph is not anonymous; but many of the figures in Netherlandish painting clearly were, and others became so over the course of the centuries that separated them from their original contexts. And it was in part that very anonymity—an anonymity nonetheless rendered with detailed attention to the individual and the particular—that enabled Dutch genre paintings to be readily assimilated to nineteenth-century visions of the "everyday." "The Dutch school of art will ever be the most *popular*," Anna Jameson remarked rather equivocally in 1844, "because it appeals to the popular sources of sympathy and wonder. Everybody has sympathy for the concerns of every-day existence—for the elegant repose of the lady at her toilet—for the joyous revelry of peasant life. Every one has wonder for the excellence addressed to the eye."⁷⁶ It is far from clear that "sympathy" with the figures depicted was the primary aim of seventeenth-century genre paintings, especially when the figures in question were peasants.⁷⁷ But Jameson's response does suggest another reason why so many nineteenth-century writers were tempted to see in such painting a visual analogue for



Figure 1-7. Jan Steen: *Easy Come, Easy Go*. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam

the novel. Just as the novel differentiated itself from earlier forms of narrative, as Catherine Gallagher has argued, by substituting fictional “nobodies” for the extratextual referents of personal satire and scandalous allegory, so genre distinguishes itself from history painting by representing “nobody *in particular*”—Gallagher’s apt phrase for figures who refer to no recognizable persons outside the artwork itself and whose highly circumstantial realization drives home their nonallegorical status. And just as the novel encouraged the sympathetic identification of its readers precisely because its protagonists were fictional “nobodies”—and thus “potential objects of universal identification”⁷⁸—so the anonymous figures of genre could prompt a viewer like Jameson to imagine that “everybody” would have sympathy for their “every-day existence.” Fifteen years later, George Eliot would make the story of her first novel “pause a little,” while she turned a similar intuition about the effects of Dutch painting into a manifesto for her own mode of realism. Professing to find “a source of delicious sympathy” in a type of painting that “lofty-minded people despise,” the narrator of *Adam Bede* (1859) deliberately set herself against a long tradition of theoretical responses to Dutch painting.⁷⁹ It is to some of those “lofty-minded people” that I now turn.