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"La Morale en Peinture":
Bourgeois and Feminist Discourses in the Paintings of Jean-Baptiste Greuze

by

Vera Dernovsek

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APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

Jean-Joseph Goux, L. Favrot Professor
French Studies

Madeleine Alcover, Professor French
Studies

Steven G. Crowell, Professor
Philosophy

Houston, Texas

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ABSTRACT

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By focusing on how bourgeois and feminist discourses intersect in the moralistic paintings of Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805), I argue that Greuze’s images manifest a thrust toward liberation from the ideological constraints of Father’s Law and toward the advent of feminized ontology. Through the analysis of L’Accordée de village and La Malédiction paternelle, I claim that the deconstruction of patriarchy and the return of the feminine are catalyzed in bourgeois economy by the monetary system.

To support the significance of Greuze in the development of Realism, not only in art but also in literature, I posit Greuze as the precursor of Balzac. Informing my discussion by Jean-Joseph Goux’s theory of the homology between the referential status of the sign, the Father, and the fiduciary system, I argue that Balzac’s Realism, illustrating the milieu of commercial capitalism of
the nineteenth century, exacerbates the loss of moral superiority of the
paterfamilias.

Although Greuze's work is profoundly embedded in the patriarchal ethic,
my analysis of La Paresseuse italienne and La Mère bien-aimée provides
evidence of the painter's (not intended) feminist vision.
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At last, but not least, I am indebted to my father, the late Karl Budlovsky, for his intellectual guidance. I dedicate this work to him.
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INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt, the ontology dominated by Father (or phallus, in the symbolic register) is in crisis that has been festering throughout the history of mankind. In France, this crisis began to surface more prominently during the later part of the eighteenth century—the time of Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805). The effect of bourgeois humanism—by this time unshakably rooted—was that the paternal authority descended from beyond and above, from God or king, to the paterfamilias officiating in the intimacy of the human domain, the nuclear family—traditionally women's space. Consequently, the influence of women increased in all social spheres. In the eighteenth-century France, the social climate was complemented by a prominent female presence not only in the salons of the upper class, but also—more importantly for the discussion of Greuze's work—by the recognition of the middle-class woman's role in the alteration of the epoch's paternalistic ethical prerogatives. Correspondingly, in Greuze's drames bourgeois, the ever increasing importance of the feminine underlined the bourgeois ideological foundation of his narratives.

While Greuze's message is univocal in endorsing the supreme authority of the paterfamilias, in his pictures that authority suffers. This is because the patriarchal criteria of grandeur such as honor, valor, glory, charity, love or erotic prowess, religious fervor and filial piety attain a tinge of banality in Greuze's
drames bourgeois as vigor mixes with sentimentality and malaise. Greuze's "morale en peinture"\(^1\) thus also depicts the tiring banal condition of bourgeois ontology, or mediocrity, as stemming from both bourgeois and "feminized" world view.\(^2\)

An important element in the process of the banalization affecting Greuze's work, one which also catalyzes the ethical notion of bourgeois feminized ontology, is the ever-increasing power of money. Bourgeois humanism needs utilitarianism; and utilitarianism underpins commercial capitalism where money plays the key role. Money, as says Ernest Mandel, "penetrates everywhere, dissolves all traditional bonds, transforms all established relationships" (97). In effect money, the universal equivalent, imparts the ultimate blow to the mediating and central significance of Father (or the phallus). Money and father connection is the theme in Greuze's diptych-like La Malédiction paternelle: Le Fils ingrat (fig. 1a) and Le Fils puni (fig. 1b). There the recruiting officer lures the son away from his father and his family circle with promise of money (Le Fils ingrat). The son's departure causes the death of his father and the despair of the entire clan (Le

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\(^1\) The expression "la morale en peinture" is Diderot's response to Greuze's Le Paralytique (Salon de 1763 234).

\(^2\) It needs to be said here that although banal might often be the descriptive epithet in regards to Greuze's work, it is by no means the only aspect of his painting. The lively rhythm of the composition, the often rigorous execution, the strong affective quality of the narrative element, the forms, the planes, the colors and the lines, in short the entire semiotics of the dramatic action particularly of the genre paintings render Greuze fascinating; the energy coincides with the social, economical, and gender dynamics of the rising bourgeoisie which is, in spite of the ontological malaise, remarkable. We are in the age of rising capitalism; its verve marks the social landscape and energizes Greuze's work.
Fils puni). The painting's message proclaims loud and clear that the family father and the family space, rather than service to the king, is of paramount importance. This is important because the king is, we must not forget, the representative of God on earth. The paintings thus reflect the gradual historical descent: vulgarization of plutocracy. This means that the focal point of moral reference is gradually recast from above and beyond humanity, from God or the king to the paterfamilias. Moreover, as the paterfamilias mandates Father's Law in the family circle, preeminently woman's space, this constitutes dispersing and lowering of the supreme authority. In other words, the vertical thrust of phallocentric hierarchy as well as the coherent centrality of power (as was upheld in the seventeenth century by the absolutism of Louis XIV) begins to deconstruct. This is the subtext of La Malédiction paternelle.

Although money has the neutralizing quality which dissolves all bonds, money, in the epoch in question, is gold. The incorruptible metal confers stability; gold money is the solid referent, the fixed mediator of exchanges. Jean-Joseph Goux points out that the stability of gold money corresponds, in the ethical register, to the stability of the paterfamilias's authority. Father's Law and gold money hold undeniable referential value. Goux also indicates that the ethical and economical registers correspond to Realism in artistic and literary representation. In Realism—Greuze's mode—the meaning of the image and of the narration are easily identifiable, common to us all, and appear definite, stable and true. The referential status of the sign in Realism is homologous to the referential status of gold money and the paternal authority. The Realism of Greuze, tinted by the Old
Regime’s sensibility develops into the solid bourgeois Realism of Honoré de Balzac in the 1830’s. There, the humanistic enthusiasm of Greuze already bearing traces of self-suspicion, achieves more ironic and cynical aspect (but not overt subversion) regarding the paternalistic propaganda. In spite of appearances, all is not true in respect to Father or Realism because money neutralizes the clarity of definition of both, the ethical and the pictorial or literary sign.³

Balzac’s *Comédie humaine* presents the next chapter of Greuze’s genre paintings which center on the figure of the family father (I call them the “Father Series”). The analysis of Balzac’s *Gobseck* provides a caricature of the platform of the *paterfamilias* celebrated by Greuze in a more advanced stage of the economy of commercial capitalism. Money is capitalism’s most consequential apparatus; money is also a prominent theme in Balzac and particularly in *Gobseck*. “Papa Gobseck” is an usurer in whose chamber human interests are neutralized into the general equivalent, money. The power of money confers on Gobseck the power of the supreme paternal arbitrator. “Papa” Gobseck, wielding his paternal power through money, is indeed a cynical representation of the paternalistic principle. The deconstruction of paternal supremacy anticipated in Greuze is exacerbated in *Gobseck*.

³ For more on the connection between fiduciary regime, Father’s Law, phallus, and artistic representation see Jean-Joseph Goux, “Catégories de l’échange: Idéalité, symbolicité, réalité.”
Another point of convergence between Greuze and Balzac is the irritated, emotionalized—we can say feminized and "bourgeoisized"—residue of aristocratic glory. In Greuze this notion is identified as sensibilité; in Balzac it is the Romantic spirit. The disappointed romantic gesture of the principal protagonist, the young aristocrat Raphaël de Valentin in Balzac's novel _La Peau de chagrin_ is comparable to the misfortune of the son in _La Malédiction paternelle_, but the spirit of disillusionment augments in Balzac. While the devastation of the son in _La Malédiction paternelle_ is still a consequence of military praxis—even if devalued by the money operation and by favoring family space—the bourgeois hegemony of the nineteenth century renders it impossible for Raphaël to partake of the noble and glorifying prospect of a warrior. The mimesis of Greuze and Balzac manifests a decline of the masculine glory by the injured spirit and the mediocre state of their heroes. Thus Greuze's "son" precedes Balzac's Raphaël.  

In _Le Médecin de campagne_ Balzac promotes, just as Greuze before him, the patriarchal morality within the rustic sphere. We follow the philanthropic actions of the fatherly Dr. Benassisis, and are invited to several rustic interiors dominated by mothers and populated by children and small animals; we are indubitably in Greuze's world. And just as in Greuze's genre scenes, this novel reverberates with ambivalence and ambiguity, suggesting soft irony which reflects unfavorably on the overt morality: the celebration of the _paterfamilias_,

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4 Noticeably, both Greuze's "son" and Balzac's Raphaël have effeminate features. This is a trend in both artist's representation of young men.
personified by Benassis. The good doctor is a bourgeois hero whose scientific
aptitude directed toward progress and profit shows him off as the follower of the
Enlightenment. But the doctor’s utilitarianism evident in his shrewdness,
particularly where money is concerned, subverts his grandeur. Although his
project is to better the condition of the villagers in his district, he is not a feudal
lord. Dr. Benassis’s general “bourgeoisness” undoes the otherwise “above
human” nobility of his generosity. The melodramatic plot underscores the moral
project, just as in Greuze. And just as in Greuze’s genre scenes, there is not la
terreur ou la pitié but melancholy; the doctor’s life story reflects the bourgeois
condition more vehemently than does Greuze’s work. By being realistic, by
representing heroism of the father figure humanized and banalized, Le Médecin
de campagne subverts, not unlike Greuze’s pictures, its own propagandist slant.

Le Médecin de campagne, inasmuch as the plot is a melodrama, also
reflects the mode of sensibilité so prominent in the eighteenth-century France.
However, Balzac’s Realism is one step further away from the sensibility of
Greuze, and Balzac offsets and desensitizes the propensity for emotionalism, or
the mode of sensibilité, which characterizes the age of Greuze. Utilitarianism and
rationalism have not quite satisfied the need for charity, compassion, and love.
Sensibilité is the result of utilitarian sensualist theories adopted in France in the
eighteenth century which stress that senses—combined with reason—are at the
root of optimal realization of individuals and social contract. The epoch is in
pursuit of happiness: if all are happy, the society will thrive. Happiness is the
function of feelings and love; it is also the function of virtue. And love and virtue
is, as Rousseau tells us, the domain where women, the "êtres sensibles" play the key role (Émile 449). In the representation of the epoch, tears and sentimentality are the tropes of virtue, the tropes which move the public on a personal, subjective level. In Greuze’s imagery of women and his choice of narrative milieu, the nuclear family, we can perceive Rousseau’s prerogative.

The new feminine in Greuze’s art is dictated by enlightened ideology and it is a male conception to be sure. In spite of the lively interest of the philosophes of the Enlightenment in the question of what does it mean to be a woman, their profuse discourse on women—of which the most influential is Rousseau’s—was not truly about women. But this considerable interest which seemed to echo the female eminence in the aristocratic circles, reflected the return of the material (in the materialism of capitalistic economy—and matter is symbolically feminine) and the maternal (as evident in the moral prescriptions of the epoch). The eighteenth-century concept of the feminine also provides an open forum for unbridled erotic desires (as in rococo sensibility). Greuze’s depiction of women is thus motivated by the moral prescriptions for women—mother, nurse, devoted spouse, daughter, or sister—mixed with the eroticism of the rococo (La Mère bien-aimé [fig. 2], Silence! [fig. 3], Le Départ en nourrice [fig 4], Le Retour de

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5 In high society, women’s power was of great significance in politics and in determination of cultural trends. Madame de Pompadour is of course the most prominent figure, but many other aristocratic women exercised their influence in their salons. See Edmond and Jules Goncourt La Femme au dix-huitième siècle for a catalogue of important women’s salons and the principal cultural ideology discussed there (44-105, 477-96).
nourrice [fig. 5]). The debauch of regency, although strongly criticized by the Enlightened discourse, leaves the sinuous trail of rococo, of rampant eroticism, of libertinism; it is also the age of Valmonts. The notorious innocent and erotic “Greuze’s girl” conforms to this sensibility (La Cruche cassée [fig. 6], Une Jeune Fille, qui pleure son oiseau mort [fig. 7], and Plegaria al Amor [fig. 8]).

Erotic or moral, Greuze painted more “natural” women (the “naturality” being determined by bourgeois morality): one conforms to the erotic sensibility of the spectator, the other to his desire for an orderly and moral social state. But how natural is woman’s condition is evident in L’Accordée de village (fig. 9). L’Accordée de village, as it depicts a marriage ceremony also reveals the unsavory trait of the economy of social exchanges, specifically marriage. The painting communicates woman’s status in her function as bride and wife. As expounded by Lévi-Strauss in The Elementary Structures of Kinship (following Mauss’s Gift), trafficking of women as the mode of gift-exchange is the most important economy crucial for sociability; and it is also the precursor of marriage.⁷ Women are the objects of exchange in the commerce underpinned by male sexual desire complicated by the taboo of incest. The operation of exchange of women remains the fundamental concept of matrimony.

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⁶ In agreement with the theme of maternity, Greuze’s paintings are also populated by children. Greuze is known for a multitude of children’s heads (for example Le Petit Paresseux [fig 25]).

⁷ For the causes and the ramifications of that commerce on the development of capitalist economy and gender differentiation see Jean-Joseph Goux’s “Phallus: Masculine Identity and Exchange of Women” and Gayle Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ and Sex”.
Significantly, in the painting the dowry, which in a sense signifies the price of the bride, is a pouch of money. By positing the sack of money in the central position, Greuze gives it a pivotal importance. This is appropriate since money is the paramount instrument of ascendant capitalism. The pouch of money is the sign of culture, and has a neutralizing effect on Greuze’s moral message. It subverts Greuze’s moral intention in *L’Accordée de village*. The equalizing property of money, as it passes from the hand of the father to the hand of the son-in-law, neutralizes not only the subjectivity of the bride—a fact accomplished to a great extent by the marriage institution itself as it is a form of the exchange of women—it also undermines the morality of Father. This notion is evidenced by the painting’s composition whose manifold ambiguities do not allow for the intended definite closure: matrimony as the keystone of patriarchal morality.

Other paintings reveal more of the feminist discourse hermeneutically concealed in *L’Accordée de village*. In *La Mère bien-aimée* (fig. 2) the family saga, whose initial chapter can be *L’Accordée de village*, continues. There we see a young family well in progress in the virtuous activity of proliferation. Greuze wanted to paint virtue, but the result is grotesque. "Exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are generally considered attributes of the grotesque style" says Bakhtin (303). The mother, as she is devoured by an evidently orgasmic emotion and also by her children, is the emblem of the grotesque body. The grotesque mode confers ambivalence and distorts the directness of the enlightened prescription for motherhood as the virtuous occupation of women. The image is, in the final analysis, linked to the upsets in the patriarchal system of ethics.
Greuze's Realism borders on Naturalism in *La Paresseuse italienne* (fig. 10). This is a portrait of a low-class woman, and the title speaks the discourse of the current morality and the esthetic appreciation. The designation dismisses any possible sympathy for this obviously apathetic obese young woman. The image is to represent a warning against sloth. The young Italian woman's sexuality is designed to repulse rather than to attract the viewer. Has she been the attractive and energetic mother as in *Silence!*, or an industrious appetizing washerwoman as in *La Blanchisseuse* (fig. 11), or is it that her unhappiness had been caused by a love conflict, indicated perhaps by symbols of lost virginity as a dead bird or a broken pitcher (*Une Jeune fille qui pleure la mort de son oiseau, La Cruche cassée*), she would have piqued the erotic inclination and righteous self-satisfaction of the (male) spectator. But Greuze's realism is merciless and the woman has none of these attributes. In spite of the contrived judgment of the title befitting the then-current ethical slant, Greuze is masterful in that he depicts the internal despair of an alienated, perhaps sick, and in any case, suffering woman. This painting, I suggest, screams silently an internal monologue, as confused and as obscured as is the confusion about the state the society prescribed for the sitter. By unraveling the layers of signification denoted by status quo, which incidentally still hold fast in the opinion of today's critics, I argue that this painting is perhaps the most modern, and the most accomplished of Greuze's paintings. *La Paresseuse italienne* evades the designation of mediocrity otherwise often attributed to Greuze.
In spite of the meticulous observation of nature which allows Greuze to paint woman’s condition above and beyond the judgment of the title, *La Paresseuse*, and in spite of the grotesque tropes in *La Mère bien-aimée* allowing a glimpse at the irony of patriarchal morality, Greuze’s painting’s moralizing is dated to the point that it fends off today’s audience. Our postmodern perspective chooses to detect flaws inherent in Enlightenment morality, and the didactic moralizing of Greuze’s genre scenes might set a smile on the face of today’s viewer. This is evident in the tone of the press in June 1977 commenting on the retrospective exhibition of Greuze’s work in Dijon. To judge by the two most important French papers, *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde*, the French public’s response to the exhibition was one of benevolent condescension. An article in *Le Figaro* doubts that the exhibition would succeed in convincing the public of Greuze’s merit:

Les efforts déployés pour réhabiliter Jean-Baptiste Greuze vont-ils porter leurs fruits? Les visiteurs après avoir vu au musée de Dijon la première retrospective consacrée à cet artiste seront-ils inclins à reviser leurs jugements à revenir sur leurs idées et préjugés? On peut en douter malgré l’importante sélection. (Qtd. in Henri 112)

In *Le Monde*, a period pastiche satirizes the entire ideology of Greuze’s pictorial narratives. The biting sarcasm ridicules not only Greuze, but the attempt to rehabilitate the painter:

Ah! La belle exposition! Le beau catalogue! Quels instants charmants passés en compagnie de la décente et de la vertu! Quelle âme délicate et sensible! Qu’il est doux de voir l’injustice réparée et l’envie confondue!

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L'homme de bien en fait gloire à l'humanité, le méchant lui-même est ému.
(Qtd. in Henri 112⁹)

The then-curator of Musée de Greuze in Tournus, Emile Magnien, echoes the
public opinion as he acknowledges that in spite of some "magnifiques morceaux"

Greuze a pâti du succès trop populaire de ses têtes de jeunes filles, de ses
sujets ambigus comme la Cruche cassée où les attitudes de fausse
ingénuité s'accompagnent de détails où le symbole graveleux accentue
l'équivoque, de ses scènes édifiantes où les "bonnes moeurs" font l'objet
d'un véritable prêche par l'image. Ceci ne correspond plus à notre goût et à
notre sensibilité. (Qtd. in Henri 116)

This disparaging view of Greuze, notes Monique Henri in her excellent study of
criticism of Greuze, was in fact the general consensus in the French press.

Clearly, today's viewer is skeptical, if not cynical or bored with Greuze's
equivocal moral propaganda. The inconsistencies and limitations implicit in
Greuze's moralizing make for the distaste of the twentieth-century viewer. How
can one take Greuze's propaganda seriously when its own content is already
suspicious of itself?

Greuze fails to convince today's audience that bourgeois virtue leads to
happiness. But Greuze was one of the most acclaimed painters of his own epoch
because his "morale en peinture" endorses the bourgeois ideology of the
philosophes advocating the virtue of simple life, industry, family, and the
authority of paterfamilias, as the antidote to the idleness and corruption of the
aristocracy.

⁹ A. Fermongier. "Une injustice réparée, la dignité des pères et leur puissance
Greuze thus fills the need for the upheaval of moralizing which demanded artistic representation differing from the traditional esthetic code. In accord with bourgeois morality, Greuze stresses in his genre paintings the milieu of ordinary people rather than employing the traditional mythical or historical pictorial rhetoric. This is an innovation in French art. Certainly, the lower classes have been represented before, but not as to depict their condition nor as examples of virtues. They were the embellishment in paintings with historical, mythical or pastoral themes. Of course there were exceptions. For example, the seventeenth-century brothers Le Nain, depicted in paintings like Le Repas des paysans (fig. 12) peasant life with realism and sympathy. But for the most part, the People or their environment were traditionally translated into fêtes galantes. The period village scenes presented aspects of pleasures and leisurely lifestyle of aristocrats for whom such paintings were produced, and the imagery of the People complimented the rustic decor. For example, in the early eighteenth-century painting of Jean-Antoine Watteau's La Mariée de village (fig. 13) we do not see country folk painted to illustrate their life, as in Greuze's L'Accordée de village. Watteau's scenery as well as his figures have the unmistakable air of noblesse befitting the upper social strata. On the other hand, the influential Dutch paintings depicting domestic scenes were designed to celebrate the wealth of the rising bourgeoisie. In the Dutch paintings, the image of the lower class was an incidental feature designed to manifest the wealth of the new patrons of art. An example is the lovely painting of André Bouys, La Récureuse (fig. 14). Obviously, social consciousness sets Greuze apart.
In a more democratic spirit, Greuze paints People in a realistic mode. But his protagonists are not depicted as decimated by poverty or hard work as we see in the Realism or the Naturalism of the nineteenth-century Gustave Coubert, Honoré Daumier, or François Millet. Greuze is the in-between step on the road to the Realism and the Naturalism of the nineteenth century. Greuze speaks for the bourgeoisie. Just as the noblesse loved to romanticize the People from their own optic of opulence and enjoyed the lyricized images as the enhancement of the splendor of their estates, so the bourgeois class, one step removed but still within the same mode, borrowed the lower class to illustrate and elevate its own condition and its own ethical and esthetic precepts. But on the scene of the plastic arts of the eighteenth century, Greuze, “le petit plébeien de Tournus” as Camille Mauclair calls him (93), along with Chardin elevate the middle class’s morality as a significant factor in the Enlightenment humanistic—read bourgeois—capitalistic—propaganda. The propaganda can not satisfy us today when we are witnessing the crisis of modernism. We are disappointed with the result of the enlightened ideology promoting capitalistic enterprising orchestrated, in the ethical register, by the morality of Father.

Thus, notwithstanding the indisputable vigor in Greuze’s moral genre paintings, I assume in my study the deprecating perspective outlined by Nietzsche (and followed by the structuralists and poststructuralists of this century). Nietzsche claims that “the great optimist-utilitarian victory, together with democracy, its political contemporary, was at the bottom nothing other than a symptom of declining strength, approaching senility, somatic exhaustion” (The
For Nietzsche, the bourgeois ideology of utilitarian optimism which informs the basis of that class's morality has thrown a gray light on the pre-Revolutionary humanistic turmoil, leaving the philosopher of modernism in strong doubt regarding the humanistic principle altogether. No less is Nietzsche vociferous regarding the feminine intrusion and blames femaleness for the loss of the glorious masculine turgidity. I do agree with Nietzsche that feminization and bourgeois ontology do deconstruct patriarchy and claim that this is evident in Greuze. But Nietzsche's misogynist perspective does not address the entire scope of the issue. My feminist reading of *La Mère bien-aimée* and *La Paresseuse italienne* shows that Greuze's work anticipates the breaking of patriarchal boundaries which opens alternative, if not yet definable, horizons. The discussion of Greuze leads me to the claim that capitalism and feminization, as they undermine phallocentricity, seem to proceed in parallel and in support of each other toward a human condition relieved of paternalistic restrictions.

Although Greuze's work does not achieve in today's viewer the effects appreciated by his own century, he is one with his times to such an extent that all the factions characterizing his epoch, as well as the consequence of its ideological base resulting in the crisis in modernism and the rise of the feminist awareness, are foreseen there. In Greuze's paintings we discern how the effects of the social and economical reorganization characterizing Enlightenment

\[10\] Although Nietzsche speaks of the rationalistic vision of Socrates and suggests an analogy with his own era, the situation is applicable to the Enlightenment, the second coming, so to speak, of the Socratic wisdom, and the precursor of the modernist malady of the nineteenth century.
influence changes from the hard and vertical masculine to a more modern, horizontal feminine ontology. In his bourgeois mediocrity, Greuze is sublime.

To better familiarize the reader with Greuze, I present a brief biography.  

Greuze’s Life: “Le Drame Larmoyant”

Jean-Baptiste Greuze was born in Tournus on 21 August 1725 as the fifth of nine children in the family of a ‘maître-couvreur’ (master tiler). However modest was this social status, the family held with pride a memory of one of their noble ancestors who was believed to have been ‘procureur du roi’ and lord of the manor de la Guiche.

Jean-Baptiste had shown a propensity for painting since his childhood, which did not please his father. But young Jean-Baptiste managed to convince his father of his talent, and Greuze Senior decided to send his son to study painting with Gromdon in Lyon in 1747. There he apparently did not learn much more than some technical skills, since the master made only bad paintings for quick sale. In the house of his master, the young painter’s sentimental education

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11 For detailed biography and extensive data on Greuze’s work and life see Camille Mauclair’s Greuze et son Temps; Anita Brookner’s Greuze. The Rise and Fall of the Eighteenth-Century Phenomenon; Edgar Muhall’s Jean-Baptiste Greuze, 1725-1805; Edmund and Jules Goncourt L’Art du dix-huitième siècle tome II; Jules Renonvier’s Histoire de l’art pendant la Révolution; Luis Hautecoeur’s Greuze; Luis Hautecoeur’s and François Monod’s Les dessins de Greuze conservés à l’Académie des Beaux-Arts de Saint-Petersbourg; and Houssaye, Arsène’s. “Notes Historiques sur Greuze” in L’Artiste. For catalogue of Greuzes work see Martin, J. Oeuvre de Greuze. Catalogue raisonné suivi de la liste des gravures exécutés d’après ses ouvrages.
began, according to Gromdon’s son-in-law (qtd. in Hautecoeur, *Greuze* 11\(^\text{12}\)).

Greuze fell in love with Madame Gromdon. Jules and Edmund Goncourt relate the anecdote in their monograph on Greuze:

Greuze brûlait en secret pour la femme de son maître, qui était fort belle. Et un jour, la femme de Grétry, encore toute jeune, le trouvant couché par terre dans l’atelier, lui demanda ce qu’il faisait: “Je cherche quelque chose,” dit-il; mais elle a vu un soulier de sa mère qu’il dévorait de baisers. (*L’Art* vol. 2 59)

The impossible love, the tears, the slipper, all are the trappings of the genre *larmoyant* Greuze adopted in his work. In spite of the apparent intensity of the young love, however Greuze, understandably, had other dreams and ambitions.

In 1750 the young provincial aged twenty five went to Paris to fulfill them. By then he had already executed *Père de famille expliquant la Bible à ses enfants* (fig. 15).

Because the moral and esthetic agenda for which Greuze is notorious is already evident in that early, but important painting, I will introduce an analysis of this work here.

*Père de famille* depicts a scene where the father reads the Bible to his family. This painting, with its Protestant overtones of private devotion, depicts the capital importance of the *paterfamilias* and the idea that the nuclear family is the seat of virtue. Greuze’s contemporary Abbé de la Porte writes approvingly:

Un père de famille lit la Bible à ses enfants; touché de ce qu’il vient d’y voir, il est lui-même pénétré de la morale qu’il leur fait: ses yeux sont presque mouillés de larmes; son épouse assez belle femme & dont la beauté n’est point idéale, mais telle que nous la pouvons rencontrer chez les gens de la sorte, l’écoute avec cet air de tranquillité que goûte une

\(^{12}\) *Mémoires de Grétry* 172.
La Porte notes the signs of distractions which to him make the painting more natural. By underscoring the contrast between those who are attentive to the reading (for La Porte, the older members of the family are completely absorbed), and those who are distracted by other causes, Greuze created a dramatic tension which boosts the natural effect of the painting (Fried 10). As Greuze appeared with his moralizing at the critical moment of strong reaction against the prevalent libertinism of the aristocratic and upper bourgeois circles, his debut is, to use today's expression, "politically correct".

But the disorder in *Père de famille* has other implications la Porte could not have perceived. It implies a disruptive element in the blueprint of the exemplified family order. In this early painting, the protagonist's gestures and expressions suggest in many ways contraindications regarding the major directive of the moral message. Thus my reading differs somewhat from that of la Porte's. While the two young daughters and the son on the left of the father are obviously taken by the reading, the son behind the father looks for distraction elsewhere, while the older lad facing his father looks quite bored. Two infants have a hard time standing still. The mother cannot devote her attention to the
reading either, because she is occupied with the little boy who wants to play with a dog. The Greuzian “patented old father” (as Crow calls Greuze’s fathers [139]) certainly does not exude powerful authority, but rather evokes pathos. Order and disorder at once are the features of a message which, on the surface, depicts solid bourgeois virtues: “Quelle noblesse! & quel sentiment […] Quel peintre! Quel compositeur!” (above quotation). Greuze’s future genre paintings all have ambivalent features. On the one hand they illustrate the Enlightenment’s moral propaganda, on the other hand, the images insinuate a doubt concerning that propaganda. And so, if my reading views the distraction evident in the depiction of the majority of the protagonists as being subversive to the major theme, it is because our age no longer holds sacred this kind of contrived morality, and in our skepticism and cynicism we are inclined to detect quickly signs that undermine it. Nevertheless, Le Père de famille expliquant la Bible started Greuze on the road to success which was assured when Lalive de Jully, an Amateur honoraire of the Academy, bought the painting and displayed it in his house before it went to the Salon in 1755.

Besides Le Père de famille expliquant la Bible, in 1755 Greuze submitted to the Salon L’Aveugle trompé (Moscow, Pushkin Museum), Un Écolier endormi sur son livre (Montpellier), Portrait de M. Sylvestre, directeur de l’Académie and Portrait de M. Lebas, graveur du cabinet du roi. Greuze, who did not have much technical training, received on the strength of these works agrégation to the Academy as élève titulaire in June 1755. He went to the Academy to draw, but because he was a poor outsider, was given the worst place. The “surprise
invader" as Crow calls him (134 and passim) had the good fortune to attract the attention of the sculptor Pigalle who arranged for him a study trip to Italy (1755-1757). Such a trip was usually given as a prize to the best students of the Academy. This was not the case for Greuze, but as Crow tells us, "if Greuze was to play his part, his still rather rough skills—and rougher personality—needed polish" (141). Greuze embarked on the Italian tour. The painter did not cultivate friendship with his compatriot colleagues (Fragonard and Hubert Robert were in Rome at the same time). As Anita Brookner comments,

Greuze did not go for the sort of camaraderie normally practised among artists. Ferociously independent, rancorous, proud and quick to take offense, he seems to have moved suspiciously through a milieu so very different from the one in which he grew up. He retained from his early background a mighty ambition for his works and a desire to make people pay for them in every sense of the word. (Greuze 58)

Brookner sketches the sort of pre-Romantic persona Greuze apparently cultivated, or was. It seems he had the spirit of the unrecognized solitary genius akin to the pre-Romantic attitude of Rousseau with whom Greuze shared ideology regarding the natural and the universal virtues as inscribed in the simple family life.

An amorous episode in Italy, recounted by Greuze's god-daughter, Madame Valori, underscores the pre-Romantic and romanesque disposition of Greuze.\(^\text{13}\) It reads as the next stage in the painter's sentimental education which

started in the house of his master in Lyon. Madame Valori who, as Hautecoeur suggests “a romancé assez agréablement” (Greuze 18), recounts that while in Rome, Greuze gave drawing lessons to Leatitia, a daughter of duc d’Orr...and the two of them fell in love. The inequality of their social position made the affair unacceptable. They were prepared to elope, but did not. Evidently the lovers’ virtue won over their sentiment and later Laetitia married a more socially suitable wooer. Whether the story is true or an invention, the melodrama recalls the tearful stories full of morality, spiced by the sympathy for passion, as is Rousseau’s La Nouvelle Héloïse (Hautecoeur, Greuze 18-19).

In Italy Greuze seems to have disregarded the art treasures of antiquity and the Italian Renaissance. His interest was to study the physiognomy and gestures of ordinary people. For the most part, he remained faithful to his model of actual populace. Later, when Greuze was well established, Diderot notes with approbation:

Il serait bien suprenant que cet artiste n’excellât pas. Il a de l’esprit et de la sensibilité. Il est enthousiaste de son art; il fait des étiudes sans fin. Il n’épargne ni soin, ni dépense pour avoir les modèles qui lui conviennent. Rencontre-t-il une tête, qui le frappe, il se mettrait volontiers aux genoux du porteur de cette tête pour l’attirer dans son atelier. Il est sans cesse observateur, dans les rues, dans les églises, dans les marchés, dans les spectacles, dans les promenades, dans les assemblées publiques. Médite-t-il un sujet, il en est obsédé, suivi partout. (Salons de 1759 238-39)

In later paintings, however the initial freshness seems to dwindle.

Notwithstanding the evident attraction the painter had for models as presented in real life situations, Greuze’s personages become stereotypes. The fathers, the

brothers Goncourt consider the anecdote to have “assez d’authenticité pour
sons, the mothers, are all of one type and the similarity in their physiognomy is remarkable. The paintings seem to represent a family saga. Critics complain of the recurrence of the old and weak fathers, the tall, strong curly-haired and effeminate sons. The aged mothers have plebeian traits and the young mothers and various daughters often have the likeness of Greuze’s wife. Hautecoeur and Monod also point out that not only humans seem to bear the stamp of standardization:

L’exemple le plus divertissant de cette déplorable méthode, c’est le chien passe-partout. D’une étude de dogue passable, Greuze tire un bâtar indescriptible, ambigu de mâtin et de King-Charles et en même temps arrière-neveu de la Louve du Capitole. Il l’allonge ou le rapetisse, coupe le museau ou l’appointe, raccourcit la queue ou l’empanache. (Les dessins 13)

There are dogs in the majority of the genre paintings, and just like the other protagonists, they are one type. Perhaps the spirit of universalism dictated the banal stereotyping.


In the years 1760 to 1780, Greuze’s reputation expanded beyond France. He was popular in the highest circles, particularly in Russia. Among other highly qu’elle mérite d’être contée” (L’Art vol. 2 11).
placed patrons was Catherine II who acquired *Le Paralytique ou la bonne éducation* (fig. 16). Notwithstanding the propensity to create stereotypes, during this period his work was as strong as it would ever get. The compositions are full of dynamism and rhythm and the tonality strongly supports the implicit theatrical air. The moralizing content appealed to the public, the high and the middle class, while the images of young girls, sweet, innocent, and regrettably (for them) seduced or about to be seduced, pleased the current rococo sensibility. As Brookner remarks, the Greuzes did not have the “slippery liquidity of the so-called mature Greuze” *(Greuze* 60).

In 1759 Greuze met two people who had great influence in his life in two very different ways: his future wife Anne-Gabrielle Balbuti and Denis Diderot. Marriage to Miss Balbuti was a bad experience for the painter as he himself testifies.14 Nevertheless, Madame Greuze is valuable to French iconographic patrimony for she served the painter as a model on many occasions. J. Martin names eight portraits of Madame Greuze, and her likeness appears in *L'Accordée de village, La Mère bien-aimée, La Dame de charité, La Philosophie endormie* and other paintings as well as in numerous studies of heads. Madame Greuze was the opposite of what the current morality demanded of women in the age of the Enlightenment. In fact she was the antithesis of the moral program which informed her husband’s depiction of women’s virtue in his *drames bourgeois*. She was unfaithful (she apparently seduced her husband’s sitters)

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she was a bad mother (the Greuzes had two daughters) and did not hesitate to steal from her husband and intrigue against him (Goncourt, *L'Art* vol. 2 36-46).\(^{15}\)

When Greuze met Diderot, his fame was on the rise. Diderot in his first Salon correspondence with Melchoir Grimm in 1759 did not have much to say about Greuze’s paintings: “Les Greuzes ne sont pas merveilleux cette année. Le faire en est raide et la couleur fade et blanchâtre. J’en étais tenté autrefois; je ne m’en soucie plus” (*Salon de 1759, 1761, 1763* 101).\(^{16}\) The philosophe is, however, convinced of Greuze’s merit which he already admired in *Le Père de famille expliquant la Bible*. Diderot became Greuze’s enthusiastic partisan in 1761. It is *L’Accordée de village* that inspired his eloquent praise:

Mais il vaudrait mieux [...] s’extasier sur un morceau qui présente des beautés de tous côtés; c’est certainement ce que Greuze a fait de mieux. Ce morceau lui fera honneur, et comme peintre savant dans son art, et comme homme d’esprit et de goût. Sa composition est pleine d’esprit et de

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\(^{15}\) Madame Greuze recalls in many ways Flaubert’s Emma Bovary. The resemblance of Madame Greuze’s personality to Flaubert’s post-Romantic heroine suggests that the modernist tendencies I am to discuss make not only part of the work, but also constitute the very fabric of the painters life. While considering the situation from the structuralist perspective, I wonder if the significance of the possibility of the analogy between the real Madame Greuze and the fictional Emma Bovary is a mere coincidence. Could it be perhaps, that Greuze’s love-life indicates that bovarism might be a part of modernism? Furthermore, it is not to be discarded, that the overall mediocrity of Greuze, his humble origins and his interest in the everyday character and locale, in short Greuze as a painter as well as a persona might recall the mediocrity of Charles Bovary.

\(^{16}\) The Salons are letters and notes which Diderot sent to his friend Grimm, the director of *La Correspondance littéraire*, concerning the biannual Salon exhibitions in 1759, 1761, 1763, 1765, 1767, 1769, 1771, 1775, and 1781. The Salons were published in 1795 by Naigeon along with Diderot’s “Essai sur la peinture”.

délicatesse. Le choix de ses sujets marque de la sensibilité et de (sic) bonnes moeurs. (*Salon de 1759, 1761 170*)

Greuze’s genre paintings insist on a similar trend of imagery of family virtues, so well accessible to the public in the second part of the eighteenth century. The years 1761-1765 continued to be a period of success. Diderot considered Greuze his painter. He exclaimed with enthusiasm in the Salon of 1763:

*C’est vraiment là mon homme que ce Greuze […] D’abord le genre me plaît; c’est la peinture morale. Quoi donc! Le pinceau n’a-t-il pas été assez et trop longtemps consacré à la débauche et au vice? Ne devons-nous pas être satisfaits de le voir concourir enfin avec la poésie dramatique à nous toucher, à nous instruire, à nous corriger et à nous inviter à la vertu? Courage mon ami Greuze, fais de la morale en peinture, et fais toujours comme cela!* (*Salon de 1759, 1761, 1763 233-34*)

This is the response to *Le Paralytique secouru par ses enfants*. In effect, the narrative content of the *drames bourgeois* which Greuze sets to paint, corresponds to the dramatic efforts of Diderot’s *Fils naturel* (1757) and *Père de famille* (1758).

The democratic mode which characterizes Greuze’s work, meaning its accessibility to the larger public and the appreciation of his art as well as the moral message he propagated, was facilitated by the abundance of engravings. The Département des Estampes in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and the Musée Greuze in Tournus (among other collections) houses a remarkable assortment of engravings done after Greuze’s paintings as well as images inspired by Greuze’s themes. Greuze’s major engravers were Flipart, Massard,
Gaillard et Levasseur. Needless to say that the proliferation of his images was lucrative; Greuze knew the monetary value of a wide audience.\textsuperscript{17}

In 1765 Greuze’s popularity probably peaked. As Brookner says, “In the pictures submitted to the Salon of that year can be seen an exploitation of every point on which he had ever won public approbation—uplifting, sentimental, and decently pornographic, with a number of portraits for good measure” (Greuze, 64). Among others there was \textit{Une Jeune fille qui pleure son oiseau mort}, first sketches of \textit{La Mère bien-aimée}, drawings of \textit{Le Fils ingrat} and \textit{Le Fils puni} Lille, Musée Wicar, \textit{L’Enfant gâté}, Saint Petersburg, Hermitage. The painting \textit{Une Jeune fille qui pleure son oiseau mort} is one of the paintings which Brookner names “decently pornographic”. About this picture Diderot exclaims: “Tableau délicieux” (Salon de 1765, 179). Soft porn, family virtues, all make part of the ethic and the esthetics of the eighteenth century. The rococo style and the libertinism of the age are never too far from the moralizing content of the works of the \textit{philosophes}.

In this period there was talk of sending Greuze to Saint Petersburg as the court painter of Catherine of Russia, but the plan was not realized. It is perhaps Diderot who sabotaged the project, Brookner suggests. Although Diderot applauded Greuze for being an excellent artist, he disapproved of his uncouth manners. His objections were particularly directed against Madame Greuze

\textsuperscript{17} For more details on engraving after Greuze’s work see Schroder’s “Genre Print in Eighteenth-Century France: Production, Market, and Audience” (\textit{Intimate Encounters} 69-86).
whom he called "by universal consent one of the most dangerous creatures in the world" (qtd. in Brookner, *Greuze* 66). 

Greuze at this time had the honorific title *Le Peintre du Roi*, and lived in the Louvre. He wanted to be recognized by the Academy as a history painter, a genre considered in those circles the zenith on the ladder of importance in painting. In 1769 he submitted *Sévere et Caracalla*—full title is *L’Empereur Sévere reproche à Caracalla son fils, d’avoir voulu l’assassiner dans les défilés d’Ecosse, et lui dit: Si tu désires ma mort, ordonne à Papinien de me la donner avec cette épée* (fig. 17), as the reception picture. The theme of the painting was again filial rapport and the narrative had the didactic purpose to warn against disobedience to one's father. But according to Greuze's contemporaries, the antique setting did not suit Greuze's mentality and the painting was a failure. Crow ascribes the fiasco of *Sévere et Caracalla* not so much to the faulty quality of the painting, but rather to politicking against the difficult, obstinate, and evidently disagreeable Greuze (165). Be it as it may, the Academy would have received Greuze as a painter of genre, but not as a painter of history. Greuze was offended and refused to show in the Salons and afterwards exhibited his work in his studio. Belittled by the dominant forces, he must have felt himself to be a misunderstood artist, a romantic figure par excellence, popular in the romantic era to come.

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18 "Diderot to Falconet", 15 August, 1767. For more detailed account of Greuze's success in Russia see Hautecoeur and Monod, *Les Dessins*. 
continues the theme of filial duty. These moral paintings, as well as the gently
salacious *Cruche cassée*, were accepted with enthusiasm expressed in two odes
on Greuze printed in *Le Journal de Paris*:

> Greuze! Peintre divin! La nature outragée
> Semble avoir déposée ses foudres dans tes mains,
> Sois satisfait! Tu l'as vengée!
> Si j'adore ton coeur qui conduit ton pinceau,
> Combien j'admire en ton tableau
> La noble vigueur du génie!
> À voir l'expression hardie
> Et la chaleur du coloris
> Qu'il étale à nos yeux surpris
> On te croirait le maître de la vie.
> Greuze! Si je t'ai chanté
> Tu ne me dois rien; c'est l'hommage
> Que m'arrache la vérité
> Qui m'a frappé dans ton ouvrage.

And then:

> Poursuis Greuze! Poursuis la faible humanité
> Pour le peintre du coeur te réclame et te nomme.
> Ce n'est qu'en pénétrant au fond du coeur de l'homme
> Qu'on s'ouvre le chemin à l'immortalité. (Qtd. in Brookner, *Greuze
> 74, 75*)."

Critics compared Greuze's skills with those of Rembrandt, Rubens, Van Dyck
and Poussin. The mix of "decent pornography", to borrow Brookner's expression,
and didactic moralizing melodrama brought the painter approval in the highest as
well as in the bourgeois circles.

Greuze's notoriety in the 1760's is also correlated to the loss of popularity
of history painting. Crow suggests that after the Seven Year's War the heroism of

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19 *Journal de Paris*, 11. 1. 1779 and 22. 6. 1779.
warrior and memorialization of war was simply not suitable. Official painters were required to turn to peaceful and benevolent subjects and the softening of concepts brought forward mediocre and weak paintings in the history genre, while Greuze’s genre of every day life and domesticity acquired renown.

Michel Régis throws an interesting light on the change of taste. He examines what he calls the “new criticism” in the epoch and notes the significance accorded to the clothing of the painted heroes. According to the pamphlet on the 1781 Salon, *La Palette de Velours*, says Régis, modern dress is described as “essentially deceptive, it deforms, dissimulates, disguises appearances... unlike the Greek cloak or the Roman toga, which are natural marks of dignity, modern dress was said to follow ‘ridiculous fashion’” (50). As Greuze was the painter of “modern dress”, the costume of his own period could not rise to the noble heights of “antique naturalness”. But it corresponded well to his middle-of-the-road style and ethic.

In 1775 history painting once again regained its superiority and antiquity was the “universal” language. The Neoclassical school, exemplified best by the paintings of David, pushed Greuze’s bourgeois scenes out of the epicenter of popularity (Crow 156). And yet, as X. De Villarceaux notes in his article “La Statue de Greuze”, David is already there in Caracala of Greuze (19). Jacques-Louis David and his school took from Greuze his moralizing and grounded the normative morality in an antique setting, the critic implies.

But the in-between status follows Greuze. Jules Renonvier suggests that Greuze can be placed between Vien and Fragonard. Vien, Renonvier says,
“voulait renouveler la peinture d’histoire, avec une imitation comme de la nature et un sentiment de l’antique”. [...while Fragonard] “plus porté à voir toujours cette nature et cette antique à travers la passion du jour, atteignait le plus vif ses formes et du mouvement de la lumière vaporeuse et de l’expression du plaisir” (Renovier 571). Greuze had neither the elegance of Vien nor the lightness of Fragonard. Greuze stands always on the middle ground. Let us note that this Greuze’s trait is not only a position vis-à-vis official art and the rococo style, but it also characterizes the painter’s preferred subject matter, the bourgeoisie, which by virtue of its own constitution is a middle ground par excellence.

Brookner notes that it was not the advent of the Neoclassical style or the Revolution which vanquished Greuze. She points out that once again he himself could be blamed for the decline of his popularity. Proud and headstrong, he insisted on painting from memory rather than from models and his later paintings lost the initial vigor. His dwindling repute was thus also due to technical inadequacies.

Nevertheless, in 1789 Greuze was still an influential artist. He painted several portraits of Napoleon and of important revolutionary personalities. Mme Vigée-Lebrun and Prudhon studied his paintings. Moreover, the art historical importance of Greuze’s family dramas lies in that it provided ideological inspiration for David as well as for the intensified upheaval of moral concerns after the Revolution.

In October 1793, Greuze joined the revolutionary Commune des Arts. Despite having earned a lot of money during his career, Greuze was at this point
on the verge of bankruptcy. The brothers Goncourt describe the pathos of the aging painter:

La Révolution prenait tout à Greuze. Sa fortune s’envolait en assignats, son nom se perdait, son Oeuvre passait et s’effaçait. Glissant dans la gêne, il disparaissait dans l’oubli. Il veillissait en se survivant, traînant le lourd fardeau d’une réputation morte. Son temps était déjà passé, son public avait vécu. Rien de lui n’était plus de son âge. (L’Art vol. 2 55-6)

The Goncourts’ support their painful description with Greuze’s pleading letter addressed to the Minister of Interior:

Le tableau que je fais pour le gouvernement est à moitié fini. La situation dans laquelle je me trouve me force de vous prêter de donner des ordres pour que je touche encore un à-compte pour que je puisse le terminer. J’ai eu l’honneur de vous faire part de tous mes malheurs: j’ai tout perdu, ou le talent et le courage. J’ai soixante-quinze ans, pas un seul ouvrage de commande; de ma vie je n’ai eu un moment aussi pénible à passer. Vous avés (sic) le coeur bon, je me flatte que vous aurés (sic) égard à mes peines le plus tôt possible, car il y a urgence. Salut et respect.

Greuze

Ce 28 pluviôse an IX.
Greuze, rue des Oties, galerie du Louvre, no 11. (L’Art vol. 2 56-57)

The Goncourts’ text and Greuze’s letter underscore the displaced romantic hero’s disposition at the last stage of life. But an episode published by Xavier de Villarceaux in an extract of documents of Greuze’s compatriots from Tournus, gives the point of exclamation to the drame lar moyant of Greuze’s life. De Villarceaux quotes Monsieur Bompar a citizen of Tournus who writes that:

les obsèques de ce peintre célèbre eurent lieu à Montmartre sans faste, mais leur simplicité, a dit le Moniteur (sic.) de l’époque, fut animée par une scène touchante qui fait l’éloge de la bonté de son coeur et de son beau talent. Au moment où le corps allait être enlevé de l’église pour être placé sur le chair funéraire, une jeune personne dont on pouvait remarquer l’émotion et les larmes à travers le voile dont son visage était couvert, s’approcha du cercueil, y plaça un bouquet d’immortelles, et se retira au fond de l’église pour y continuer ses prières qu’elle avait interrompues. Les tiges de ses fleurs étaient fixées par un papier sur lequel étaient écrits ces
mots: Ces fleurs offertes par la reconnaissance de ses élèves, sont l'émblème de sa gloire. (452-453)

Greuze finished his life in poverty and his work lost its appeal in the rapidly changing world. The "solitary walker" found no appreciation at the rigorous stage which characterized the post-Revolutionary rigor. David's iconography was more suitable to the heroic proportions of the Revolutionary spirit. But Greuze's popularity revived in nineteenth-century France and England. Brookner comments:

Curiously, Greuze's posterity was longer-lived than that of David. His contemporary eclipse was not due to the character of his subject matter but to his refusal, or inability, to recognize the official style of academic drawing. When this too became recognized as a reactionary movement, the pendulum swung back again, and in the nineteenth century he achieved a sort of posthumous recognition in both academic and sentimental painting in France and in England. (Greuze 134)

Greuze's paintings spoke the language of the bourgeois hegemony's sensibility more eloquently than David's work. Greuze's appeal rose, alas posthumously, once the turmoil was over and the hegemony gained its proper heavy-footed grounding in mediocrity. Greuze is the mediating figure between the eighteenth-century enthusiastic humanism (existing side by side with, as well as a contrast to the exuberant elegance and frivolity of the rococo style) and the increasing banality and mediocrity of the post-revolutionary capitalist regime.

As Greuze was an obvious product of his age, I introduced his biography with the view that the bourgeois discourse in Greuze is also linked with the pre-Romantic tendency of his epoch. The trend of sensibilité—the tendency toward
melodrama—does affect not only the work, but the way of life of the painter.

Greuze's realism, his novelistic treatment of the *drames bourgeois*, as well as the certain element of the romantic and of the romanesque, all these modes of creativity frequently evoke in the viewer ambivalent reactions of admiration and of distaste. The latter augments in our times.
CHAPTER 1
GREUZE AND BOURGEOIS DISCOURSE

The eighteenth century is pivotal in the development of Western civilization. It is the epoch in which decisive changes took place on a world-wide scale, changes which effectuated the rise of modernism. And although the epoch epitomizes humanism (read anthropocentrism) at its most flourishing stage, the germ of anti-humanism (the crisis of modernism) is implicit in the gradual changes from the Old Regime into bourgeois capitalistic and democratic sensibility, and can be traced in the epoch's esthetic and ethical concepts.¹

In Greuze we perceive a transition characterizing the eighteenth century. A transition from the indisputable valuation of the puissance paternelle: God/king/paterfamilias to a system where those paradigms of patriarchy are in peril, causing, as it were, the advancement of a degraded society (term of Goldmann 38). The qualifier "degraded" is apt since, as Goldmann points out, the quality of objects as well as human subjects and their interrelations is mediated and degraded by the purely quantitative relation of values of exchange (38). The concept of puissance paternelle, which constitutes the principal motive in the majority of Greuze's genre paintings, is the element through which we can

¹ The term humanism is used here as a system of thought where the human subject constitutes the central referent in the explanation of being.
debate the eighteenth-century’s phenomenological position as the
underpinning of modernist epistemology, which is ultimately reflected in the
esthetic sensibility of the epoch.

Lucien Goldmann underscores the loss of high esthetic quality in
bourgeois art as being due to rationalism of the bourgeois system:

C’est, nous semble-t-il, la raison fondamentale pour laquelle la société
bourgeoise a créé la première forme de conscience radicalement
anesthétique. Le caractère essentiel de la pensée bourgeoise, le
rationalisme, ignore dans ses expressions extrêmes l’existence même de
l’art. Il n’y a pas d’esthétique cartésienne ou spinoziste […] l’art n’est
qu’une forme inférieure de connaissance. (Goldmann 55-56)

Greuze’s genre scenes correspond to Goldmann’s position. But Greuze’s
drames bourgeois (and in fact Greuze himself), being the very epitome of his
epoch, exemplify Goldmann’s insight only to an extent. The eighteenth century
had not yet made the decisive cut from the Old Regime and the inclination
towards traditional esthetics and ethics still dwells in Greuze’s paintings and
blends there with the (an)esthetic and modified (un)ethical criteria of bourgeois
rationalism. The self-subversive complexity in Greuze is, however, the function of
the latter.

The rococo form permeates the eighteenth century and its sinuous and
sensuous line softens the ponderous weight of the bourgeois spirit in Greuze’s
work. The light and frivolous elegance of the rococo style replaced the
seventeenth century’s majestic classicism or the heavy grandiloquence of the
baroque style (represented perhaps best in the work of Nicolas Poussin). The
lesser status of the rococo is connected to the fall of high feudal values, to the
feminization of mores, and to the advent of the bourgeoisie. Mitigated indirectly by bourgeois morality, the work of François Boucher (1703-1770)—who was the king’s first painter and the protegé of Madame de Pompadour—epitomized in the esthetic and the ethical register the decadent tendency of the Ancien Régime in the eighteenth century.² Edmond and Jules Goncourt assert that Boucher

\[\text{est un de ces hommes qui signifient le goût d’un siècle, qui l'expriment, le personnifient et l’incarnent. Le goût français du XVIIIe siècle s’est manifesté en lui dans toute la particularité de son caractère: Boucher en demeura non seulement le peintre, mais le témoin, le représentant, le type. (L'Art vol.1 173)}\]

The brothers Goncourt continue further on: “Il est simplement un peintre original et grandement doué, auquel il a manqué une qualité supérieure, le signe de race des grands peintres: la distinction” (209). The Goncourts connect the menial quality of Boucher’s work to the humanization of royalty and to the conventional aspect of art; art was to be pleasing rather than awesome. They saw well the parallel between history and art:

\[\text{Lorsqu’au siècle de Louis XIV succède le siècle de Louis XV, quand la France galante sort de la France fastueuse et qu’autour de la royauté plus humaine les choses et les hommes deviennent plus petits, l’idéal de l’art demeure idéal factice et de convention; mais de sa majesté, cet idéal descend à l’agrément. Partout se répand un raffinement d’élégance, une délicatesse de volupté, ce que le temps appelle la quintessence, le coloris des charmes et des grâces, l’embellissement des fêtes et des amours. (L’Art vol. 1 173-174)}\]

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² Lascivious imagery is the trend of the times. For example Noël-Nicolas Coypel’s (1690-1734) *The Rape of Europa*, 1727 and the racy paintings and engravings of Boucher’s pupil, Jean-Honoré Fragonard revel in the sexual abandon of the epoch. But, as Michael Levey points out, “the middle years of the century rightly belong to Boucher” (160).
The bourgeois representation of Greuze is the foil to Boucher, but the Goncourt's remark that "les hommes deviennent plus petits" also applies to Greuze's representation on the other, the enlightened bourgeois side of the social spectrum. This other side, encompassing the worthy upper bourgeoisie and the lesser nobility, retaliated against aristocratic debauch with moral discourses. Diderot, whose art criticism is a function of his project as the philosophe of the Enlightenment, attacked Boucher from the platform of morality. "Je ne sais que dire de cet homme-ci. La dégradation du goût, de la couleur, de la composition, des caractères, de l'expression, du dessin, a suivi pas à pas la dépravation des mœurs" (Oeuvres 453). By contrast, he praised Greuze and Chardin for their realistic depiction of the natural condition and applauded Greuze mainly for the illustration of bourgeois morality: "Voici votre peintre et le mien; le premier qui se soit avisé parmi nous de donner des mœurs à l'art" (Salon de 1765 177).

The flattening of social hierarchy and the vulgarizing of plutocratic notions meant the decline of the sublime and the heroic in the works of the two painters who best exemplified the epoch's trends, Boucher and Greuze. If Boucher used conventional historical and mythical iconography, his representation lacked the grandeur such lofty iconography used to evoke. In Greuze's genre painting (also

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3 In fact, morality was not the burning question only in bourgeois circles. In the royal court, piety and morality was an issue for the parti devot headed by the queen, the dauphin Louis and the three princesses. Theirs is the morality as proclaimed by the Scriptures. The new morality, on the other hand, is based on the empirical understanding and the spirit of utilitarianism. This morality is most aggressively promoted by the bourgeoisie.
spiced by rococo sensuality), on the other hand, heroism descended to
the middle class altogether. While Boucher’s iconography is erotic, light and
fluffy, Greuze’s genre scenes are more weighty. Unlike Boucher, Greuze had the
well-being of society on his mind and his images moralize ponderously. Whether
those of Greuze or Boucher depict morality or vice, both artist’s works lacked the
superior quality of art of the seventeenth century.

The bourgeois system not only undermined the esthetic merit of art as
noted Goldmann, but, by ironic reversal, flattened and discredited the good
intentions of paternal moral criteria. The notorious depiction of feeble and dying
patriarchs in the second part of the eighteenth century corresponds to this
devaluation. Robert Rosenblum suggests that the icon of the moribund father is
a trend which reacts against the cloying and luscious imagery of the rococo:

Le premier de ces thèmes—une couche funèbre qu’entoure le choeur des
parents éplorés—devient si fréquent à partir de 1750 que l’on pourrait en
citer des milliers d’exemples. Comme une sorte d’antidote aux
préoccupations hédonistes de l’art rococo, ce thème pour le moins lugubre
servait à inaugurer une ère nouvelle de sérieux et de gravité. Cette
solenne funérée devint pour ainsi dire une sorte de catharsis anti-rococo,
qu’il s’agisse d’évoquer le trépas d’un grand et noble héros ou celui d’un
simple bourgeois père de famille. (37)

Carol Duncan takes a different view in her article “Fallen Fathers: Images
of Authority in Pre-Revolutionary French Art”. For her the frequency of old and
dying patriarchs in paintings of the second part of the eighteenth century
manifest traces of subversion of the solidity of paternal power; in effect, the
iconography of the epoch concur with the political and the familial responsibility
of the patriarch. Duncan points out that these old men are “noble but suffering”
and “often convalescent, weak, in need of rescue or at the mercy of their dependents” (187). She ties the phenomenon to the growing ambivalence toward established paternal authority since, as she says, “a gap was developing between the promises of patriarchal ideology and what the social structures could really deliver” due to scarcity of jobs, loss of privileges and greater demands for family discipline (188). Consequently, “traditional attitudes of deference and respect were becoming more difficult to sustain and the expression of hostility more difficult to repress. Images of sympathetic but weakened old men could perfectly express the forbidden impulses but also keep them hidden beneath conscious feelings of love and respect” (188). Duncan notes, “pity fear and guilt, alone or in combination, are the feelings these old men—the family patriarchs—are likely to inspire”. Greuze is an example of the trend, and although overtly celebrating the paternal authority, depicts fathers generally in a state of physical decline; for example in Le Paralytique (fig.16), in La Dame Bienfaisante, La Malédiction paternelle (fig. 1a, 1b), in the drawing La Mort d’un père denaturé abandonné par ses enfants (fig. 18), or in the drawing La Mort d’un père regretté par ses enfants (fig. 19). The moral message is effective since, as Freud points out “nous savons que l’échec favorise beaucoup plus la réaction morale que ne fait le succès” (Totem 214, n. 1).

As Duncan also notes, the old, decrepit, sick, or dying father’s foil is often his rebellious son. Greuze often depicts the son as taking over the scepter in the family sphere. But just as God himself is losing ground, the king following in his steps is followed by the paterfamilias, Greuze’s sons’ merit cascades lower and
the sons never measure up to the moral grandeur of their fathers—as in
*La Malédiction Paternelle* or in *L’Accordée de village*. Moreover, the sons are often of dubious standing vis-à-vis moral virtues. In *La Malédiction Paternelle* the son rebels against the father, in *Les Oeufs cassés* or *Geste napolitain* the young men, the sons, are often the playful seducers of young girls, they are the embodiment of the licentious eroticism of rococo.

To better situate historically the notion of a degraded esthetic as evident in Greuze, as well as the kind of morality Greuze propagates, a detour explaining historical and philosophical underpinnings of the rise of bourgeois consciousness is necessary here.

The Enlightenment—with its emphasis on commerce which was inadvertently linked to science and empirical understanding—was marked by degradation of the high spiritual and esthetic quality into material quantity. This notion thus prepared what Nietzsche called “the death of God”. The rise of industry, the riches coming to Central Europe from the exploration of colonies, and the increased familiarity with a world different from what Europeans considered the status quo, spurred inquiry into the nature of existence. The Christian religious dogmas no longer sufficed to provide a satisfactory explanation to philosophical questions. God’s authority suffered by the insistent questioning of the *philosophes*, by their unrelenting striving toward empirical understanding. In the chain of events, the Old Regime began to show serious signs of decay. The fall of esteem for the king’s authority (namely Louis XV and Louis XVI), epitomized this downfall.
In 1715, the death of Louis XIV opened in French history a period of reaction to the austerity of the absolute monarchy of the Sun King. The noblesse, forced into the background under Louis XIV despotism, had a spree during the eight years of the Regency. Morals loosened and a libertine lifestyle dominated. Notwithstanding other changes in political and religious spheres, the decadence of morals is perhaps the most manifest trait of the period, and for my purpose the most important shift. The king, at first dubbed Le Bien Aimé, ultimately continued the Regency’s trend and the dwindling reverence for the monarch seemed proportional to his abject life-style. The discreditable lifestyle of the king in tandem with his poor performance as the father of the nation

4 The aristocracy surrounding the Regent enjoyed balls and masquerades. In the circle of Philippe d’Orléans small dinners were reserved to his intimate friends “les roués” (dignes du supplice de la roue). “On buvait, on disait des grossièretés et des impiétés à qui mieux mieux; puis, quand on avait fait bien de bruit, et qu'on était bien ivre, on s’allait coucher et on commençait le lendemain” (Saint-Simon, qtd. in Denis and Blayau 118).

5 In reaction to the absolutist policies instigated by cardinal Mazarin, the Regent gave more power to the aristocrats. The noblesse dominated in the new government body, the Polysynodie, but certain representatives of the gown were also admitted. The system was, however, handicapped by quarrels between the members. In the religious sphere, the Regent removed from the court the most influential members of the “parti dévot” and relaxed the adopted politic vis-à-vis Jansenism. The imprisoned Jansenists were released. The religious war between the Jesuits and the Jansenists was not over.

6 A historical anecdote attests to the increasing disrespect for the king. He has no longer the unquestioning adoration of his subjects Louis XV enjoyed: Lorsque sa dépouille mortelle [celle de Louis XV] fut transportée le surlendemain soir à Saint-Denis, les manifestation d’irrespect le long du parcours montrerent à quel point de discrédit était tombé ‘le Bien Aimé’. Alors qu’en 1744, 6000 messes avaient été offertes à Notre-Dame pour la guérison du roi, il n’en fut demandé que 3 en 1774. (Denis and Blayau 231-232)
further enhanced discontent. The government of France lacked homogeneity; thanks to intrigues the certitude of tomorrow was always in question. In the second part of the eighteenth century, Louis XVI's proverbial mediocrity, as if in tandem with the deterioration of aristocratic values and in correlation with the rise of the bourgeoisie, further enhanced the tendency of irreverence vis-à-vis the French monarchy. At the end of the century, the Revolution made the decisive cut, and in the nineteenth century began the new era of bourgeois hegemony, the era of rampant, voracious capitalism; accordingly the era of modernism takes a sinister turn.

The eighteenth century, however, is the epoch where humanism reached its apogee and moralizing became an important component in the ideological agenda of the epoch. We can trace the basic precepts of Greuze's propaganda and its implicit weaknesses to the metaphysical underpinnings of humanism.

Humanism has long and complicated roots. Let us propose that the seventeenth century, with the proclamation of Cartesian Cogito represents infancy of philosophical humanism as the continuation of the anthropocentric trend of the Renaissance. The seventeenth century continued the Renaissance philosophy of the revival of antiquity as the model of social existence. Descartes's statement "I think therefore I am" pronounced philosophically the Man-centered vision of the world. It is "I", the subject, which gives form to the world through "my" capacity to think. This proclamation announced as it were the
momentous event in the experience of humankind, a moment of great
glory. It is the moment of liberation and autonomy. What Man does is not God's
will, it is Man's own prerogative.

Sartre points out that
telle est bien l’intuition première de Descartes: il a compris, mieux que
personne, que la moindre démarche de la pensée engage toute la pensée,
une pensée autonome qui se pose, en chacun de ses actes, dans son
indépendance plénière et absolue. (Situations I 315)

The majesty of the centralized absolute monarchy of Louis XIV
corresponded, in the framework of France as a nation, to the glorious event of
the Cartesian affirmation. However, the sovereignty of “I” is precarious. The
upcoming age of bourgeois capitalism decentered the centrality of subject—
symbolized in this context by the Sun King—and with it, its majesty and glory; the
feudal stage from which the noble concept proceeded slowly toward its limit. In
the eighteenth century this is perceptible by the crumbling of the top of the
hierarchical pyramid: the deterioration of monarchical power, and the advent of
bourgeois ontology.

The macrocosm of historical change in regard to the status of the human
subject—simultaneously reaching his apotheosis and losing his noble distinction
as reflected in the Cogito and in seventeenth-century absolutism which
inadvertently also brought the rise of the bourgeoisie—reflects also, in the
psychological register, the development of the individual ego. Lacan's “mirror

7 After the death of Louis XV in 1757, Frederick II of Prussia declares: “Dans les
circonstances où se trouve la monarchie française il faudrait au jeune roi de la
force et du génie” (qtd. in Denis and Blayau 232).
stage" is a notion homologous to the advent of the Cogito and the expansion of the bourgeois class with its paternalistic ethical underpinnings. Lacan describes the moment of self-recognition as *jouissance*. The centralized monarchy, the Sun King in person and the Cogito, correspond in a historical sense to that *jouissance*. The event, however, has a short duration: the self-affirmation of the subject's ego's (symbolically the phallus) begins to depreciate at the instant of its glorification, since recognition is based on the economy of reciprocity. The discovered identity is a construction, it is the composite product of impacts of images and experiences (masterminded by genetic inscription, to be sure). By analogy, as the world perceived by the developing young and proud ego becomes increasingly larger—as did also the world of the European in the Renaissance with the discovery of America and subsequent colonization—more and more other factors influenced this identity. (Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* is an example of the *other* world mirroring France's status quo and providing a parody of it.) The certainty of "I" of the Cogito or, in the final analysis the phallus (coinciding with the centrality of French absolute and centralized monarchy) began to deteriorate. This is the dialectic of conscience. Lacan says:

> La connaissance humaine, et du même coup la sphère des rapports de la science, est faite d'un certain rapport à cette structure que nous appelons l'ego, autour de laquelle se centre la relation imaginaire. Celle-ci nous a appris que l'ego n'est jamais seulement le sujet, qui est essentiellement rapport à l'autre [...]. Et c'est de la tension entre le sujet – qui ne saurait désirer sans être fondamentalement séparé de l'objet, que prend son départ la dialectique de la conscience. (*Le Séminaire* 209-210)

Autonomy and subjectivity, paradoxically, mean also dependence and reliance on the Other. This phenomenological design, the dialectic inscribed in the
concept of the Cogito, implies tension between individuality and universality in the human condition. It implies equality; it implies a democratic mode of existence and, consequently, limitation of individual liberty. And it plays also a role in the dialectic of exchanges in the rapport between subject/Father.

Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité* resounds with the thought that in his origin, man, unaffected by society, unique and singular, is good. It is society which corrupts him. Rousseau thus posits a single, total and integral man as the origin (a correlat to Lacan's ego, the Cartesian Cogito, or the phallus). Condillac echoes this thought by positing a model of a marble statue, which develops all its senses in itself, by itself and outside of social enterprising. Such centrality of the human subject is the highly unstable humanistic position. In the eighteenth century, it is still sustainable, but as this concept cannot do without the tensions inherent in the mutuality between single subject and society, the paradox of humanism is already evident. Nonetheless, the singular virtue, Goodness, the moral base of sociability is necessary for proper conduct, and the *paterfamilias* takes on the responsibility as the ethical referent.

Endorsement of free will and the belief in the primary importance of the individual coincides with the notion of the oneness of the human condition, of universality. The cry of the Revolution summons the ideology propagated by the *philosophes*: "égalité, fraternité, liberté". The act of the Revolution precipitates the principle implied (by homology) in the Cogito with violence. The moment of glory of the Lacanian mirror stage, of Rousseau's "good" man, of the Cogito, is
tragically short. The phallus had played out its jouissance, the mirror
breaks: bad luck for all. What follows is the infinite solitude in the muddle of
differences, or what we call the crisis of modernism. The deterioration of the
monarchy was part of the long historical process which was, by analogy, also
part of the changes implied in the Cogito (and is mirrored in the individual
psychological development and the “origin” as posited by Rousseau); it is part of
the historical change from feudalism to capitalism.⁸

The ambivalence which leads to the dilemma of Cogito is implicit in
Descartes’ skepticism:

Le premier était de ne recevoir jamais aucune chose pour vraie, que
je ne connusse évidemment être telle: c’est-à-dire d’éviter soigneusement la
précipitation et la prévention ; et de ne comprendre rien de plus en mes
jugements, que ce qui se présenterait si clairement et si distinctement à
mon esprit, que je n’eusse aucune occasion de le mettre en doute.
(Discours 47–48)

Descartes’ began with doubt to arrive at his philosophical method which affirmed
the primacy of the human subject, and mobilized reason and scientific method to
establish the concept of the world.⁹ The Cartesian pathway: doubt → Cogito →

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⁸ As Tocqueville points out: “Elle [la Révolution] a pris, il est vrai, le monde à
l’improviste, et cependant elle n’était que le complément du plus long travail, la
terminaison soudaine et violente d’une œuvre à laquelle dix générations avaient
travaillé” (Tocqueville 81).

⁹ As Sartre points out, Descartes has seen well the link between science and
the concept of free will: “En ce sens, nul n’a mieux montré que Descartes la
liaison entre l’esprit de la science et l’esprit de la démocratie, car on ne saurait
fonder le suffrage universel sur autre chose que sur cette faculté universellement
répandue de dire non ou de dire oui” (Situations I 319).

Needless to say, science speeds up economy and is responsible for the
rise of industry mostly in the hands of the bourgeoisie. Thus, in the final analysis,
this process is linked to the ascent and fall of the Cartesian subject which is
God → the Conception of the World, a pathway surveyed by God, signals
a dilemma since “my” conception of the world instilled doubt in “me” in the first
place. ¹⁰ Descartes thus anticipated the vicious circle which instilled existential
angst of the modern subject.

The problem of duality between “me” and the “other”, in which swing and
float the ambiguities of Greuze’s *drames bourgeois*, immediately surfaces in
Descartes’ method and has moral implication: for each “me” has a somewhat
different conception of the world and views Good and Evil from “his” personal
perspective. Descartes is aware of the problem and summons God as the central
essence which directs existence. And although the Cartesian pathway implies a
subversive tendency because the quest for the world is instigated by doubt, the
epoch has not yet reached the moment of deconstruction of the hierarchical
social structure. On the contrary, the multiplicity of subjective conceptions of the
world ascertained its referential value in God (and the king as the representative
of God on earth), while the new era also foregrounded the human subject.

The Pandora’s box of Cartesian polemic which included a multiplicity of
subjects obliged Descartes to draw a provisory moral of which the first maxim
was

symbolized by phallus and/or Father. This process also indirectly degrades
esthetic of art in the eighteenth century, particularly in Greuze.

¹⁰ The graphical representation of the Cartesian pathway was proposed by Goux
in the seminar *La Rupture Postmoderne*, fall 1997. The dilemma inscribed in the
pathway of course also puts into question the existence of God, a question which
Descartes, in his effort to sustain faith in God, deliberates ponderously in the fifth
part of *Méditations métaphysiques*. 
d'obéir aux coutumes de mon pays, retenant constamment la
religion en laquelle Dieu m'a fait la grâce d'être instruit dès mon enfance, et
me gouvernant, en toute autre chose, suivant les opinions les plus
modérées, et plus éloignées de l'excès, qui fussent communément reçues
en pratique par les mieux sensés de ceux avec lesquels j'aurais à vivre.
(Discours 53)

The Cartesian provisory moral is centered on that which "I", the unique subject,
understood best and which suited "me" the best as the foundation of the life
quest within the constrains of a particular human community. Nevertheless, as
historical development proved, the Cartesian humanistic and bourgeois gesture
ricochets and subverts the moral base of the primary referent, God; this trend
slides downward and begins to undermine the eighteenth-century concept of
paterfamilias as is evident in Greuze's genre paintings. The provisory moral
escapes, as it were, the surveillance of the one totalizing referent and slowly
collapses onto itself in the double discourse of individualism and universality.

But the process is gradual. The ideology of the Enlightenment is based on
the notion of universal man and universal moral where personal interest parallels
and compares with the public interest. Rousseau thus announces his thesis of

_Du Contract social:

'Trouver une forme d'association qui défende et protège de toute la force
commune la personne et les biens de chaque associé, et par laquelle
chacun s'unissant à tous n'obéisse pourtant qu'à lui même et reste aussi
libre qu'auparavant.' Tel est le problème fondamental dont le contract
social donne la solution. (28-29)

In protecting one's liberty, one must be useful to society. In the eighteenth
century, the search for solid ground in morality in the increasingly secularized
world led to utilitarianism. Influenced by English thought, Condillac, baron
d'Holbach (1723-1789), Hélotieus (1715-1771) continue Locke's (1632-1704) ideas and proposed theories of moral economy based on the notion that personal pleasure gives happiness to the individual and is simultaneously the foundation of common well-being. As Voltaire said in 1734 in *Lettres philosophiques*: “C'est l'amour de nous mêmes qui assiste l'amour des autres; c'est par nos besoins mutuels que nous sommes utiles au genre humain” (137). Mandeville's (1670-1733) utilitarian principle forms the framework of his proposition that vice too is useful to society. Luxury, for example, causes demand and spending, and enhances motility of the economy rooted in capitalist production.\(^\text{11}\)

The utilitarian notion inherent in bourgeois enterprising entered the scenario with force with the Reformation. The Reformation which rejected Catholic dogmas, emphasized personal spiritual liberty, and recast responsibility for devotion onto the human subject. The vulgarization of religious activity went hand in hand with secularization; but secularization within the religious sphere.\(^\text{12}\)

In Catholic France the *philosophes*, and Greuze was the painter among them,

\(^{11}\) The notion that modern morality is an integral part of capitalist ethos was proclaimed by Adam Smith and Bentham and in France those ideas were developed by Turgot and Montesquieu.

\(^{12}\) Also the notion of atheism begins to take roots early in the century, for the Christian maxim of obedience, poverty, and charity does not satisfy the new social ontology, viewed as machine fueled by capitalist enterprising. For Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) “L'athéisme ne conduit pas nécessairement à la corruption des mœurs” (74); atheism corresponds better to the notion that personal interest is parallel to the public interest. Diderot too makes the step toward atheism and away from Deism.
were particularly sympathetic to the Protestant spirit. Edgar Munhall points out that the Protestant slant is the moralizing substance in Greuze’s *Le Père de famille expliquant la Bible*, *La Lecture de la Bible: Le Retour sur soi-même, La Prière du matin*. Munhall also makes a study of the Protestant overtones in *L’Accordée de village* (“Greuze and the Protestant Spirit”). The theme of private devotion in *Le Père de famille expliquant la Bible* and in *La Lecture de la Bible: Le Retour sur soi-même, La Prière du matin* depicts the Protestant tendency whereby God’s power marks downward mobility since everyone can adore Him as he/she wishes. This is a Cartesian notion. And so the ethical notions imbricated in Protestant religion are the concepts of individualism, but also of universalism, leading to utilitarianism favorable to capitalistic enterprising. It is a telling coincidence that the Reformation took place in countries with the greatest development of commercial capitalism. Also significant is the fact that thousands of Protestants fled France after the revoking of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, and that this exodus weakened French economy.

Max Weber underlined the connection of Protestantism and capitalism, stressing that it is the utilitarian ethos inherent in the Protestant spirit, rather than “joie de vivre” of the libertine style, which is responsible for the advancement of capitalism and democracy:

S’il fallait trouver une parenté entre certaines expressions du vieil esprit protestant et de la civilisationcapitaliste moderne, force serait, bon gré mal gré, de la chercher dans leurs traits purement religieux et non dans cette prétendue “joie de vivre”, plus ou moins matérialiste ou hostile à l’athéisme. (43)
To give force to his arguments, Weber recalls the words of Montesquieu who looked toward the English system as an example of a satisfactory social economy:

Dans L’Esprit des lois (XX, VII) Montesquieu dit des Anglais: “c’est le peuple du monde qui a le mieux su se prévaloir à la fois de ces trois grandes choses: la religion, le commerce et la liberté”. Leur supériorité commerciale—et ce qui est lié sous un autre rapport—l’adoption d’institutions politiques libres ne dépendraient-elles pas de [cette prééminence dans la religion], de ce record de piété que Montesquieu leur attribue? (44)

According to Weber, following Montesquieu, the English were successful with their social state because of the tolerant and enterprising spirit which is inherent in the Protestant ethic.¹³

In Catholic France of the Enlightenment, universal moral and universal God are essential. Deism, in the Cartesian spirit, attempted to replace divine revelation with the light of reason.¹⁴ Even if the God of the Deist is removed from

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¹³ Weber’s argument is convincing, but Ferdinand Braudel in The Wheels of Commerce argues, following Werner Sombart, that the change toward appreciation of wealth as a feature connecting the spiritual and the material is a feature in the Catholic cities of Venice, Florence and Genoa in the Quattrocento: Braudel notes that the texts Libri della Famiglia dating from 1433-34 and 1441 indicate to Sombart “a new climate: praise of money, recognition of the value of time, the need to live thriftily—all bourgeois principles in the first flush of their youth” (Braudel 578-79). And certainly the new humanistic approach, fathered by Descartes in philosophical terms a century later, is also rooted in Catholic dogmas. But as the Reformation is an answer to the excesses of the Catholic Church, and promotes humanism, it endorses the utilitarian capitalist tendency already in making in the Renaissance, as Braudel points out.

¹⁴ Deism is “the movement held to a belief in one God who created the world but does not intervene in its present functioning, either by way of revelation or miracle; an objective difference between right and wrong; the duty of life as support of the right; the immortality of the soul; and our condition in the life to
the human condition. "C'est Dieu dont le pouvoir est toujours immédiat sur la créature, maître aussi jaloux qu'absolu, qui ne perd jamais de ses droits, et ne les communique point" as Diderot says (Encyclopédie, "Autorité politique" 60). But as God of the Deist influenced human existence only indirectly, the paterfamilias increasingly assumed responsibility as the legislator of order. (In his method, Descartes summons the person of the legislator since a governing law is imperative to confirm the anthropocentric vision in face of undermining doubt.) In the previous century Louis XIV was the paradigmatic father of the centralized monarchy, his family. (He is depicted on coins and engravings as the father/king.) In the Enlightenment, personal liberty as well as general will needed to be sustained, and the paternal authority marked a certain diffusion. Rousseau called for the civil state (état civil), the republic, headed by the Souverain whose power is the function of the general will (volonté générale) (Du pacte social 30-31). At the same time, in the domestic sphere, the role of supreme authority is recast onto the paterfamilias. For Diderot, it is the law of nature: "Si la nature a établi quelque autorité, c'est la puissance paternelle [...] toute autre autorité vient d'au
tre d'un autre origine que de la nature" (Encyclopédie, "Autorité politique" 59). Family is the realm where the ideology of the Enlightenment directs its focus in its search for moral virtue. This is the "natural morality" in Greuze corresponding to the moral and legislative imperative of the paterfamilias. Furthermore, Greuze's imagery also represents Protestant and

come as related to ethical conduct in this life" (Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion 121).
bourgeois milieu and the social atmosphere of utilitarianism and
democratic capitalistic enterprising. This in the long run is the consequence of
philosophical humanism.

There is one more element actively involved in this structure: it is the
fiduciary regime. In the social order morality, upheld by the *paterfamilias* (as the
epoch's moral epicenter diffused into domestic spaces) circulates. In the sphere
of commerce circulates gold money, the interaction of social and economical
registers defines bourgeois ambiance of paradoxes which effectuated the
degradation of elevated concepts.

Goldmann points out that

[dans la vie économique, qui constitue la partie la plus importante
de la vie sociale moderne, toute relation authentique avec l'aspect qualitatif
des objets et des êtres tend à disparaître, aussi bien des relations entre les
hommes et les choses que des relations interhumaines, pour être
remplacée par une relation médiatisée et dégradée: la relation avec les
valeurs d'échange purement quantitatives. (38)

This Marxist perspective lays emphasis on the loss of authenticity in human
interaction due to the mediating aspect of the economy of commerce,
promulgated in the epoch by gold money. By extension, it explains the gradual
degradation of the import once of the *paterfamilias*, the momentous social
paradigm to whom is due, one would say, the *authentic* respect and adoration
that had been bestowed upon God. In other words, the economic regime of
bourgeois capitalism brings about degeneration and vulgarization of the
authentic power of the legislator of order (God, monarch, *paterfamilias*).
Goux' theory of conflation of the patriarchal criteria: God, Father,

Money as the sign of bourgeois ontology forms an interesting foundation for
discussion of the ideological base of bourgeois discourse and its utilitarian
capitalist underpinnings as linked to Father. Goux underscores the correlation
between the phallic signifiers, Father and money. The limits of the phallocentric
institutions are exactly in their universalism (which is also the principal function of
valorization by money, the general equivalent). Goux says:

L’institution du PÈRE, du PHALLUS, du LANGAGE, des “signes” majeurs
qui règlementent le marché des valeurs, relèved en fait d’une genèse dont
celle de la MONNAIE marque sans doute le mieux, théoriquement les
limites. (“Numismatiques” 57)\textsuperscript{15}

Money provides a referent of value of objects but also of the human subject to
the extent that the value of the latter is determined by his or her productivity. The
referential stand-point of money thus means reification of the human subject.
This leveling of human subjectivity was in the period encroaching uncomfortably
on the eminence and authenticity of the authority of Father. In fact it began to
insinuate itself into the moral imperative. Gold money provides the referent of
value and it is thus “le dieu des merchandises” (Le Capital 186). Homologically,
Father was, in the epoch of gold money, the central phallic universal equivalent
in the ethical register, as Goux affirms:

Ce ne serait pas autre chose... que l’axe de la métaphore paternelle
(monnaie, phallus, language, monarque), métaphore centrale,

\textsuperscript{15} Goux, as does Lacan, includes language in the homology. This aspect is
indeed pertinent in discussing Greuze’s romanesque representation, and I will
return to it in Chapter 5 in my discussion of the analogy between Greuze and
Balzac where the significance of the connection between the rise of realistic
representation, money and Father is the issue.
centralisatrice, permettant l’ancrage de toutes les autres, pivot de toute législation symbolique, [and moral] lieu de l’étalon (de “estel”: pieu, poteau) et de l’unité. (“Numismatiques” 65)

The value of the universal referent, explains Goux, is of course implicated in its reciprocity to the objects or the subjects whose value it designates. The structure of reciprocal rapport between subject and object mediated by money necessarily demeans plutocracy, and it becomes, historically, increasingly more difficult to ascertain the stable value of one surveying and determining phallic referent. At the period where gold money circulates, and particularly in the eighteenth century where feudal values of personal merit and individual distinction are not completely eclipsed by utilitarianism, this is not the major concern; not yet. (In fact this is not so even in the first part of the nineteenth century. See more on the comparison and contrast of this economy as is visible in Greuze and Balzac, in Chapter 5). The nobility of gold gives gold money its reasonable stability. By homology, the post of the Father is also “solid gold” and adequately strong. But, as is visible in Greuze’s imagery, the conflations between the signification of gold money and Father there are signs of degradation. The property of money as equalizer and quantifier rather than qualifier undermines the authentic value of all referents, and of course of the authority of Father. Money has taken from the patriarchs (God being the highest in this context) the role of the phallic mediator. The father figure in L’Accordée de village and La Malédiction paternelle bears the traits of the deconstruction of that figure, a process catalyzed by money (see Chapters 3, 4 and 5). Moreover, as the Goncourt’s saw, the noblesse of art degenerated in the epoch, a trend connected
also to the economy of money. The fate of art parallels the fate of
humanism which suffered such a blow by the equalizing operation of the
mediator of exchanges, money.¹⁶

If the bourgeois discourse effectuates, as says Goldmann, an "anesthetic"
art, noted by the Goncourts as a trait in the work of Greuze and Boucher, we

¹⁶ In _Les Iconoclastes_ Goux describes in great depth the correlation between the
loss of the material and external referent of measure in monetary system—gold
as the symbol and the sign of value (analogical to the surveying function of
phallic signifiers, God/monarch/paterfamilias)—and the change in artistic
production toward abstraction; and to the existential angst of modernism. He
says:

La dématérialisation du système monétaire et son évolution vers le
'nominalisme', jusqu'à la suspension de toute convertibilité, peuvent être
rapprochées du dépassement du mode de signifier réalistre-représentatif,
de la tendance vers l'abstraction, dans la pratique picturale. Ici aussi, nous
voyons une transformation des rapports entre le symbolique et la réalité.
Dans la peinture réaliste-représentative issue du Quattrocento, les
signifiants picturaux ne sont pas saisis en eux-mêmes, dans leur
autonomie, mais comme représentants d'un dehors spatial réel, qui
constitue leur caution, leur garantie, leur référent. Ce n'est que dans le
mouvement commencé dans le siècle dernier, et qui trouve un point de
rupture qualitative nette au début de ce siècle avec la peinture abstraite de
Kandinsky ou de Mondrian, qu'est rompu tout rattachement à une réalité
extérieure au tableau [...]. Par une métaphore qui n'est pas une simple
comparaison accidentelle, on pourra parler d'une perte de convertibilité des
signifiants picturaux, et d'une structure nominaliste de la peinture, dans sa
phase abstraite. La peinture non figurative est une pratique des marques
picturales sans couverture.

La désaffection du symbole, son devenir opératoire sont aussi le _mode de
production de l'angoisse._ Ce qui devient dans les échanges économiques
système de la valeur d'échange, principe de l'équivalence universelle,
devient dans l'histoire inconsciente du sémiotique, par la désaffection
sociale du signe, système de l'angoisse. La dialectique hégélienne de la
valeur, remplacement de ce qui n'est plus présentable, par une
détermination abstraite et universelle, se trouve dans la production de
l'universel abstrait négatif, noir, de la monnaie-angoisse, et de sa
circulation dans un monde de symboliser désaffecté. 'L'angoisse constitue
la monnaie courante contre laquelle sont échangées toutes les excitations
must differentiate the lesser than noble quality of Greuze's paintings, and
the bulk of modernist works where the decline of traditional esthetic harmony
derives from conscious and critical irony. A fitting comparison and contrast to
Greuze is the work of Diderot. Unlike Greuze in his narrative paintings, Diderot—
a moralist as well—nonetheless takes the position of irony consciously and à
priori. The difference lies in the fact that in Diderot the intent is critical of itself,
while in Greuze the bourgeois ethos is very much part of the paintings, and the
work is inextricable from the ethos of his epoch. In Greuze the ironical dimension
happens, as it were, and is not due to Greuze's conscious will. It happens
because paradoxes and ambivalences are an integral part of the discourse
Greuze is embedded in, and depicts.

The mediocrity of Greuze's representation is a reflection of the murky
process of "degradation of society", as Goldmann puts it, characterizing the
advent of bourgeois humanism. Already at the onset of anthropocentric vision,
we perceive a vicious circle which will eventually expand around the Cogito into
non-existence. The nihilism of Nietzsche will find its resolution in Foucault's
"death of Man" (Les Mots et les Choses). For Greuze, such development was
still at least two centuries away, but its first signs are anticipated in the shaky
position of patriarchal representatives of power as he depicted it. The mediating
authority became increasingly the function of the fiduciary regime, and the
quantifying and equalizing effects of that regime began to decimate not only God

affectives, lorsque leur contenu a été éliminé de la représentation et a subi
un refoulement' (Freud). (167-168)
as the ultimate referent, nor only the monarchic power, but spread lower
and wider and effected adversely, as Greuze's work shows, the authority of the
paterfamilias as well.

Greuze, the "inventor" of the painted drame bourgeois celebrated paternal
authority. In the climate of subtextual (using the term "text" in the Derridian
sense) deterioration of patriarchal hierarchy, the puissance paternelle was, on
the level of the home, without doubt indisputable. But the ontological flux
undermined this institution. With the edification of virtue of the patriarch presiding
over his family and its simultaneous, if subtle and understated, deconstruction,
another aspect of social interactions enters into evidence in the humanistic/anti-
humanistic process, and is notably evident in Greuze's genre paintings. It is the
discourse of the feminization of mores. The muddy ground is fertile for the return
of the feminine. This is the topic of next chapter.
CHAPTER 2
GREUZE AND FEMINIST DISCOURSE:
THE EFFECT OF FEMALENESS IN THE PROCESS OF PATRIARCHY'S
DEMISE IN GREUZE'S PAINTINGS

Dans matérialisme il y a mater. Alors l'idéalisme, qui s'oppose au matérialisme et
le refoule, n'est-il pas un patérialisme?
Goux, Les Iconoclastes

The eighteenth century is the epoch where woman “est le principe qui
gouverne, la raison qui dirige, la voix qui commande” as say the brothers
Goncourt (La Femme 371). Female protagonists are numerous in Greuze, and
since his work represents the dual—but always intermingling—bourgeois and
rococo modes, their representation echoes the epoch’s appreciation of women,
be it from the point of libertine galanterie, or as dictated by the moralizing
ideology of the Enlightenment.1 In the eighteenth century, in both, the aristocratic
and the bourgeois social spheres, the masculine glory of the sublime declined
and more “feminine” aspects of life became manifest. The brothers Goncourt’s
exclamation about the work of Watteau who is productive at the beginning of the
century expresses the tendency of the aristocracy: “Loin le sang, le carnage,
l'horreur et la terreur! Vive la gloire parée pour l'Opéra” (L'Art vol. I 10). By the
middle of the century, also vive la gloire of breast feeding, of nuclear family, of

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1 I use the word libertine as philanderer rather than freethinker.
marriage, of children; a glory more important for it spans the wide range of the bourgeois population. The notability of the feminine coincides with the materialistic tendency of the bourgeoisie and a certain reconciliation of nature and culture. Since the glory of the woman's sphere has horizontal symbolic signification as opposed to the celebrated vertical phallic glory of the warrior of the Old Regime, the question arises: is the mediocrity and certain banality—perceivable in the work of Greuze—also a function of the feminized ambiance in his epoch? Greuze's work lends itself to such a query since the rococo style and bourgeois virtues of his genre are both expressions of feminized esthetics and/or

\[2\] Some critics are reticent to ascribe the idealization of family (as the seat of virtue and happiness) as the symptoms of the rise of the bourgeoisie. Sarah Maza in her article "The 'Bourgeois' Family Revisited: Sentimentalism and Social Class in Prerevolutionary French Culture" takes that stand when she claims that sentimental images of family "cannot be taken as symptomatic of the rise of a bourgeois or middle class" (Intimate Encounters 39). For Maza, there are other causes responsible for the cultural change. She explains:

A society based on the rational contracting of isolated individuals lacked, however, the emotional glue theretofore provided by king, church, or ingrained social difference. In the eighteenth century the sentimental family became crucial as a model and ideal of social cohesion in reaction to the dilemmas posed by individualistic and rationalistic thinking; society could only cohere if the overwhelming power of family love was recognized, portrayed and extended from the domestic sphere outward. In this context, the family bore the burden not of shoring up a particular class but, on the contrary, of negating or transcending social divisions. (39)

It seems to me that the loss of the "emotional glue", provided traditionally by church and king, is the trait of the historical process of bourgeoisification, whereby the "emotional glue" is to be provided by the family presided by the paterfamilia onto whom the power held by church and king descended. Also, Maza's conclusion that sentimentalization of the family is a function "negating and transcending social divisions" in fact coincides with the democratic disposition of bourgeois ontology. Thus this notion supports, rather than argues against, the involvement of the bourgeois imperative. Maza's argument appears to be more congruent with eighteenth-century sensibilité than with postmodern criticism.
ethics. The feminization of Greuze’s epoch and his art are the product of an historical progress of flux in gender duality whereby the import of female essence slowly reestablishes its parity.\(^3\)

Goux’s structuralist perspective outlining the historical and metaphysical framework of feminization, as developed in his book *Les Iconoclastes*, informs my query of the reduction of masculine bias in Greuze’s work. Greuze’s paintings illustrate the history when the vectors of the *ideal* or the sublime (masculine qualities) and the *material* (maternalistic, female attributes) approach a crossing point.\(^4\) Goux presents the plot of the drama of feminization as he follows its thrust in the structure of Western culture’s esthetic sensibility. His meandering argument demonstrates why the insistent return of the feminine by a tendency to illustrate—that is to say by revealing the sublime, the imaginary and the symbolic in material things in artifice or art—decreases the status of the phallus and brings about the “somatic exhaustion” (Nietzsche) of patriarchal structure. Before that,

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\(^3\) The problematic of gendered essence, or essentialism, has become a point of contention in recent critical debate. The anti-essentialist attitude is not, however, pertinent here, because the epoch under scrutiny has not yet reached an equalizing of gendered essences, as is the case in our times. But the eighteenth century, being profoundly male biased, underscores gender duality.

\(^4\) Hegel’s metaphysics propose a convergence of symbolic significations of the masculine and the feminine: the thrust from high to low is the movement from the masculinized sublime down to the earthly, feminine realm. Goux says about Hegel’s perspective:

_à la fin, si on regarde de plus près, double mouvement de haut en bas et de bas en haut, qui ne peut aboutir, quelque part, qu’à un croisement, l’élément spirituel, dit Hegel [*Principe de la Philosophie du droit, § 360*] a dégradé l’existence de son ciel au niveau d’une présence terrestre, tandis que l’élément temporel a élevé son existence à la pensée et au principe de l’être rationel._ (219)
however, Greuze’s times mark the expansive cresting of the convergence of the symbolically masculine ideal and the material which is symbolically feminine; all the while the anticipation of descent of high humanism is in motion.

Goux’s point of departure is the inquiry into the significance of interdiction of images by the Mosaic Law. Keeping in mind Nietzsche’s charge that Judeo-Christian religion has effeminate quality which, according to Nietzsche, is responsible for undoing the exalted, aristocratic, masculine-centered existence, Goux’s approach is extremely apt. Goux makes the connection (and is surprised that Freud did not), between the interdiction of images and the interdiction of incest.⁵

Tailler des images des dieux, c’est faire une image matérielle, une image de la mère; c’est adorer sensuellement la figure maternelle. S’arracher au contraire aux séductions des sens et porter sa pensée vers le dieu infigurable, c’est se détourner du désir pour la mère, s’éléver vers le sublime père et respecter sa loi. (Les Iconoclastes 13)

From the Freudian perspective, the act of representing and of adoring representation is paramount to sensual adoration of the maternal figure, an incestuous impulse the Law forbids. Congruently, the repression of the maternal and the material by the interdiction of images enacts the triumph of spirituality over senses or instincts (Les Iconoclastes 12).

The problem arises from the fact that the notion of the ideal required the investment of the material and the maternal—in short the feminine—in the form

of negation, for the presentation of the sublime. It is a problem indeed, because the “purity” of the ideal and the sublime is contaminated, as it were, from the very start by the negated mater and matter, the feminine. The problem thus is the sublime in presentation and re/presentation. Goux follows Kant in saying that “[l]e sublime concerne directement l’irreprésentable” (Les Iconoclastes 18). And yet, as Goux points out, the Torah, the Testament of God’s will, is expressed in language of metaphors, “des figures des mots”:

Ramarquons toutefois que comparer l’Eternel à un père est une métaphore, une image, et que à ce titre—même si elle n’est pas une image taillée, mais une figure de mot—elle meuble d’imaginaire ce qui devrait rester vide. (Les Iconoclastes 25)

Words form the foundation of the Judeo-Christian ethic as they formulate the Mosaic Law. The use of language conjures up images, it represents. Thus, the representation of the Mosaic Law—the Commandments represented on the tablets Moses brought to his people—is already a transgression of the Law. There is a paradox implicit in the paternalistic legislative thrust of the Torah since the immaterial needs the material to present itself to accede to the sublime Law which, by definition, should not be representable. It is as if what was denounced—the material perceived by the senses, the maternal—returned by the back door the very instant it was expunged. There is no escaping the gendered duality.

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6 In fact the empty temple of the Jews is inhabited, so to speak, by the unspeakable Yahwe, who also has a feminine counterpart, the Sapentia Dei, Sophia.
The operation of the interdiction of the feminine does not appease the libidinal desire of men, just as the negation of matter does not satisfy existence, which is after all material; in real life and in metaphysics. The dialectic of repression and reappearance of the material and the maternal via representation of the Law in the metaphysical order by “les figures des mots” is analogous to the principle underlining the exchange of women in primitive society as outlined by Lévi-Strauss. The economy of exchange of women as well as spiritual consideration were motivated by an erotic underpinning (the sexual and the sublime are never far from each other): the woman was the gift to love (to have sex with), and through this commerce, the tribe as an organism could exist and function as an integral totality; law and order were the consequence. Give away a women to another clan out of fear of incest, get another one in return in order to forge the male community and to procreate: that was the logic establishing rudimentary morality. Thus men transferred onto women, who passed from one tribesman to another, a dimension far above the material and the profitable. The gift of the woman reached the sublime dimension of the Law. In its essence, the primitive operation of giving away the female blood-relative is analogous to the Judaic proscription where the feminine was restrained symbolically by interdiction of images. But in both cases, this negation needed to be negated, and the salutary Law of God demands that man take a woman in order to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” as God commanded Noah (Genesis 9:1). This is also the imperative in the operation of the exchange of women in primitive society.
In both the metaphysical and the social register, the feminine acquired the sublime quality which was later in Christianity recast onto the Mother of God and also onto the androgynous Christ. Absolute iconoclasm (which was not so absolute), or the negation of matter, collapsed in Christianity—the Judaic progeny—and Image was sanctified. As if to underscore the event, the sublime descended onto the maternal with the adoration of the Virgin Mary. And so the natural, material predisposition reinstated itself gradually into the cultural construct of Judeo-Christianity and replaced the absolutism of masculine symbolicity.

If making images means the return of the material or of the maternal which was distanced into the safety of symbols, the possibility of representation marks also ratification of the feminine. But slowly: this feminine is appreciated in the masculinized order, and femaleness as such is far from achieving its full potential. The Virgin was desexualized and the materiality of art was gendered only symbolically, as the masculine look allowed only a glimpse of the feminine, and did this for the contentment of phallocracy. Thus, as the masculine notion of the sublime was feminized and castrated somewhat in the process of feminization (by the return of the material and the maternal embodying the sublime), the feminine was masculinized and fetishized. This was the outcome of the paradox inherent in the rigorous Law of Father. As Laura Mulvey says:

The paradox of phallocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning.[...] women in representation can signify castration, and activate voyeristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent this threat. (25)
In the Renaissance, the feminine made a powerful presence not only indirectly by materiality of the art-thing or by veneration of the desexualized Goddess, the Mother of God. Representation of the body, male and female, became an important ingredient of humanistic iconography. While in the Middle Ages the nude body disappeared almost entirely (with the exception of images of the martyred saints), with reinstatement of the importance of man as the center of the human universe in the Renaissance, came the depiction of the nude body as a symbol of human glory. Leonardo da Vinci’s “Vitruvian Man” (c. 1485-90) illustrates the perfect proportions as attributes of the male body. But the dialectic of feminine/masculine the Judaic Law tempted to repress by interdiction of images, in other words by interdiction of the idol or the fetish, returned yet more openly with the female nude in art. The female nude as art was nominally the “eternal feminine” and had now the granted status of the sublime.

While the female body entered into the sphere of the divine, many depictions of various Venuses, Dianas and other goddesses of the Olympus appeared. Botticelli’s Birth of Venus is an example of sublimation of the female form. This trend to idealize woman’s body was imbued with erotic connotations, an effective continuation of the archetypal erotic impulse toward the sublimated material and maternal as is discernible already in the hermeneutics of the Second Commandment and in the operation of exchanges of women. Thus, although Descartes still made the division between the mind and the body, and the mind overrides the body, eroticism is an important factor in the idealistic concept of serious art. The feminine, one could say, had a renaissance. It
happened in the far distance of male perception, in the sphere of the ideal and of
divinity into which the male subject transferred the symbolized sexual essence.
We must not forget, however, that as the overall structure is phallocentric, a
woman, as woman, (not the masculinized feminine) stayed on the margin of
male sociability and art. As Linda Nead reminds us, "[t]he female body—natural,
unstructured—represents something that is outside the proper field of art and
aesthetic judgment". Nead adds that “artistic style, pictorial form, contains and
regulates the body and renders it an object of beauty, suitable for art and
aesthetic judgement" (25).

Goux says:

C'est pourquoi aussi l'emplacement de la femme, de même que le
lieu de l'autre nature, est celui de dépassement relatif de la scission
ouverte par le symbolique. Ce n'est pas sans lucidité il faut le reconnaître,
biens qu'il ne s'agisse que d'une indication isolée, inassimilable, une
météorite de vérité extérieure au système global, que Hegel a pu désigner
la femme, en un point, comme lieu de l'unité de l'idée et de la matière, unité
qui est en somme anticipée imaginairement par la production esthétique.
(229)

In the esthetic register, the role of the feminine as the unifier and mediator
overseeing the dialectic of idea and matter meant that the feminine was further
fetishized, reified, sublimated, scrutinized. But it was a progress for Her as Man
was making Her physical presence more and more appreciable. Furthermore,
while art endowed the nude woman's body with sublime beauty, in the domain of
pragmatic life, flesh and blood women influenced the rough mannerisms of
uncouth warriors—in the highest circles in any case. The Gargantuas began to
get civilized. And so, in Rabelais' l'abbaye de Thélème, the utopia of perfect
society, women as well as men enjoy equal status in a gentle, refined, if simple milieu.

Joan Kelly reminds us that in the Renaissance nude "Love, Beauty Woman, aestheticized as Botticelli’s Venus and given the cosmic import, were in effect denatured, robbed of body, sex, and passion by this elevation" (41). By the eighteenth century this was no longer so. With the focus on nature, imagery of women revealed the new stress on motherhood, while art also registers with lascivious indulgence the erotic attributes of woman’s body. In the later part of the eighteenth century, sublimated eroticism made a turn toward soft pornography as is visible in the rococo “whorehouse elegance”, to borrow Madelyn Gutwirth’s expression (6), particularly in Boucher’s, Fragonard’s, but also in Greuze’s paintings. The traditional split of the symbol of woman as the “eternal feminine” and the woman to whom erotic longing is permitted (the duality is already implicit in Mosaic Law) forms, naturally, part of Greuze’s genre.

Another step in this long process of feminization (of which I am presenting a simplified version) is the advent of the bourgeoisie and a capitalistic economy which finally recast the mediating function from God onto the general equivalent, money. In the global sense, the structure of this process signifies the undoing of centralized phallic supremacy, and works towards a dispersed, damaged and devalued, we can say emasculated paternal morality and degraded esthetics. This is parallel with the down-to-(mother)earth materialism and the inclusion and empowering of femaleness. Money as the new divinity (Marx) is yet another avatar of sublime fetishization and also, in the last analysis, of feminization. The
material or the maternal in the form of the general equivalent, money, is the new, bourgeois avatar of the sublime—adored, but flattened. Goux says: "L'équivalent général devient un intermédiaire étranger, un tiers indépendant. Les attributs propres à l'activité humaine sont transférés à ce médiateur [...] Cette médiation, forcement transcendante aux sujets de l'échange, est de l'ordre d'une loi" (36). Goux also points out: "L'argent, quoique produit humain, est une essence étrangère, séparée de l'homme, de son travail: essence étrangère qui le domine et qu'il adore" (34); we note here the same attributes and the same ambivalence of approach which underpin adoration of Father and of the sublimated and erotic feminine. It is the consequence of idealizing reality. The fiduciary regime thus characterized incarnates the metaphysical import—money is the bourgeois metaphor for God, the mediator and arbitrator of human affairs. The materialistic aspect invested in the fiduciary order conforms, once again, to the feminine symbolism of matter and mater. Moreover, the fiduciary regime to which Marx and Goux ascribe the metaphysical import, is a perpetuation of the primitive exchange of women and its foundation is a sexualized process. And following always the meandering path of the formation and the reformation, the materializing and the fetishizing of the sublime, in short its feminizing, the fiduciary regime banalizes the sublime, destroys the erection of the phallus and accelerates the progression towards horizontal positioning of human enterprise. In the artistic representation of the bourgeoisie is also evident a descent from the heights of masculine heroic magnificence to mediocrity. The sublime element of female imagery also suffers. In the second part of the eighteenth century, the
images of women became sentimentalized, softly pornographic or bound to the
prescribed morality. Those are the characteristics of females in Greuze’s work.

In Greuze’s times and in his work, not only the symbolic representation of
femininity as the material substitute of the masculine sublime, but the real human
female worth became part of the makeup of the patriarchal structure. As
women’s position was remarkable, the debate about their status was
considerable. An insistence on equality between the sexes was expressed by
some Encyclopedists. The call for understanding the human condition by
empirical methods dictated to some encyclopedists that inequality between the
sexes is incompatible with the natural law. At the close of the century, Condorcet
protested against the omission of women’s rights in the Déclaration des Droits de
l’Homme et du Citoyen in his article “Sur l’admission des femmes au droit de
cité” published in 1790 in the Journal de la Société de 1789. Condorcet made a
strong case for women’s equality, disregarding biological determinants:

Il serait difficile de prouver que les femmes sont incapables d’exercer les
droits de cité. Pourquoi des êtres exposés à des grossesses, et à des
indispositions passagères, ne pourraient-ils exercer des droits dont on n’a
jamais imaginé de priver les gens qui ont la goutte tous les hivers et qui
s’enrhument aisément. (122)

Condorcet’s feminism is significant but still, unfortunately, premature. The
post-Revolutionary era, expressed by the Code of Napoleon recoiled from
considering women as citizens (not to mention equal citizens). After the
Revolution, the status of the aging father as the overseer of morals was
preeminent. In fact, intensified paternalism is also the continuation of the
Enlightenment tendency as Greuze depicted it.\(^7\)

Rousseau's writing expresses more accurately the current ideology's
slant: "En tout ce qui ne tient pas au sexe, la femme est homme", he says
(Émile, 446). There is the sex part, the point which undoes the possibility of
gender parity: "la seule chose que nous savons avec certitude est que tout ce
qu'ils [men and women] ont de commun est de l'espèce, et que tout qu'ils ont de
différent est du sexe. [...] L'un doit être actif et fort, l'autre passif et faible: il faut
nécessairement que l'un veuille et puisse, il suffit que l'autre résiste peu" (Émile
446). Evidently for Rousseau, the gender difference is not a balanced complex.
Rousseau's logic led him to this argument: "la femme est faite pour plaire et pour
être subjuguée, elle doit se rendre agréable à l'homme au lieu de le provoquer"
(Émile 446). Rousseau's prescription for women on the one hand forcefully
enunciates the importance of women as mothers and as êtres sensibles in
sociability, but also lets us perceive the limitations of equality.

De la bonne constitution des mères dépend d'abord celle des enfants; du
soin des femmes dépend la première éducation des hommes; des femmes
dépendent encore leurs moeurs, leurs passions, leurs goûts, leurs plaisirs,
leur bonheur même. Ainsi toute l'éducation des femmes doit être relative
aux hommes. Leur plaire, leur être utiles, se faire aimer et honorer d'eux,
les élever jeunes, les soigner grands, les conseiller, les consoler, leur
rendre la vie agréable et douce: voilà les devoirs des femmes dans tous les
temps, et ce qu'on doit leur apprendre dès leur enfance. (Émile 455)

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\(^7\) For a concise study on the debate on women in the eighteenth century, see
Steibrügge.
As Lieselotte Steinbrügge notes, the passage from rationalism to sensualism means close liaison between mind and body; and in the current bourgeois discourse, woman’s body outweighed her mind. The procreative functions of women, their comforting maternal sensibility, and of course men’s lust, determined women’s worth, while their intellectual merit was viewed with scepticism. Thus perceived, the body and mind imbalance in women meant the restriction of egalitarian and feminist impulses. In truth, the powerful influence of women of high society was a point of contention for Rousseau and other philosophes. Mercier warns: “tant que les femmes domineront la France, y donneront le ton, jugeront du mérite et du génie des hommes [as was the mode in the high social circles], les Français n’auront ni cette fermeté d’âme, ni cette sage économie, ni cette gravité ni ce mâle caractère qui doivent convenir à des hommes libres” (357 n.7). The sexist attitude resonates with echoes of the archetypal economy of exchange of women, and of the sublimation of the maternal feminine juxtaposed with the exigency to satisfy carnal desires.

Notwithstanding the antifeminist notion of Rousseau’s prescription, the attribution of sensibility to the feminine was viewed as a positive instance. This is the Enlightenment’s step on the long path of feminizing which began in the dawn of history: sensibilité is the manifestation of the compromised sublime. In the eighteenth century, feminist and antifeminist attitudes were in flux, along with the flux and blend of mind and body parameters, and the dialectic of the masculine and the feminine. These were the new modes of sensibility which along with the
stress on nature, science, and universalism were part of the bourgeois economy infiltrating the Old Regime. This sensibility informs Greuze’s work.

Greuze painted his epoch’s sensibilité and its inherent objective: happiness. And “l’être sensible” (as Rousseau called woman) was to provide happiness for men. Thus, as noted Louis Hautecoeur and François Monod, “[c]e sont les femmes et les enfants qui ont été ses [Greuze’s] modèles d’habitude et de prédilection, ceux dont il s’est toujours inspiré avec bonheur” (Les dessins 14). The mode of sensibilité comprises the domain of love, and the domain of love is, as Rousseau saw it, “l’empire des femmes”. Rousseau made the following observation which sums up the essence of feminization of morals as the natural process of civilizing:

Voyez comment le physique nous amène insensiblement au moral, et comment de la grossière union des sexes naissent peu à peu les plus douces lois de l’amour. L’empire des femmes n’est point à elles parce que les hommes l’ont voulu, mais parce que le veut la nature: il était à elles avant qu’elles parussent l’avoir. Ce même Hercule, qui crut faire violence aux cinquante filles de Thespus, fut pourtant contraint de filer près d’Omphale; et le fort Samson n’était pas si fort que Dalia. Cet empire est aux femmes, et ne peut leur être ôté, même quand elles en abusent; si jamais elles pouvaient le perdre, il y a longtemps qu’elles l’auraient perdu. (Émile 449-50)

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8 The historians also note Greuze’s limited vocabulary of male types: Deux ou trois passe-partout, accomodés à des mines différentes lui servent pour tous usages [...].La première idée, le dessin préliminaire du “Vieillard éloquent et pathétique”, du père de la Lecture de la Bible, de l’Accordée, du Paralytique, sont fournis par deux masques rudes de plbéiens, caractérisé avec insistance; celui-ci hirsute, mal équarri, le cou épais, les traits mal venus, l’autre plus régulier et plus expressif. (Les Dessins 12-13)
Rousseau described the new myth of the feminine. He considered it the natural order of things that the woman’s “empire of love” and its “douces lois de l’amour”, supplant the haughty presumptions of the crude eroticism of masculine heroism (Rousseau mentions Hercules and Samson in this context). In other words, the concept of love in the eighteenth century was the effect of mutation of the masculinized sublime into feminine form. This motif is the framework of Rousseau’s La Nouvelle Héloïse. Belles âmes like Julie find semi-sweet happiness through love, virtue, and fulfillment of duty. Rousseau’s Julie combines the sensual and the maternal aspect, both illustrated by Greuze’s images of women.

Greuze’s representation of women can be divided into two types. (The delimitation, however, is not always definite). Firstly, the young innocent but seductive girl representing the “douces lois d’amour”, the notorious Greuze’s Girl. But the sublime beauty or pathos of women in traditional eroticized representation is replaced in Greuze’s Girl by plain sensuality. Secondly, there is the mother type, an image around which is organized the moral prescription for women. Of course she would be the now-lauded representative of the initially rejected maternity.

The Goncourts are skeptical of the innocence of Greuze’s Girl. They propose that Greuze presented us with multitude of paintings of girls, the types Laclos incarnated in Cecile in Liaisons dangereuses:
Greuze ne prête point à la jeune fille dont il a répété si souvent les traits, d'autre pureté que le sourire, la jeunesse, la faiblesse et les larmes. La pudeur virginale, telle qu'il l'exprime [...] l'ingénuité qu'il personnifie est l'ingénuité de Cécile Volanges, l'ingénuité sans force et sans remords, cédant à la surprise, aux sens, au plaisir, avec le charme et l'adresse d'une hypocrisie angélique et d'une fausseté naturelle. ("La peinture de Greuze" 67)

Greuze's *La jeune fille qui pleure son oiseau mort* (fig.7), *La cruche cassée* (fig.6), or *Le miroir cassé, La prière à l'amour* (fig.8) and many other paintings of young girls are the Ceciles "whose immaculacy has only just been stained", as says Norman Bryson (190). Lost virginity (symbolized by dead bird, broken pitcher, or broken mirror), although regretted by the protagonist, is nevertheless calculated to evoke libertine pleasure in male spectators. We must not forget that it is the masculine discourse which dictates valuation of the female image. In that perspective, the "natural falseness" with which, as the Goncourts note, Greuze endowed his Girl, can be the expression of duplicity—always the hidden part of masculinized conception of the feminine—now openly evident. In effect, the Goncourts articulated the impression given by imagery where the sublime and the profane are conflated and equated, insinuating thus an homology with the entire notion characterizing bourgeois ethics and esthetics.

Bryson points out the psychological aspect of Greuze's Girl's ambivalence and underscores its purpose in the libertine tendency of the epoch:

the image is prized precisely because it can overcome the restraints and contradictions of the real: it is a place of sanctioned transgression, where the bans and proscriptions of external and psychic authority can be negated at will. (138)
Bryson’s reading stresses the factor of human will, Cartesian humanistic posture and its permissive aspect vis-à-vis the Law of Father. As Linda Mulvey suggests, *libertinage* in the epoch was due to resistance to and fear of the Father and his Law (34). What this means is that *libertinage* has its roots way back in human history in the impotent fury of not attaining gratification by sexual communion with the sublime feminine, inciting thus fear and hate of Father. It is as if the revolt bore fruit. In humanism it demeaned Father’s authority and is coincidental—in the register of the visual arts—with a move toward the depiction of a more or less full-blown female sexuality. The profanity of the biological and sexual female body which in Greuze’s Girl is, in the final analysis, an expression of *gallanterie*, blurs the sharp clarity of the masculine sublime; as if the profanity soiled the high ideal. The “sanctioned transgression”, as Bryson names it, provides for the false ingenuity of Greuze’s Girl.

Diderot, while musing over *La Jeune fille qui pleure son oiseau mort* expressed the delight of the male spectator over “the fall” signified by the dead bird. Diderot instantly recognizing the metaphor—the dead bird signifies a sexual encounter (probably the first for the girl) not sanctified by marriage—reacts:

> Tableaux délicieux...Que son visage a des expressions! Sa douleur est profonde, elle a son malheur, elle y est tout entière...Délicieux! Délicieux!

His next thought is tender, playful and condescending; the girl’s chagrin is poignant, but amusing:

> Bientôt on se surprend conversant avec cette enfant et la consolant. Mais, petite, votre douleur est bien profonde, bien réfléchie! Que signifie cet air rêveur, mélancolique? Quoi, pour un oiseau! Vous ne pleurez pas, vous êtes affligée, et la pensée accompagne votre affliction.
Diderot is a moralist, and in search of happiness. While piqued by the vision of a first sexual encounter, he proposes a happy ending congruent with morality; the profane needs to be sanctified in a proper *drame bourgeois*. Thus, in order to fully appreciate the image, he contrives a counter movement: the damage would be repaired by marriage. Diderot consoles the young girl:

> Et pourquoi pleurer? Il vous a promis, il ne manquera à rien de ce qu’il vous a promis. Quand on a été assez heureux pour rencontrer une enfante charmant comme vous, pour s’attacher, pour lui plaire, c’est pour toute la vie… (Salon de 1765 181).

Greuze’s Girl appears solo, or forms part of an ensemble. The theme of erotic delight and consolation through marriage suggested by Diderot as the underlining plot of *La Jeune fille qui pleure son oiseau mort* is developed in *Les Oeufs cassés* (full title: *Les Oeufs cassés, ou une mère grondant un jeune homme pour avoir renversé un panier d’œufs que la servante apportait du marché. Un enfant tente de réunir un œuf*) (fig. 20). The painting depicts an old mistress reprimanding a young man for distracting a young woman so that she

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9 The pendant of *Les Oeufs cassés, Le Geste napolitain*, presents the same figures, but is more happy in tone. In this painting a young woman is teasing a young man—a Portuguese gentleman disguised as peddler (Munhall 50) who perhaps tried to seduce her—by passing a hand her chin (a Neapolitan gesture). The old woman seems to want to retain him. More playful, not morally laden, more “Italian”, the narration is more in the style of Boucher or Fragonard. Mark Ledbury qualifies the paintings as “burlesque bricolage of his [Greuze’s] Italian travesties” (*Intimate Encounters* 57). Richard Rand speaks of “ribald anecdotes” (*Intimate Encounters* 151). Ledbury and Rand stress a humorous aspect in these paintings which is rather painfully absent from Greuze’s work in general.
lets go of her basket of eggs. The broken eggs, as Munhall notes, are once again the symbol of lost virginity (Greuze 40).

The response of a contemporary critic to a situation which certainly could have brought misfortune to the young servant girl in the age of Valmonts, indicates the insouciant libertine attitude:

Avec quel plaisir on considère une jeune fille aimable affligée d'avoir renversé un panier d'oeufs. Sa tête est charmante; elle est peinte avec une belle douceur et pleine d'expression. On trouve dans le reste du tableau, avec la plus grande vérité, une force singulière de couleur, et un effet très piquant. (Qtd. in Munhall, Greuze 4010)

"Effet très piquant" indeed. The leniency, even indulgence toward the libertine attitude of young men corresponds to Diderot's delight over La Jeune fille qui pleure son oiseau mort. But Greuze, true to his calling, gave to this painting a moralistic undertone in the vein of Diderot's consoling gesture vis-à-vis La Jeune fille qui pleure son oiseau mort.

The semiotics of the painting suggest that notwithstanding the boisterous youth's transgression, all will be well again and the couple will get married. The basket of eggs suggests fertility, and the painting's overall tone does not really suggest the misfortune of a child out of wedlock. I would also argue that it would be out of character, as the happy family is Greuze's primary and consistent directive. There are other signs supporting the prospect of matrimony. A small boy attempts in his innocence to correct the fault by trying to mend a broken egg. The small arc and arrow beside him indicates that he is the allegory of love. This

10 E.-C. Fréron. "Lettre XV: Expositions des ouvrages de peinture, de sculpture et de gravure". L'Année littéraire, 1757.
little boy seems to signify a conflation of erotic passion and the moral imperative as he tries to mend the egg. True, an egg can never be put together again. I would argue that the fallibility of the boy’s/Eros’s action reflects the impossibility of complete reconciliation of passion and virtuous duty in marriage, a notion characterizing also the marriage of Julie and Wolmar in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Furthermore, the action in the painting takes place in the right part (if we divide the painting diagonally, from the upper left corner to the lower right corner) of a simple village home, the family space. It is as if Greuze wanted to underscore the prominence of the domestic space by placing the action off-center. The heads of the young man and the old woman—a mother figure—lean together, more or less. The old woman reprimands, she threatens the youth, demanding perhaps compensation for the damage and, in this sense, her gesture echoes the little boy’s/Eros’s reparatory action. Importantly, in this family affair, the mother figure, rather than the father, assumes the function of the arbitrator. The converging slant of the gesture of the seducer and of the old woman indicates a sort of complicity between the two, as if they were deciding the young woman’s fate whereby she will find her appropriate position as a mother and wife, and family order will be restored.

The young woman, however, is upset. Greuze gives her a melancholy and withdrawn expression and paints her reduced into a sitting position, while everyone else is standing. It is as if she is dominated by the process which involves her, but has not much to say about it. (Is this not an echo of the logistics of the sublime and of the operation of exchange of women in the primitive
society?) Her back is turned to her probable lover and she is leaning away from him, while he leans away from her. In effect, she shows signs of refusal and distress, regarding the position she is in. Perversely, the semiotics indicating refusal and distress on her part give this woman an aura of virtue; being timid, she is not a “light” woman, she understands the gravity of the situation, and her consciousness regarding virtue as duty will restore the harm done by a flight of passion; clearly she would make a good wife. This would have been the moral imperative in Greuze’s times. In the discussion of the body language of the bride in *L’Accordée de village* (Chapter 3), I point out a similar reticence in the young bride. It is as if, in spite of Greuze’s obvious approbation of marriage, he is not blind to the fact that a young woman could be skeptical about her future role. In both paintings, the young woman’s features indicate a certain unwillingness to enter into the bond. This supposition would indicate an intuition on Greuze’s part regarding the feminine condition above and beyond patriarchal assumptions about morality of marriage. This thought might be comforting to today’s feminists, but it is perhaps anachronistic. What we read today as reticence, reserve, and alarm on the part of Greuze’s Girls, would have been seen by a male spectator of the eighteenth century as delicacy and timidity; qualities that would have rendered women desirable and beautiful. Their true state of mind, which Greuze does capture, would have been concealed by patriarchal imperatives concerning the feminine.  

11 Ledbury points out that the narrative content of *Les Oeufs cassés* and *Le Geste napolitain* is linked to the popular mixture of farce and morality in the opéra
Virtue and Duty of Women in Greuze

I situate Les oeufs cassés on the middle ground between the libertine tendency which promoted the images of Greuze’s Girl (seen solo in La Jeune fille qui pleure son oiseau mort or La Cruche cassée for example, and Greuze’s moralizing which celebrates the maternal sensibility.

In the majority of Greuze’s genre paintings the moralizing tendency concerning women’s virtue and their social obligation is exemplified by mothers and daughters as supporters of their husbands and sons (La Malédiction paternelle [fig. 1a, 1b], Le paralytique [fig. 16]). We also see wet-nurses (Le Départ en nourrice [fig. 4], Le Retour de la nourrice [fig. 5]), we see women attending to children and feeding them (Silence [fig. 3], Le Goûter, [fig. 23]) and, as is desirable by the mode of sensibilité, the charitable woman figures as well (La Dame de charité). Mothers delight in their maternity (La Mère bien-aimée [fig. 2]) and it is clear that the woman’s consecration to the family—the milieu of paternal despotism—is well compensated by the love of her husband and her children. These women have passed the stage of tender and juicy seductive comique. This, he mentions, is true about L’Accordée de village. Concerning the comparison of compositions, Ledbury says that in L’Accordée de village Greuze “went far beyond [Les Oeufs cassés and Le Geste napolitain]”. On this occasion, the modern model of virtue (the central groom) and the classical model of ideal beauty were harmoniously mixed and mutually reinforcing” (57). Ledbury insinuates that there is a connection between the development of Greuze’s skill in designing a composition and the rise of his moral intent (in the case of L’Accordée de village, the idea of virtue of matrimony). Ledbury detects a progression from Les Oeufs cassés and Le Geste napolitan of 1755 to
erotism enhanced by prudery and vulnerability as in La Jeune fille qui pleure son oiseau mort, and have progressed to the next stage: marriage and motherhood. Dominating the household, they ease the lives of male family members and are, primarily, producers and educators of infant citizens. Greuze depicts them in roles exemplifying their duty in echo to Rousseau's instruction:

La première éducation est celle qui importe le plus, et cette première éducation appartient incontestablement aux femmes: si l'Auteur de la nature eût voulu qu'elle appartînt aux hommes, il leur eût donné du lait pour nourrir les enfants. (Émile 5).

According to Rousseau, it is natural, it is God's will that mothers nurse their children because moral foundation is acquired with mother's milk.

This motivates not only Greuze's paintings but also his one literary creation, the drama Bazile et Thibault ou deux educations. Greuze provides a profoundly banal tract on education in the same vein as Rousseau's Émile.

Greuze never finished the work which was to be a text accompanied by series of paintings telling the story of a contrasted destiny of two young men, Bazile and Thibault. Their destiny is determined right from the beginning by the way they were nurtured in infancy. Bazile's mother nurses her boy which sends him on the righteous path of a true honnête homme who marries an equally fine woman. Thibault as a baby, on the other hand, is sent to the wet-nurse, and as a consequence he leads a dissipated life, ends up in prison and causes his parents' despair and ultimately their death. The painting Départ de la nourrice ou la privation sensible would have illustrated the upsetting moment of baby

L'Accordée de village painted in 1761. The burlesque is certainly gone, replaced
Thibault’s departure, and *Les préjugés de l’Enfance, ou le retour de nourrice*, the moment when the infant is brought home. Greuze provides this commentary:

Le jeune Thibault revient de nourrice avec tous ses bagages; sa nourrice le présente à sa mère qui s’empresse à le recevoir; alors le petit enfant se rejette avec effroi dans le bras de la mère qu’il connaît, et, par cette action, fait des reproches à sa mère pour son indifférence.\(^{12}\)

The pattern is set: little Thibault, denied the maternal breast, is on the wrong track for life. At the tender age of six, Thibault is cruel to animals, while little Bazile, having been breast-fed by his own mother is modest and charitable. And the plot develops in that vein: Thibault is destined to wrong-doing, Bazile to virtue. This drama underscores Rousseau’s notion that children acquire a good and industrious character with their mother’s milk. Deny this basic element to your children, Greuze seems to warn his audience, and the future development of the infant is in jeopardy.

Greuze’s little play also reflects his inclination to paint children. The Goncourt’s point out, “Le doux attendrissement qui vient de l’enfance est répandu dans toutes ses toiles, les Sevreuses, la Bonne éducation, la Privation sensible, le Retour de nourrice: le coeur de son oeuvre est un berceau” (*L’Art* vol. 2 51).

This is congruous with the bourgeois feminized ideology underpinning the mode by bourgeois moralizing.

\(^{12}\) Brookner appends Greuze’s *Bazile et Thibault, ou les deux éducations* to her monograph on Greuze with a note that the “manuscript was originally in the possession of Caroline de Valory and was noted in the *Journal de l’Empire*, Il Frimaire An XIV, and published by Philippe de Chennevières under the title *Un Roman de Greuze* in the *Annuaire des Artistes* for 1861. Only the sixth episode (episode f), *Le jeune Thibault commence à montrer son mauvais naturel*, is in Greuze’s handwriting; the rest was apparently dictated” (Greuze 156).
of sensibilité which emphasizes happiness and the morality of procreation and family life.

Madelyn Gutwirth points out that when women "move from segregation to integration into this world, women come bearing the ancient male-generated symbolic baggage defining them as temptresses, nurturers, or hags" (89). Greuze does not omit either aspect of the female image. Clearly, the lesson of feminine virtue in the proper bourgeois family setting would not be well learned if there were not examples of badly behaved women. In Greuze, the bad woman, the hag, has didactic purpose: Greuze paints the stereotype of a hysterical female, or the Bad Mother in La Femme colère (fig. 21). There the mother seems to frighten and alienate her husband and two daughters by her unreasonable fury. Greuze also paints the cantankerous, if not nasty, mother-in-law in La Belle-mère (fig. 22). La Paresseuse italienne (fig. 10) warns against sloth, a fault incompatible with the character of a good wife.

The negative maternal image is, however, rare in Greuze. Marriage is certainly one of the most important themes of the epoch, and woman's influence is pacifying. In Greuze's genre painting, the discord in the family, if there is any, is usually played out by fathers and sons. It is the male figures who act as principal protagonists in the majority of Greuze's drames bourgeois. The woman in Greuze usually knows her place, as would the mother in La Mère bien-aimée.

By the eighteenth century, the repressed feminine has come a long way. But nurturess, temptress or hag does not qualify woman. Not even in Greuze. The archetypal repression of the maternal and the material did not really allow
masculine closure, and feminine symbolism incessantly made its return, more and more pronounced as civilization progressed, until in the eighteenth century woman “est le principe qui gouverne, la raison qui dirige, la voix qui commande”. And it seems to me that this effectuated the gradual degradation of the epic sublime of art—tied in many of its aspects to the female image. This happened with the appreciation of materialism which parallels that of women. Greuze’s bourgeois work lacks lofty beauty for it is an expression of a moment when democracy progressively undid the centrality of the one phallic signifier while the other side of the gender duality that underscored human sociability, the feminine part, rose in significance. Is this trend—discernible Greuze’s banal iconography—the beginning of the end of art? Obviously not. But the turn modern art takes, dictated as it is by the new socio-economical system, is a rebellion against the bourgeois stance promulgated by Greuze. The role of the feminine in the new stage of artistic production is an aspect beyond this study. But I will point out that the subjective or internal space which plays an important role in modernist creativity is, in the symbolic register, feminine.
CHAPTER 3

L'ACCORDÉE DE VILLAGE:
ORDER AND DISORDER, NATURE AND CULTURE IN THE INSTITUTION OF
MARRIAGE

In his letter to Melchoir Grimm, Diderot remarked on the pyramid-like
composition of L'Accordée de village, Ou Un mariage, et l'instant où le père de
l'Accordée délivre la dot à son gendre (fig. 9 and 9a). Diderot praised the unity of
the composition and found in this painting, as he did in Greuze's work in general,
a subtle didactic and natural aspect of bourgeois morality so desired by the
philosophes of the Enlightenment: “La composition m’en a paru très belle: c’est
là la chose comme elle a dû se passer. Il y a douze figures; chacune est à sa
place, et fait ce qu’elle doit. Comme elles s’enchaînent toutes! Comme elles vont
en ondoyant et en pyramidant!” (Salon de 1761 165).¹ There is no doubt: the
composition is solid and its symmetry is carefully structured. The symmetry
emphasizes the depicted moral ideal: father gives his daughter to a young man;
all the family is present at a rite which assures continuation of that family; or in a

¹ The painting was immediately well accepted not only by Greuze's partisan
Diderot. Diderot praised the painting and commented on its popularity when first
shown: “Enfin je l’ai vu, ce tableau de notre ami Greuze; mais ce n’a pas été
sans peine; il continue d’attirer la foule.” (Salon de 1761 164). Other critics didn’t
hesitate to applaud L’Accordée de village. In the Abécédario, Mariette wrote that
the painting was “justement regardé comme le chef d’oeuvre de ce peintre” (33).
larger sense, the continuation of an order in which family signifies the foundation.²

But is the pyramidal structure stable? Close scrutiny of L’Accordée de village reveals cracks and fissures in the seemingly solid composition and in the edifying narrative content. My reading suggests that those fissures are the echo of gender related upsets deeply rooted in the history of patriarchy—in the exchange of women, the operation shaping sociability, culture, and commerce—reverberating in bourgeois matrimony in the time of the Enlightenment. The composition of L’Accordée de village, its protagonists and their social and pictorial relations reflect how the economy of commerce/marriage effectuates, paradoxically, an ever increasing gulf in the patriarchal culture the act of marriage is designed to uphold. The painting also lets us perceive that money, as it intercedes more and more in human interaction in the eighteenth century, augments the disparity inscribed in the morality of marriage. My analysis shows that the solidity of the painting’s composition falls short where the narrative of marriage involves gold money.

Because the manifest solidity of the composition stresses the fundamental moral value of marriage and reflects the validity of Father’s Law in Greuze’s day, I first examine the painting’s compositional symmetry.

² Mark Ledbury says that “Greuze compacted into one moment many aspects of one narrative—meeting, courtship, betrothal, civil and legal ceremonies” (Intimate Encounters 58). Ledbury’s argument is convincing, as my personal archeology of the specific nature of the depicted moment had no results.
The figure of the groom constitutes the central vertical axis. The line which touches the heads of the mother and the bride crosses the line touching the heads of the older sister (this figure was described as such by Diderot [Salon de 1761 521]) and the attorney of law, the tabellion. The lines intersect with the central vertical axis above the head of the groom. It is thus that Greuze constructed the composition as an isosceles triangle. The base of the triangle is wide (I suggest a line on the floor which traverses the image of the chickens and the bowl). The width of the base gives an unshakable stability to the composition, a stability which conforms to the epoch's moral ideal concerning conjugal rapport.

The wide base of the triangle on the floor underscores the condition of ordinary people, grounded, as it were, in the natural environment. In concordance with the current ideology, the terre à terre naturalness of the rustic scene advocates that morality and virtue are the function of an unaffected simple life. Thus it is not surprising that Diderot found the painting "plein d'esprit et de délicatesse [dont] le choix de ses sujets marque la sensibilité des bonnes moeurs" (Salon de 1761 170). The locality enhances the morality of marriage which, as Diderot pointed out, inspires "l'amour de la vertu, l'horreur du vice" (Le Fils naturel 168).

While Greuze and Diderot were both satisfied with the symmetry of the composition, neither of them would limit themselves to a rigid order. That would be against nature. As Diderot noted: "Car que sert au poète d'imaginer des tableaux, si le comédien demeure attaché à sa disposition symétrique et à son
action compassée?" (Le Fils naturel 184). In Greuze's case, the poet and the actor are unified. The painter is the poet, the painting is his stage, and the function of the artist is incarnated in the representation. Interesting is the paradoxical position of Diderot concerning the artificial and the natural in art. If Diderot appreciates the natural-like order of the composition ("c'est la chose comme elle a dû se passer"), he sees that the "enchaînement" of figures is pointedly artificial. In the "Paradoxe sur le comédien", the philosophe suggests that a reconciliation of artful imitation with the work of nature enhances works of art (Oeuvres 317).

However, the ambivalence, artifice/naturalness, in L'Accordée de village has implication Diderot, Greuze, or their audience could not have perceived. The pictorial and social stability of the structure of culture—supported by the classical compositional triangle—is undermined by the natural fluxes. First of all, there is a divide, a duality which simultaneously supports the symmetry as well as it insinuates a notion of a split. The central vertical axis represents an almost perfect division in the representation of sexes: the right side is occupied predominantly by male figures, the left exclusively by females. (The painter enhanced the division by use of tone—in concordance with fashion. Women, particularly the bride are in lighter dresses, men are dressed in more somber colors.)

To unravel the significance of divisions and fissures in L'Accordée de village, the theory of Lévi-Strauss regarding the rite of marriage in its most primitive form—the exchange of women—as the archetype of trade, and Lacan's
view of the feminine as being imbued with phallic symbolicity is useful. Lévi-Strauss states that the exchange of women eliminates “the risk of seeing a biological family [where incest would be the order of things] becom[ing] established as a closed system […]; the biological group can no longer stand apart, and the bond of alliance with another family ensures the dominance of the social over the biological, and of the cultural over the natural” (The Elementary 479).³ Thus in the social intercourse between tribal communities motivated by the taboo of incest, woman becomes an important and valuable commodity, an object to be used in an elementary commercial transaction. Lacan extends the concept further: “women in the real order serve, if they forgive me for saying so, as objects of exchanges required by the elementary structures of kinship and which are sometimes perpetuated in the imaginary order, while what is transmitted in a parallel way in the symbolic order is the phallus” (Ecrits 207). Lacan speaks here about the imaginary order, the order of representation, which primarily includes art. Lacan comments reiterate that the female image in art functions as the catalyst of transcendence. This process elevates the feminine, certainly, but the feminine monopolized for masculine purposes; being the carrier of phallic symbolism, it is masculinized. The operation of sublimating and masculinizing the feminine in art is homologous to the value of woman-as-gift in the economy of exchanges of women. The trafficking with women—the prototype of marriage—is thus imbued with a signification transcending the simple

³ For analysis of the etiology of the sexual contract involving the marriage contract and as it appears in the eighteenth century, see Pateman at all and
utilitarian concept of a commercial exchange. The exchange of women, who are treated in the operation of exchange of women both as human subjects and as objects, confers on the special gift of human flesh a superior distinction, certainly. “Woman could never become just a sign and nothing more, since even in a man’s world she is still a person, and since insofar as she is defined as a sign she must be recognized as a generator of signs” says Lévi-Strauss (The Elementary 469). But because the male libidinal investment regulated by the taboo of incest meant that women must be traded, the sublimation is connected with commerce: in the name of the phallus’s tumescence, women are objectified while the phallus is feminized.

Primarily, the symbolic site of the phallus is the site of God the Father. It is the site of the legislator of order overseeing the relationships between subjects and commercial exchanges. In spite of the fact that Judeo-Christian tradition requires that marriage and the ensuing order be sanctioned by God, in the marriage ceremony as represented by Greuze, God—or his representative, the priest—is manifestly absent. In this way L’Accordée de village depicts the tendency of the Enlightenment, inherited from the Renaissance, to “naturalize” the celestial power of God, transmit it down to earth, to the paterfamilias demeaning thus the phallic import. René Pillorget stresses that the primary parental role—as exemplified by Greuze—is a point to which, “[l]e clergé semble, dans une mesure, s’y être résigné” (21).

Bérenguier 329.
The cascade, God → king → paterfamilias is illustrated also in the factual concept of marriage in the eighteenth century as documented by Nadine Bérenguier. In her study she says: “La législation royale retint le mariage-contract pour s’en servir aux dépens du clergé et imposer la conception civile du mariage, permettant aux familles un meilleur contrôle de leurs alliances” (Bérenguier 281. Italics are mine). She thus implies that the royal legislation provided the stepping stone toward the bourgeois utilitarian and secularized marriage. Bérenguier also points out that the sacramental aspect of marriage differed from the civil contract in that in the eyes of the Church the consent of the two parties was of the foremost importance. Clearly, however, materialism outweighed idealism, and the utilitarian ethic regulated the institution of marriage.

For Edgar Munhall, the absence of the priest proves that the painting depicts a Protestant marriage. Arguing for Protestant overtones in Greuze, Munhall points out that the Protestants in mid-eighteenth-century France considered the civil ceremony as complete (Greuze 84). Since, as Max Weber claims, Protestantism and capitalism are correlated, Munhall’s claim supports the argument regarding the secular and commercial aspect of L’Accordée de village.

The presence of the tabellion and the central position of the sack of money as it passes from the hands of the father to the hand of the son-in-law, underscores the contractual and commercial, rather than the spiritual aspect of the rite. Connecting morality and commerce, Montesquieu insisted that commerce “guérit les préjugés destructeurs et avance les moeurs douces” (270).
Now if society profits from commerce/marriage, it is imperative that this commercial activity be protected by law. It was Aristotle's contention already that the concept of justice is an integral part of the system of exchanges: "l'échange qui nous lie inébranlablement les uns aux autres [...] la réciprocité bien comprise est un type de justice" (135). Thus the presence of a lawyer is necessary in a trustworthy depiction of a marriage contract. The *tabellion* signifies the judiciary support both of commerce and of the mediating function of the father.

The central influence of the father was, of course, not lost on Diderot who notes that the father in *L'Accordée de village* attracts the spectator's gaze before anything else (*Salon de 1759, 1761* 168). The father here, not God, is the arbiter, the mediator and he authorizes and sanctions marriage. It is he who speaks from the position of supreme authority. The logos is his, and everyone listens. It is he who mediates the transaction; he gives away the girl and perpetuates the law of exogamy, which in itself is the prolongation of the most archaic structure of kinship. Let us note that the figure of the father and the figure of the *tabellion* form a pyramidal unity within the triangle which encloses the entire composition. The *tabellion*’s back provides a firm support of the right side—the masculine side in the painting (see fig. 9a). Thus the composition underlines the fact that law forms an integral part in the patriarchal complicity of exchange of women symbolized by the rite accompanying the nuptial agreement.

Greuze did not neglect the importance of the trade between the father and the son-in-law: the transmission of dowry—the pouch of money, and placed it in a pivotal place. The transaction occurs in the central circle whose radius is the
distance between the painting's center and the head of the groom (see fig. 9a).
This momentous activity of passing the dowry takes place on the right side of the
painting occupied mainly by masculine figures. Since money is the mediating
force in the reciprocity (entirely masculine) in the system of exchanges, it too
incarnates phallic symbolicity. The phallus is inevitably, as Goux says, "the
'general equivalent' for objects of drives" ("The Phallus" 62). Thus placement of
the pouch of money on the masculine side is appropriate.

The figure of the bride who is on the groom's right side (but from the
spectators' point of view she is on the left) is on the "feminine" side. She is
visually slightly distanced from the center of the principal action. (See in figure 9a
how the image of the bride is almost excluded from the central circle). The
central position of money on the one hand, and the off-center placement of the
bride on the other, suggest that in the male operation money assumes greater
signification than the bride. What is the importance of dowry (or in other words,
the price of the bride)? It mediates the circle of masculine reciprocity. It is the
symbol of male reciprocity in the operation of exchange of women; the barter
which substitutes the object of exchange, the woman. Or as Gayle Rubin states,
"[i]f women are exchanged, in whatever sense we take the term, marital debts
are reckoned in female flesh. A woman must become the sexual partner of some
man to whom she is owed as return on a previous marriage" (182). Thus
although in the painting the passage of money from the hands of the father to the
hands of the groom might look as if the father is buying the young man for his
daughter, in the larger order, he is in fact repaying the debt he owes to his wife's
father. The patriarchal economy of these exchanges is a large structure of social networking between its male members where direct reciprocation is no longer possible. Marriages are the points of junction in that network, and there reciprocity is perpetuated through other members of the male community.

There is more at stake. We have seen that the status of the phallus weakens by the transposition of power from God the Father to the family father. Goux examines the crisis of phallus as a loss of the “natural referent”, the male sex (“The Phallus” 71) and sees it as the consequence of fiduciary regime. Goux says: “That which is outlined and reinforced since the logic of the general equivalent was put in place—in the exchange of women, of goods, of signs—is mediation”. And he continues to explain the fall of the phallic mediator through its transformation into the general equivalent. He says:

It is because we are now [in modernity an era which includes philosophically the eighteenth century] in a regime of the most indirect exchange of women—a fiduciary regime—that mediation in general becomes so important. [...] Just as the direct exchange of goods in direct trade or in the barter system was supplanted by the monetary medium, [...] it is as if phallic mediation, a token in the fiduciary regime of the exchange of women, has lost or is in the process of losing all connection to the natural referent (the male sex) which it had originally signified. (“The Phallus” 71)

Live by the sword, die by the sword. First the phallus causes reification of the feminine and subsequently, as Goux shows, it undergoes the same fate. Thus the masculine, as well as the feminine, arrives at the annihilation of intrinsic identity and subjectivity in the economy of commerce. As Goux perceives, the exchange of women is “at the foundation of what makes possible all sociality, or all otherness” (“The Phallus” 59). The situation, however, is complex: women are
human beings and do retain, and keep retrieving, their subjectivity in the
economy of the historical progression of patriarchy. This creates a problem
which flaws the archetypal foundation of sociality and otherness. It creates a
fissure whose ramification becomes flagrant in the age of powerful blooming of
economy of commerce, the rise of bourgeoisie, and the feminization of ontology.
The archetypal plight of women, namely reification and/or neutralization of
intrinsic and authentic human quality, strikes both genders. Hence the well-noted
ambivalence of values which accompanies the rise of capitalism in the
eighteenth century. The morality is double edged. “L'effet naturel du commerce
est de protéger la paix”, writes Montesquieu. He adds, however, “le commerce
corrompt les moeurs pures” (270-271). In fact Montesquieu notes the paradox of
capitalism, a paradox which is also structurally linked to the deterioration of the
moral imperative of Father. The natural effect undoes the cultural stance.

Gender differentiation as depicted by Greuze underlies the lack of
cohesion on the level of the family event—marriage—a lack of union caused by
reification and alienation of women in patriarchal structure. The predominant side
of the picture, the phallic—right—side, to use the language of symbols, also
shows marks of disunity, conforming thus to the general ambiance of potential
crisis. If there is a marked proximity between the female figures on the left side of
the symmetry, the masculine figures are, by contrast, separated. As noted
before, there is a tight compositional unity within the triangle formed by the
father, the older daughter and the lawyer. This unity is formulated by Greuze
through the female figure (the sister of the bride, according to Diderot). It
appears that the picture indicates—in accordance with the theory of kinship relations—the imperative presence of women in social unification. There are gaps, however, between the male figures as if underscoring further the necessity of woman for sociability. The males in the painting appear to keep a distance one from the other, and it is the female figures who forge the communion.

In fact when considering the cohesive group of women, the vehement feminization and naturalization of mores in the eighteenth century comes to mind. But although the group is significantly solid and thus important, the females are no more than supporting cast in the predominantly male drama. We see the group of women pushed into a somewhat smaller space than the one occupied by the males. The groom’s body language suggests the historically attested imperial attitude of men vis-à-vis women. The young man is almost entirely in the left (feminine) space. His back is turned to the women, to his future wife, whom he pushes slightly with his behind. His concentration is devoted to the father and to the principal act of the rite, the acquisition of money.

Yet there is a significant hiatus between the groom and the father reminiscent of the oedipal situation. The central figure is the son (the groom functions as son), the father occupies a secondary position. In spite of the evident importance of this father, Greuze positions him off-center. The sack of money, the dowry, establishes a link in the filial rapport. If there is indeed an ever so slight and subtle hint of the parricidal impulse, it is brought about by the power of Pecunia. The sack of money symbolizes the scepter of power passing from the father to the son. But as Goux suggests, money effects neutralization of
the paternal mediating power. The son accepting the sack of money is also involved in the transaction and stands on equal footing with the father. But the father's power is diminishing and the son-as-sign reflects the decline of the decentralized and aged father. The son would never have a status as grand as the father once enjoyed. Again, Greuze intuit the problem, and paints the son with a smaller stature than the father. If we imagine the father in an upright position, the son, although quite a giant, would be smaller by comparison. Moreover, the son does not reach the height of the compositional triangle. I would argue that the father standing up, and positioned in the center would. But he can not... any more. The image of the son and the father thus support Goux' theory that the mediating function, the sanctioning function, in short, the phallic social function is beginning to deteriorate. The paterfamilias retains greatness, but it is of second degree.

One detail supports the sign of the beginning of the fall of the sovereign masculine power. It is the small group of chickens on the floor. Importantly, the rooster is absent. The separated young chicken, sitting on the bowl can symbolize two things. Firstly, we can read the significance of the chick as the diminished Father/phallus who attaches himself to the material goods (the bowl). Secondly, since, obviously, the gender of the chick is not evident, it can also represent the bride alienated from her female essence, and reified as she becomes a commodity: the bowl represents in this case the goods linked to matrimony. It is as if the detail was a mise-en-abyme of the work. The second alternative complements an explanation according to the conventions of
eighteenth-century symbolic order: there the group of chickens represents a symbol of fertility of the newly married couple. This detail tells the tale of the complexity of the social structure depicted in L'Accordée de village.

Diderot's observation serves as the starting point in the discussion of female images, particularly the mother and the bride. First the bride:

[Elle] est jolie vraiment, et très jolie. Une gorge faite au tour qu'on ne voit point du tout; mais je gage qu'il n'y a rien qui la relève, et que cela se soutient tout seul. Plus à son fiancé, elle n'eût point été assez décente; plus à sa mère ou à son père, elle eût été fausse. Elle a le bras à demi passé sous celui de son futur époux, et le bout de ses doigts tombe et appuie doucement sur sa main; c'est la seule marque de la tendresse qu'elle lui donne et peut-être sans le savoir elle même; c'est une idée délicate du peintre. (Salon de 1761 167-68)

Diderot's description encompassing the libidinal (natural) and the commercial (cultural) register (d)evaluates the girl as a sexual object. The lexical notion "je gage" ("I estimate") suggests evaluation of a merchandise. And what are the parameters of value of the girl? Where is the critic's gaze directed? Diderot notes, with curiosity, the firmness of her chest (cela se soutient tout seul). His gaze undresses her. In short, his commentary is full of covetousness. Fittingly, and following the basic tenet of marriage as a commercial transaction which has its roots in the rudimentary exchange of women motivated by male libido (avoidance of incest), the value of the young woman is estimated according to her potential to satisfy male sexual desire as well as for the inter-familial bond she facilitates.

There is nothing terribly wrong in the natural impulse on the part of the male spectator, or of males in general to covet women. The problem, as far as
women are concerned, arises from the fact that this practice is not allowed, at least not at the instance painted here, to be reciprocal. Diderot sees well the tendency towards secretiveness on the girl’s part. She is hiding something. In fact the secret mode makes her somewhat more attractive. But a woman, stuck in the position of an object of exchange, especially during the rite of nuptial agreement, can not freely express her own desires and wishes. The natural woman is suppressed into a position of passivity. Her subjectivity is hidden in the face of phallic evaluation. It is not surprising that the artist, accustomed to the habitual passivity of women, but not blind to their hidden natural energies, would perceive her psychological state and would paint the young woman reserved and introverted. Perhaps she had different ideas from those to which she was supposed to be subjugated. Diderot inclined to read paintings as novels comments: “elle n’eût point été assez décente; plus à sa mère ou à son père, elle eût été fausse” (Salon de 1761 167).

The question of women’s position becomes an important issue of contention to certain writers in the eighteenth century. Diderot in La Religieuse points his finger at the injustice toward women. Suzanne’s case is a case of marriage as well, she is married to Jesus Christ; and what a disaster it is for her. Among others, Abbé Prévost, Marivaux, Laclos, Beaumarchais, Voltaire, and even Rousseau, continue Molière’s deprecation of the Arnolphe and create
female characters whose sexual force necessitates transgression of traditional patriarchal assumptions regarding woman's subjugation and obedience.  

The bride's attitude indicates that she is not completely satisfied with her lot. Her penchant towards her mother rather than toward her future husband is evident. Moreover, the folds of her skirt emphasize the rhythm of the figure and her body language implies a certain reticence toward the masculine group. The painting suggests a tight liaison between the mother, the daughter, and among the other women. This pictorial sign offers two readings: on the one hand it suggests that the women are in fact pushed aside and thus necessarily need to huddle together to fit into the pictorial and/or social space. It also indicates certain solidarity between women in the face of male colonization of their space, and indicates a the strength of female presence in eighteenth-century culture. And so, in contrast to the loose assembly of the male figures, the group of women is compact.

The image of the seated mother constitutes the major part of the back support of the female group. The mother cries. Diderot's comment: "la gaieté et la tendresse sont mêlées dans la physionomie de cette bonne mère" (Salon 1761 168), points out the ambivalence of her emotions. While Greuze painted the mother happy because her daughter is now in the proper situation according

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4 Perhaps most poignant is the portrait of Manon Lescaut. Prévost intricates her predicament with fiduciary concerns in such a way that it is inescapable to perceive the valuation of female worth in terms of money. Manon fluctuates between love interest and interest in monetary gain. Lost between the two, she causes the detriment of Des Grieux. The chevalier also can not upheld the patriarchal duties in face of the natural force: love.
to social exigencies—the mother, quite "naturally"—subscribes to patriarchal values, especially a mother depicted by a moralist painter—and sad, naturally, because, she is losing her daughter, as her gesture suggests; she seems to want to hold onto her.

For Diderot, \textit{L'Accordée de village} exuded morality and although the \textit{philosophe} was well aware of the double valuation in the depicted social rapport, his critique curiously lacks the characteristic of ambivalence which established him as the leading modernist of his day. Diderot, the \textit{philosophe}, always searched for the optimal human condition. The ascending capitalistic economy dictated the idealization of marriage to uphold the rising, and at the time praiseworthy, bourgeois order: the order of commerce, in short the order of the erect phallus: this is the cultural necessity. Thus the \textit{philosophe} could not allow the notion of the deconstruction of the family, an institution which remained the pillar of the enlightened society. Granted, the conception of marriage began to change and \textit{L'Accordée de village} is in fact productive of social realities. The \textit{philosophes} helped to construct the notion of the family as represented by Greuze. With the trend of sensibilité, with the penchant toward the natural and the feminine, freedom of choice and affection became important ingredients in the economy of conjugality. But marriage, sacrament or contract, traditional or modern, remains the avatar (civilized and cultured, to be sure), of the tribal exchanges of women as described by Lévi-Strauss; an operation conceived and perpetuated under the baton (the phallus) of patriarchy.
CHAPTER 4

VALMONT AND GREUZE:
LA MALÉDICTION PATERNELLE

Taking into consideration Greuze’s diptych La Malédiction paternelle: Le Fils ingrat (fig 1a), Le Fils puni (fig. 1b), we can ask: is there a way to reconcile the two, Valmont and Greuze? One is the painter of bourgeois moral scenes, the other a fictional character who epitomizes the corruption of the eighteenth-century upper class in Laclos’s Les Liaisons dangereuses (1784). Surely Boucher, rather than Greuze, would provide a more appropriate analogy since Boucher just like Valmont is, to use Camille Mauclair’s words, “l’image même de l’érotomanie galante d’une société sceptique, revenue à l’accès de franche et furieuse obscénité de la Régence, et la remplaçant par un libertinage plus hypocrite et non moins bas” (22). How can we speak in the same breath of Valmont and of Greuze, the painter whose “Father Series”, emphatically—and ad nauseam—reminds the viewer of the virtue which resides in an orderly family under paternal rule, and which illustrates the disastrous consequences when someone defies the paternal family “law” (for example the son in La Malédiction paternelle, the wife in La Femme colère, or even the father himself in Le Père dénaturé)?
The message in *La Malédiction paternelle* is a serious one and its histrionics strongly affected a contemporary viewer.¹ The first painting, *Le Fils ingrat*, depicts the opening scene of a drama played out in an interior of a middle-class home. The oldest son of a large family chooses to leave for the army. The recruiting officer stands in the doorway. Although Greuze paints him inconspicuously on the side, his role is crucial in the narrative plot because he represents the force (the monarch) which defies the father's wish to keep his son at home. The aging father is enraged. He is half-seated, obviously in the process of getting up to hurl curses at his son. His raised hands, angry face, the wind-like swept hair, and the flying coat underscore the intensity of his reproaches. The mother and one sister (or perhaps she is the wife of the departing son), plead with the young man to change his mind. A little child clutches desperately at his departing brother's (or his father's?) vest to retain him. Another sister, half-kneeling, tries to soften the violent reaction of the old father. Anxiety is visible on all faces, except on that of the recruiting officer who, bemused, calmly observes the scene. The commotion creates a disorder supported by other props. The clothes are disarrayed, the chair is reversed, the swing of draperies is disorderly. See the tablecloth on the father's side on the left, the cloth on the floor near the mother on the right, and the cloth on the suspended shelf in the upper part of the painting in the center.

¹ *La Malédiction paternelle* was in its days a disturbing painting indeed. One Salon visitor exclaims: "Madame, I was not able to sleep all night because of the profound impression made on my senses by the superb picture of *La Malédiction paternelle*" (qtd. in Brookner, *Greuze* 73).
Yet, in spite of the discord between the father and the son, the schema of the composition is solid, as would be the system of paternal power in the eighteenth century. The play of the masculine arms forms the over-all compositional triangle and gives the painting a solid coherence as if supporting the prominence of patriarchy as a sound, orderly, and reliable establishment. Furthermore, Greuze designs the father’s and the son’s vectors in parallel, suggesting thus a certain solidarity of their condition. After all, the son is a father in the making.

But the disorder indicated by the narrative wedges itself into the composition. Beside the general turmoil, other structural indications point to an antithetical imperative. The impassioned composition of Le Fils ingrat enhances the kinetic energy of the narrative. The diagonals create tensions. The father’s slant to the right is echoed by the son and by the pleading gestures of the daughter and the child. Greuze stresses the dramatic conflict by opposing the slant of the rhythm of the mother and the kneeling sister to that of the father and the son. The prolongation of the raised hands of the father would meet the raised hand of the departing son. The son’s outstretched hand suggests a certain regret and apology which counteract the father’s reproachful gesture. The parallel slant of the father and of the son eliminates the possibility of mutual support. Their vectors run in the same direction, but will never meet. Greuze, we can say, maps Oedipal strife. There are other indications. There is the relatively large and as if increasing space (the son is leaving, the father is staying home) denoting a rupture in the rapport between the expressive hands of the father and son.
Moreover, the compositional triangle's solidity is undermined by the existence of two separate triangles which divide the father and the son into two distinctly parted groups. One of these triangles is composed by the father and the half-kneeling girl, the other by the son who forms in this triangle the axis, while the other girl and the mother form the two sides. The figure of the recruiter contrasts the disorder by its calm vertical position. This representative of the higher placed paternal power (the king's), is the omniscient onlooker like some degenerated God (we note his smirk). He advocates and activates an action which will result in the fall of the male signifiers of that family circle as seen in *Le Fils puni*.

Ironically, no-one, except the recruiting officer, stands upright, and he is the one character who is the representative of the authority of the king and who enlists the son with the help of money.

*Le Fils puni* narrates the return of the prodigal son and concludes the drama. The father is prostrate and has his eyes closed. Evidently he is dying or is already dead. The returning son is bent over with hands pointing towards his body in a self-accusing gesture. The same characters, minus the recruiting officer, are present. The passage of time is suggested by an additional infant who hangs on to one daughter's (or his mother's and the son's wife's) clothes. The mother's grieving gesture points out the dying or dead father to the distraught son. The two dismayed young women frame the upper torso of the reclining patriarch. The grim and silent atmosphere is supported by the vertically hanging draperies and the more or less orderly props: no upturned chairs; a plate with medicine lies ready on the floor. A little dog continues the melancholy
compositional line linking the dying or dead father to the son. The son’s cane, fallen on the floor in a diagonal direction, is a sad reminder of the once lively rhythm. Now it attests to the remorse and sorrow of the returning soldier. It suggests that not only his spirit, but his body too, is crushed. The female figures and the children still express anxiety, giving this painting the Greuzian baroque-like mobility. The imaginary isosceles triangle which holds the composition firmly together, can still be constructed in *Le Fils puni* by stretching the line continuing (on the right hand side) from the head of one infant, to a young daughter, and by intersecting it with the line prolonging the axis of the son’s upper body via the mother’s head. But the dynamics of the composition have changed. This triangle is present, as it was in *Le Fils ingrat*, but is now hardly perceptible since it is filled with action only at its base. The energy of the morality of Father and his Law have been profoundly disturbed. The striking rhythm of the painting is horizontal. The vertical element of *Le Fils ingrat*, created mainly by the play of raised arms of the disputing masculine protagonists (father and son) is all but lost in the sequel *Le Fils puni*.

And so, just as is the case in Greuze’s painting in general, the diptych’s moral prerogative is imbued with signs uncomfortably disturbing its conscious propaganda for paternal authority. This subversive feature, which in effect amounts to a parricidal gesture, constitutes the crux of my argument concerning the link between Valmont and Greuze.

My discussion also ponders the question of feminization as a trait in *La Malédiction paternelle*. For while the disorder in the paintings is played out by the
representatives of patriarchy—the father and the son—there is a pacifying sway accomplished by the female supporting cast. Greuze paints the disorder as if coming from the masculine side, while the order is reestablished by women. Analogously, in Laclos’ novel the father figure, Valmont, is totally corrupted—significantly Valmont’s and Cecile Volange’s child does not live—while Madame de Rosemonde, the aunt of Valmont restores order, if there is indeed any.

As the point of departure in the discussion of the comparison between Valmont and La Malédiction paternelle I will take a close look at the Goncourt brothers’ analogy between Greuze’s work and the scene in Les Liaisons dangereuses where Valmont saves a poor family from bankruptcy. The reader of course knows well that by staging the honorifiable act—which in fact amounts to fulfilling his seignorial, that is to say, fatherly duty as the protector and benefactor of his vassals—Valmont schemes to gain an access to the bed of the morally upright Madame de Tourvel.

In their L’Art du dix-huitième siècle the Goncourts start their section on Greuze with these words:

Au milieu de ce grand livre de corruption, les Liaisons dangereuses, il est une page inattendue, et qui fait contraste avec tout ce qui la précède, tout ce qui la suit, tout ce qui l’entoure. C’est la scène où Valmont va, dans un village, sauver de la saisie du collecteur les meubles d’une pauvre famille qui ne peut payer la taille. Le collecteur compte ses cinquante six livres. Echappée à la paille, toute la famille, cinq personnes, pleurent de joie; les larmes coulent, des larmes heureuses et qui éclairent de bonheur la figure de patriarque du plus vieux. Autour du groupe, le village bourdonne, ses bénédictions murmurent; et voici qu’un jeune paysan, amenant par la main une femme et deux enfants, entoure Valmont de l’adoration des siens, et les agenouillé à ses pieds comme aux pieds d’une Providence humaine et de l’image de Dieu.
Cette page dans le livre de Laclos, c'est Greuze dans le XVIIIe
siècle. (7)

On the surface, the comparison would imply that the high morality as depicted by
Greuze, is unexpected in the artistic production of a century where the
mainstream ethic is based on sentimental artifice, just as Valmont’s act of charity
is unexpected in the book about corruption (Valmont in fact personifies
corruption). It is as if the Goncourt brothers wished to point out the distinct
position that Greuze’s genre scenes occupy within eighteenth-century
iconography. The Goncourt brothers seem to say that just as Valmont fills the
material need and saves the family from bankruptcy, so is Greuze’s moral
content a welcome surprise since it satisfies the Enlightenment’s hunger for
virtue. Furthermore, the choice of text implies an analogy between the material
poverty of the village family and the spiritual poverty in the gallant libertinism of
the aristocracy.

Conversely, the historians hint to their readers familiar with Valmont’s
corrupt nature and informed of the real pretext for his act, that Greuze’s
moralizing obscures another, less noble, pretext. The Goncourt brothers write:

L'impression qu'il [Greuze] donne est complexe, trouble, mélangée.
C'est que cette peinture de Greuze a plus qu'un défaut, elle a un vice: elle
recèle une certaine corruption, elle est essentiellement sensuelle par le
fond et par la forme, par la composition, le dessin, la touche même [...] 
Partout le tempérament du temps, le tempérament de l'homme traverse les
idées du peintre, mettant à toute cette morale en action une pointe de
libertinage[.] (L’Art vol. 2 52)

Evidently, the Goncourt brothers themselves justify the troubling impression
Greuze evokes by underscorin the juxtaposition of the double and contradictory
social fluxes in the eighteenth century. What unsettles in Greuze, they imply, can be explained by the convergence of the bourgeois ethics sanctified by Enlightenment ideology, and the human frailty inherent in sexuality which is in the epoch combined with libertine “erotomania” and the frivolous slant of the upper class. Needless to say that it is the latter that conferred to the period and to Greuze the precedent on style.

Norman Bryson in his analysis of Greuze’s work, pauses at the Goncourt’s analogy. For him the crucial element in their text is that both Greuze and Valmont are motivated by the moral imperative inscribed in the notion of sensibilité, the eighteenth-century foil to reason and utilitarianism. Bryson says about the Goncourts’ analogy between Valmont’s “charitable” act and Greuze’s oeuvre:

It is a scene that might have come from the brush of Greuze, and in fact it was used by the Goncourt to illustrate their version of Greuzian ideal. It believes as Greuze does, that virtue is not only a matter of reason and calculation, but of the heart; that the heart, like reason, needs its own sentimental education; and that the central instrument of such an education is exemplum virtutis. We need only to witness the virtuous act to be uplifted and improved. (126)

For Bryson the common denominator in the comparison is the pursuit of happiness (the title of Bryson’s book). Although he concedes, that “there is quantitative calculation at work” (126) and sees the point of convergence in the conflations of the notion of sensibilité and utilitarianism, he insists on the sentimental aspect of Greuze’s pictorial text and the Valmont scene:

And the witness to the scene will be convinced because the happiness generated will touch his heart; the more happiness there is, the greater will be the throb of his response, and its intensity will be emotional
proof of the validity and power of goodness. Both the intellectual and emotional components of happiness demand maximisation if the pedagogic work of the exemplum [virtutis] is to be effective, and from this need to present happiness at a moment of repletion and abundance, a specialized structure or staging, shared by all the arts under sensibilité. (126)

For Bryson, the Goncourt brothers’ comparison works because of the emotive element. Bryson insists that it is the element of sensibilité that captivates the reader and the spectator, and that emotion is the seductive factor promoting the didactic purpose inscribed in both tableaux. Bryson focuses on the Valmont scene removed and separated from its context. He thus neglects the depravity which motivates Valmont’s act and which consequently subverts any pretension to virtue. Thus Bryson also omits the fact that the Goncourts, by presenting such an analogy, satirized Greuze’s moral imperative. Bryson’s reading is somewhat simplistic even though, as I show later, not incorrect.

In addition to the Goncourt brothers’ and Bryson’s reading I suggest that the point of conversion between Greuze and the vignette from Les Liaisons dangereuses is that both, while endorsing the concept of paternal supremacy, insinuate and anticipate the drama of deconstruction of bourgeois morality epitomized by the paterfamilias. There is in Greuze’s pictorial and Laclos’s literary text the ever-present irony which rocks and almost tumbles morality inscribed in the notion of paternal supremacy. There are also signs in the Valmont scene and in La Malédiction paternelle which seem to anticipate a self-destructive movement in the social and economic aspect of bourgeois and capitalistic hegemony.
The Goncourt did well to set up the vignette from the Liaisons dangereuses as a metaphor for Greuze. Just like in La Malédiction paternelle (the case is the same in other genre paintings in Greuze’s “Father Series”), the trappings of bourgeois morality are present. There is the simple people’s family circle headed by the father. In Laclos’s image the central light is thrown on the family father (“des larmes heureuses et qui éclairent de bonheur la figure de patriarche du plus vieux”, above quotation). There is also the young man, a son we can presume, and the rest of the members of his family—the sign of continuation of the paternal order.

In La Malédiction paternelle and in the Laclos’ vignette, the family patriarch does occupy the central position, but not only is he old and helpless (which would evoke pity), his position is also undermined by irony. In the Valmont scene the irony derives from the fact that the deliverance and the sustenance of the village family comes from the corrupt Valmont whom the folks consider as God: “le village bourdonne, ses bénédictions murmurent” (above quotation). The son makes his wife and two children kneel at the feet of Valmont “comme aux pieds d’une Providence humaine de l’image de Dieu” (above quotation). Presenting Valmont as God throws derision not only on the theological concept (in accordance with the secularistic spirit of the Enlightenment), but also on the entire patriarchal hierarchy where God occupies the top. What happens is that the villagers headed by the old patriarch are not aware that while being helped are in fact being used as the instrument of higher forces; they are being duped. Contrary to Bryson’s contention, the pathos (the
motive of sensibilité) in the tableau is naught but raillery for those who know what goes on behind the scenes.

In the first instance, the situation where Valmont as God renders deliverance to the people undermines the concept of the omnipotence of God, the supreme patriarch. The deprecation cascades. Valmont's corruption rebounds and reduces the repute of the seigniorial position which is Valmont's own. On the historical level, the dubious moral status of Valmont, the lord, mimics the pre-Revolutionary loss of respect for the Monarch. The dissipated lifestyle of the later years of Louis XV and, later, the weakness of Louis XVI are a reminder of deterioration within the higher order, a tendency which spreads and descends to the lower social strata and is echoed by the weak and ridiculous standing of the village patriarch. The demeaned position of the old village patriarch (who also represents the authority on virtue) is echoed by the younger father's command to his family to adore Valmont. The degenerated stature of Valmont/seigneur/God/patriarch, influences negatively not only the significance of the village paterfamilias (the father and the son), it also subverts the entire discourse built around the supremacy of that figure. The honest folks, obeying their father and rendering their homage and adoration to Valmont, are fooled too. The pathos of La Malédiction paternelle in Laclos's setting is tainted by mockery.

The agency responsible for the downfall of the paterfamilias in La Malédiction paternelle as well as in the Valmont scene is the operation of exchanges, and the use of money in that operation. Valmont uses money to dissimulate his corruption. Money allows him to accomplish his underhanded
aim: while he buys the well-being of the village family, he buys the reputation of a charitable man in the eyes of Madame de Tourvel. In the epoch of advancing capitalism the new bourgeois ethic penetrates into the action of the lord, Valmont, whose duty would be to care for the well being of his vassals by way of an exchange of a different kind: the feudal symbiotic relationship between lord and his people would obligate Valmont to care and protect his vassals as an exchange for their services. But Valmont gives money which replaces in one quick and easy step the care he owes to his people. Thus money in its function as the general equivalent neutralizes the burden of the seigniorial position. More than that. This gift of money as the substitute for the lord’s care, inasmuch as it helps the villagers, nevertheless neutralizes and blots out the difference between real virtue (charity in this case) and Valmont’s pretension to virtue. Valmont’s corruption is veiled by the transaction and vice can parade as virtue, undetected. The villagers are trapped in the dealings. What accentuates the irony of their position is that they profit, momentarily, but the discourse of corruption—within the literary text itself, and in a larger sense within the current text of social economies of the eighteenth century—devalues the patriarchal ethic the villagers ascribe to with great gravity.

\[2\] John Markoff names lord’s duties as they are described in the *Dictionnaire des fiefs* by Joseph Renauldon (2:393, reprinted in 1788). Here is an excerpt which plainly indicates the paternal status of the lord:

[The lord’s duty is] to see that crimes are punished, to protect their vassals and subjects, to maintain peace among them to the extent possible, to see that official regulations are observed, to supervise proper functioning of churches, hospitals, poor relief, food for foundlings, to prevent injustice by their officials and their injuries by their various agents. (140)
In *La Malédiction paternelle* the recruiting officer standing for the monarch represents the hierarchically higher paternal significance and his role corresponds to Valmont’s. And just as Valmont’s ruse—emphasized by the equalizing property of money—reduces the moral worth of the village father and casts a black shadow on the lord as Father, so does the monarchic apparatus demean the authority of the *paterfamilias* and devastate his family in *La Malédiction paternelle*. The recruiting officer’s sarcastic grin is a sign of the negative aspect of the socially higher order (the army which represents the king and the state as opposed to the family) and corresponds to the ironic disposition of the operation in the Valmont scene. The application of the fiduciary regime to gain members for the army, where honor itself should be the motive, demeans the value of the glory of the king’s warrior. Once again, the malaise inherent in the transaction spreads and descends. Due to the bourgeois stance of the warrior, we see in *Le Fils puni* the power and glory of the *paterfamilias* failing, affecting the entire social unit; a situation not unlike the one provoked by Valmont’s machinations. Correspondingly in *Le Fils puni*, there are very few vertical axis to denote paternal (phallic) potency. In *Le Fils puni* it seems, Greuze has finished not only the drama of the ungrateful son, but also anticipated an apocalyptic destiny for the signification of the patriarch.

The almost incidental presence of the recruiting officer obscures the pivotal operation of an exchange where money is traded for the service of a soldier. Greuze seems to insinuate, rather than state directly, the machinations of the apparatus which had put the drama into motion. This corresponds to the
underhanded subtext of Valmont. In both instances, the nasty dealings are there, but hidden in the context; literary, pictorial, or social. The highlight is on the old family father who, in a larger sense, corresponds to the important status of paternal authority as the central supporting structure of ethics. Moreover, the tactful masking of the crass influence of money is indubitably also due to the code of honor still intensely viable in that age. Thus, notwithstanding the deconstructive elements, the parricidal gesture hesitates in the eighteenth century, and Greuze's over-all compositional schema is solid as if to echo the ethical code of the Father.³

The mythological and ethical dictum would have it that to sustain the Paternal Law, the crime of parricide brings about punishment. This is the tragedy of Oedipus, and constitutes the principal ingredient of the drama in La Malédiction paternelle. The castigating gesture of patriarchal morality veils the parricidal impulse, but, in the final analysis, it incessantly repeats it, all the while decreasing the stature of fathers and of sons (the future fathers).

Psychoanalysis allows Freud to bridge mythology and the symbolic register with the lived reality of an individual:

³ The film Le Ridicule (Directed by Patrice Leconte, 1996) is a period piece which comprehensively portrays the ideological thesis—and antithesis—of the eighteenth century. The film opens with a scene where a young man urinates on his dead father. In the symbolic register this can be read as the phallus (the son's penis) dishonoring the phallic signifier of the higher order. This oedipal scene would certainly support my argument about the deconstructive and self-destructive tendency of phallic signifiers (the son has the potentiality of the father), but in the context of the picture (which is not overly experimental) it is a glaring anachronism.
Freud illuminates the historical advent of patriarchy: "Avec l'institution de divinités paternelles, la société, privée de père, s'est transformée peu à peu en société patriarcale." (223). Now the terrible crime, the parricide, is at the commencement of our society (238) and since the order is based on a crime, the society is flawed or given to neurosis. The flawed ontology, the criminal make-up of the sons (or the patriarchal society at large) rebound on the edified Father. Lacan speaks of the carence of Father as the "noyau de la grande névrose contemporaine" (Le Dictionnaire de la psychanalyse, article "Père", 200). The two tableaux support Lacan's notion that "le père est toujours, par quelque côté, un père discordant par rapport à sa fonction, un père carent, un père humilié" (Le Dictionnaire 200). Moreover, according to Freud "on retrouve dans le complexe d'Oedipe les commencements à la fois de la religion, de la morale, de la société et de l'art" (234). The hermeneutics of Greuze's La Malédiction paternelle and of the Valmont scene encompass all those registers.

Freud also writes:

Après l'avoir supprimé [the father], après avoir assouvi leur haine et réalisé leur identification avec lui, ils [the sons] sont dû se livrer à des manifestations affectives d'une tendresse exagérée. Ils le firent sous la forme du repentir; ils éprouvèrent un sentiment de culpabilité qui se confond avec le sentiment du repentir communément éprouvé. Le mort devenait plus puissant qu'il ne l'avait jamais été de son vivant (214. Italics are mine)
Sublime father, our Lord. Yes, but as the sense of culpability undermines and subverts the otherwise strong position of the son, and causes his symbolic castration, the symbolic father must also, by ricochet, lose potency in the chain (or vicious circle) of significations. In *Le Fils puni*, guilt of indirectly killing the father gives the final stroke to the son. But the father, prostrate there on his death bed would have had gone also through the parricidal gesture with his own father; and the chain can perhaps be traced back indefinitely. This chain of events which promulgates guilt and remorse disturbs the serenity of the clan and undermines the credibility of paternal authority. Seen through the Freudian perspective, the microcosm of *La Malédiction paternelle* reflects the eighteenth-century scenario, which manifests the historical continuation of primitive society’s parricidal impulse and the elevation and eminence of the murdered father. This is also evident in the Valmont scene through the figure of the feeble and ridiculous patriarch who is, however, venerated by his son and his son’s family.

Seen from the psychoanalytical perspective, the descent of paternal power perpetuated by the parricidal impulse from father to son simultaneously installs a system of ethics designed to repair the damage. Hence the moral imperative of filial piety and guilt. Carol Duncan in her examination of the feeble status of the icon of the eighteenth-century patriarch notes how in *La Malédiction paternelle* moral rectitude veils direct aggression:

Overtly, the work’s intention is clear enough: it argues the virtue of filial duty. Yet the image is charged to the utmost with hostility, barely repressed by the overt moral content. Stripped of that morality, that image alone visually amounts to parricide. The youth rebels and finds his father dead. The viewer is invited to both enjoy and denounce the crime, to
identify secretly with the criminal while consciously condemning him. Exciting and dangerous feelings which, if brought to light, would contradict morality, are stirred up but not allowed conscious expression. ("Fallen Fathers" 190)

Duncan suggests that Greuze’s paintings express the Oedipal situation in all its aspects. For along with aggression, morality conceals the violent impulse rendering the message ambiguous. She further adds, that the ‘moral victory’ of the father “results in his own death and the ruin of everyone else. Thus, even the apparent resolution is flawed” (191). Duncan evidently follows Freud and Lacan in tapping the important dimension of the “demise of the father” I have outlined above: he is dead, but his ethical power is strong enough to perturb his surrounding clan with guilt. We have come full circle to the notion of sensibilité, the trend so prominent in the epoch, and appropriately so at the point when phallocentered humanism reaches its apotheosis while its deconstruction simultaneously takes root. From this perspective Bryson is of course correct in stressing the emotive importance of the Valmont scene and Greuze, because, following Duncan’s argument, the Valmont scene and Greuze’s pictures would have worked on the unconscious of their audience. What appealed to the readers and the viewers was the need for compensation of the unconsciously felt transgression. Conversely, the horror La Malédiction paternelle evoked in contemporary viewers also corresponds to the unconscious dialectic of the parricidal impulse.
La Malédiction paternelle: Father's House, Woman's Space

The textual space of Les Liaisons dangereuses is essentially a feminine space, where the father's figure paternal glory has a lot to be desired. As I mentioned before, the mediating power is taken on by the female protagonist, by Valmont's aunt, Madame de Rosemonde.

The dramatic space in La Malédiction paternelle too is a feminine space. It is the interior of a middle-class home. In this family abode, decidedly woman's space, transpires the drama of the revolt of the son against the paterfamilias. In Le Fils ingrat a female figure—the old father's daughter or perhaps the son's wife—rather than the father, the son, or the recruiting officer, forms the central axis of the overall compositional triangle. Furthermore, the father and the son, placed in the two separate triangles, are supported while they are restrained, structurally and compositionally, by female protagonists. In Le Fils puni, the dead or dying father is framed by women, and the devastated son is motioned into the picture by his mother. Significantly, in Le Fils ingrat, the father is not standing. He is seated, trying to stand up, but is prevented in doing so by his daughter. The imagery seems to suggest that the feminine space is indeed detrimental to the family patriarch's masculine vigor and power.

The composition of La Malédiction paternelle suggests an interesting upset concerning traditionally gendered spatial duality: left = feminine, right = masculine. The father who represents the pinnacle of authority in the family is on the left, while the son and the recruiting officer are on the right. This split of paternal authority between the family realm and the monarchic state—represented by the recruiting officer—evidently pulls apart the son (see the
gesture of regret and the anxious face of the son in *Le Fils ingrat*) and brings about his own, his father's, and the entire family's downfall.

Rousseau saw the incompatibility of a *paterfamilias* with the ruler of the state and he too implies that the split is caused by feminization. In *De l'économie politique* he attempts to justify the distinction on the grounds that emotions and sensitivity are the natural driving force of the *paterfamilias* because he is in intimate proximity to those he governs. The chief of the state, on the other hand, "ne voit presque rien que par les yeux d'autrui" (1). For Rousseau,

> les devoirs d'un père lui sont dictés par des sentiments naturels, et d'un ton qui lui permet rarement de désobéir. Les chefs n'ont point de semblable règle et ne sont réellement tenus envers le peuple qu'à ce qu'ils lui ont promis de faire, et dont il est en droit d'exiger l'exécution. (*De l'économie* 1)

Rousseau posits the authority of the *paterfamilias* which occurs in the women's sphere (the family) and is directed by natural sentiments, as the model for the sovereign authority in a republic. In other words, what Rousseau proposes is that the family father functions in the mode of *sensibilité*. On the other hand, the chief of state—the monarch—is distant and his power is regulated neither by the natural law, nor by emotions provoked by intimacy, but by a power accorded to him by social and historical project. In fact Rousseau wished "[q]ue la patrie se montre la mère commune des citoyens, que les avantages dont ils jouissent dans leurs pays le leur rendent cher, que le gouvernement leur laisse assez de part à l’administration publique pour sentir qu’ils sont chez eux, et que les lois ne soient à leurs yeux que les garants de la commune liberté" (*De l'économie* 9).

Rousseau thus calls for the state as "mother", and that the citizens are "chez
eux”. The lexical notions reflect the politics of feminization. In short, the 
*paterfamilias* is motivated by natural, feminized concerns, (and it is Rousseau 
above all who insists on women’s place as homemakers) and this influence 
would “soften” the power of the patriarch.

By pointing out the opposing role of the monarch and the Family Father, 
Rousseau in fact points out the schism which stimulates the dramatic action in 
*La Malédiction paternelle*. Moreover, Greuze depicts Rousseau’s democratic and 
feminizing prerogative by placing the father who is restrained by women on the 
left/sinister/feminine side, all the while the external virile force—the recruiting 
officer and the outside world behind the open door—who lure the son and cause 
general ruin are on the right. All this accentuates the demise of the already 
feeble father. And so, considering the symbolic signification of the spatial duality 
in *La Malédiction paternelle*, the separation of the father and the son, the left 
placement of the weak father, plus the ever-present female supporting cast, 
seem to indicate that the disorder in the patriarchal sphere is accompanied by a 
turn toward feminization and by the change toward evaluating family life in 
sentimental terms.4

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4 But is the left/right dichotomy in Greuze consistent enough to use it as an 
argument that it symbolizes gender symmetry? In 1756, Greuze exhibited a 
couple of drawings which were in fact the preparatory sketches for *La 
Malédiction paternelle* (Lille, Musée des Beaux-Arts). In the first, *Le Fils ingrat*, 
the father is on the right side. In the later version of the drawings (Albertina, 
Vienna), the position is already reversed and it remains so in the final paintings 
of 1777-78. The positioning, one could say, is arbitrary, and we should be careful 
to jump into conclusion concerning significance of the left/right dichotomy in 
Greuze’s paintings. And yet it seems that instinct led Greuze to posit the fathers 
on the left side quite often, and I would argue that the left-sided position of the
Greuze's patriarch, bourgeois and feminized, is the new patriarch with reduced potency. Bryson makes a case for the feminization of paternal figures in Greuze and points out that Greuze “distorts by depotentiation” (140).  

Often he senesces his fathers, so that we find it impossible to believe that the white-haired, moribund relics could possibly sire their tribes of small children: this is the case with the father in L’Accordée, and also in Le Fils puni. (138)

Bryson analyzes the feminization in Greuzian imagery from a psychological perspective and speculates that it is caused by Greuze’s anxiety about manhood. This is possible and even probable. But I would supplement Bryson’s speculation by suggesting that the anxiety disturbing Greuze’s imagery is not particular to himself only. It also represents the patriarchy’s neurotic twitch regarding the general equalization and, effectively, emasculation or castration of standards of ethics and esthetics. As feminine space tended to almost eclipse the masculine realm in the eighteenth century, this castrating influence would

father in La Malédiction paternelle is indeed a meaningful indication of the descending patriarchy accompanied by feminized ontology in the epoch. Examples of other paintings where fathers are on the left are: La Mère bien-aimée, Le Père lisant la Bible, La Mort d’un père regretté par ses enfants, La Mort d’un père dénaturé, La Femme en colère or Les Offres malhonnêtes. (In Les Offres malhonnêtes the narrative element does not imply that the old man trying to seduce the young woman is a father figure, but his age, and all facial and body features resemble other fathers in Greuze’s family saga.)

Having said this, I must note that the father in L’Accordée de village is on the right side of the painting. In that painting, however, the patriarchal paradigm functions more or less harmoniously, discord is well hidden, and the female part of the painting’s population still occupies smaller space on the left.

5 Bryson notes that the theme of “depotentiation” is prevalent not only in his genre works. About Greuze’s portrait of Napoleon he notes that “the First Consul is rendered as a schoolboy” (143).
have necessarily evoked anxiety in Greuze's (and other philosophe's as well) self-conscious representation of patriarchal morality. Thus the anxiety (fear of castration) in Greuze is more than a personal problem but the effect of deeper grounded social, cultural and economic causes. Feminine cultural influence irritated Rousseau (even though, as we have seen, it was also his proper discourse), Mercier and others, and these enlightened gentlemen delimited precisely the function and space for women, namely motherhood and home. But their prescription rebounded and undermined the phallocentric discourse they were trying to uphold. Feminine dominion later, in the nineteenth century, curled and twisted the tongue of Nietzsche who lamented the loss of the aristocratic turgidity of phallic potency.

While endorsing the spatial oppositions of masculine and feminine, Greuze simultaneously, and in consonance with his epoch, disconcerts that duality. The Father's space is on the left and is overwhelmingly occupied by women; this is the case in the painting as well as in society. But the value ascribed to the two sexes was by no means equal and women were always perceived as the "weaker sex". In Les Liaisons dangereuses Laclos omitted to include any vigorous paternal authority and thus enhanced, with underhanded and sardonic misogyny, the overwhelming corruption which motivates the novel. He describes the upper class where the salonières give tone. Laclos in effect echoes Rousseau who did not approve of the cultural influence of women.\(^6\)

\(^6\) In Lettre à d'Alembert Rousseau writes to his correspondent about the influence of women in the theater: "Pensez-vous, Monsieur, que cet ordre soit
Greuze, unlike Laclos, is working within the plot of bourgeois discourse and his universe is the nuclear family, the space which is (according to the current ideology pronounced by Rousseau) rightfully women's. Concerned with morality, the painter evokes with force the paternal power to sustain rectitude against the corruption of Valmont's feminized class. And yet in both plots the secret dialectic promoted by women's interference is detrimental to patriarchal paradigms.

If the patriarchal discourse considers the feminine as weaker, it follows from the phenomenological model that the feminine influence would indeed have a softening impact on the hard masculinity. Nietzsche complains of the gendered dialectic and perceives in it a danger for patriarchy: "feminine frailties [are] the source of all evil" (The Birth 64). He digs into history for origins and finds guilty the Judeo-Christian tradition; the tradition which encompasses the detestable bourgeois discourse. Unlike the social critique of the philosophes of Enlightenment based on secularized theology, Nietzsche's critique reflects a profound disillusionment in the Christian ethical base; and perhaps this is one reason why his critical analysis of patriarchal embarrassment is so virulent. Rather than the Judeo-Christian monotheism, Nietzsche prefers the blended, balanced duality of the Apollonian and Dionysian (neither of them feminine) as the crux of majestic existence where Good and Evil have equal ethical value. The stature of the Judeo-Christian God lacks (for Nietzsche) the noble dimension as its ethics comprise repression of the sinister side of the dichotomy. Western

sans inconveniance, et qu'en augmentant avec tant de soin l'ascendant des femmes, les hommes en seront mieux gouvernés?" (44. Italics are mine).
civilization, complains Nietzsche, while giving preference to the aspect of reason symbolically designated as masculine and positive, recasts its negative double as inferior and feminine. The feminization of Evil means for Nietzsche that the realm of the negative in this form is flawed and inferior, and by consequence, Sin and Fall are not tragically sublime, but banal. Nietzsche muses on the contrast between antiquity and the Christian myth, and develops this misogynistic (and anti-Semitic) argument:

An austere notion, this, [the equality of the Apollonian and the Dionysian] which by the dignity it confers on crime presents a strange contrast to the Semitic myth of the Fall – a myth that exhibits curiosity, deception, suggestibility, concupiscence, in short a whole series of principally feminine frailties, as the root of all evil. (64)

For Nietzsche, the Other, the feminine, assumes demeaning qualities. He would have preferred a straightforward masculine crime to what he considers as feminine and weak features, curiosity, deception, etc. Sharp delineation of equal opposites, of Good and Evil, is “noble” if characterized by masculine vigor. And

7 The all-masculine ontology can not possibly be a stable condition since, ironically, the implied dialectic would effectuate a neutralization between the two opposite entities. No doubt, Nietzsche’s dilemma leads to nihilism. He sees this in Will to Power (124).

Conversely, the zig-zag thought of Nietzsche can not let go by simply vilifying the feminine. In Will to Power the philosopher “transvalues” the female entity into the sublime dimension of art. The pedestal on which he places the feminine is not all that strong either, for the reference to the sublime dimension is always woman with all its lamentable frailties. Moreover, in terms of Luce Irigaray, this sort of transvaluation of the feminine has nothing to do with woman’s sexual difference. Rather it is the result of the appropriation of the feminine by the masculine, intolerant of the difference between the feminine and the masculine. In his romantic revolt against reason, Nietzsche would, with the help of art, validate the feminine by masculine parameters in order to retain the aristocratic schema of which he was so fond. Ellen Mortensen’s elegant critique of Nietzsche’s attempt to qualify the feminine as the inadequate Other, while
so, implicit in his philosophy there is also the modernist angst caused by the bourgeoise and feminizing influence already anticipated in Greuze.

What Nietzsche has seen—and what Goux also analyzes in *Les Iconoclastes*, but not from the virulent point of view of Nietzsche—is that the Judeo-Christian myth's posits uneven gendered duality and that recasting the feminine into a lower order will not eliminate the effect (which Nietzsche sees as detrimental) of femaleness in the dialectics of existence. It means that the feminine, since it is an ever-present factor, and thus an active element in reciprocal recognition and determination, undermines the majesty of the patriarchal symbols; it continually and historically degrades the potency of the phallic signifiers, from God to king to *paterfamilias* to money. To the chagrin of Nietzsche, the scales of gender valuation tip to the left to greater extent in the eighteenth century. The epoch is dominated by sexuality, sentiment, and Reason, and it stands to reason that women acquire public clout.

This slant is evident in Greuze's and the epoch's trend of *sensibilité*. The masculine figures in *Le Fils ingrat* are without doubt the major protagonists, but the placement, the emotional narrative, the images of female figures as well as their narrative function as supporters, and the pathos of the old father combined with the fact that the drama is played out in the home, suggests an upgrading of the supporting female protagonists. This in turn reflects the notion of *sensibilité*.

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conferring to it the sublime noblesse of art, defines the irony of his idea: “One might in fact say that Nietzsche has performed a biting critique of the history of metaphysics, but that, in the process of transvaluation, he has managed to suck the blood out of his newfound ‘idea’” (Engaging 216).
The father is weak, the son is weakened, emotions fly, tears flow, and at the end, in *Le Fils puni*, the home is neat. Surely, such a melodramatic performance threatens, according to Nietzsche, the sublime hard-edged masculinity.

*Sensibilité*—which is in effect the aristocratic directive attenuated by bourgeois and feminizing discourses—is connected with utility and morality. Thus ironically, the feminization of ontology also promotes the morality of patriarchy. The Goncourt brothers say that Diderot has invented Greuze, for the work of that painter agrees with the project of the *philosophe* that art should be profitable to humanity and also that "Il [Diderot] professait que la vocation du beau n’était seulement d’être beau, mais encore d’être bien" (*L’Art* vol. 1 208). What Diderot is echoing here is the current sensualist and empiricist philosophy—-inherited from Locke, and propagated by Helvetius, Holbach and Condillac in France—of the profitability of virtue to well-being and happiness. This in turn is dependent on material things. And material things and their production are intrinsic to the system of exchange; they are the foundations of capitalism; and they are, in the final analysis, linked through their *materialness* to matter and mater, to the feminine.

Max Weber points out:

toutes les admonitions utiles sont teintées d’utilitarisme. L’honnêteté est *utile* puisqu’elle nous assure le crédit. De même, la ponctualité, l’application au travail, la frugalité; c’est *pourquoi* ce sont des vertus. On pourrait en déduire logiquement que, par exemple, l’apparence de l’honnêteté peut rendre le même service. (50)\(^8\)

\(^8\) Weber analyzes the Protestant-based precepts of Benjamin Franklin; they are pertinent, however, to the discussion of the link between Protestantism and capitalism in eighteenth-century France.
What is profitable to society is ethical. "L'apparence de l'honnêteté" is the corrupt aristocratic notion of honor which assumes the cloak of virtue. Valmont's dubious honnêteté is without doubt profitable to the poor family, even as it renders credibility to Valmont in the eyes of Madame de Tourvel. Everyone is happy, but the good fortune is flawed by the overall text (literary and social) of corruption. In its most hyperbolic form, not glory, honor, sincere charity, or courage, not even real love, but profit to society determines virtue. The double standard of virtue (the useful is virtuous even if it operates as a sham, or l'apparence de l'honnêteté) forms in fact part of the overall scheme of the capitalist ethic.

Duality and ambiguity along with feminization enter into the social and esthetic discourses, namely into the discourse of sensibilité, and equalize and neutralize values. Diderot, friend and supporter of Greuze, connects mediocrity with sensibilité even at his own expense: "Au reste, lorsque j'ai prononcé que la sensibilité était la caractéristique de la bonté de l'âme et de la médiocrité du génie, j'ai fait un aveu qui n'est pas trop ordinaire, car si Nature a pétri une âme sensible, c'est la mienne" (Œuvres 362). Diderot owns up to the mediocre status of sensibilité and unlike Nietzsche is in harmony with the idea. In this sense, Diderot is more modern than Nietzsche.

Brookner's analysis of sensibilité follows Weber's thoughts (in L'Éthique protestante et l'esprit du capitalisme) when she states that sensibilité "lies in the changed concept of religion" (Greuze 2). She explains that knowledge is based on empirical understanding supported by the appreciation of the world by the
senses. It is reasoned and subjectively felt rather than innate or given by revealed religion. Reason in correlation with feeling, then, is the activity that demeans the power of God. And reason and sensibilité are useful to humanity and are connected with the capitalist utilitarian ethic. In short, reason and sensibilité are the basis of bourgeois morality.⁹ Sensibilité, even sentimentality, replaces heroism in what remains of male discourse. This is in effect Nietzsche’s point, and constitutes the ideological foundation of Greuze’s drames bourgeois. Affectation, sentimentality and hypocrisy are implied in the pathos in the Greuze and in the Valmont scenes. The tragedy turns into a sentimental melodrama in the case of Greuze, and to a satire in the case of Valmont.

In The Birth of Tragedy Nietzsche regretted the loss of the aristocratic tragic disposition within bourgeois ontology because it is permeated by feminine influence. The problem of tragedy versus drame bourgeois is an issue Diderot takes on in Le Paradoxe sur le comédien. It is also the major theme in his drama Le Fils Naturel. Diderot, unlike Nietzsche, is not embittered by the fall of tragedy. For him it is rather congruous with the prospect of the well brought-up, sensitive to others, sincere and unselfish honnête homme. Diderot’s theory about the theater, as well as his dramas, are well inscribed in bourgeois and feminized

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⁹ The sensibilité in Greuze, or the pursuit of happiness as Bryson calls it, coincides with Condillac’s treatise. The Abbé de Condillac develops an interesting model to demonstrate the primacy of sensation over thought. He posits a marble statue to which he confers, little by little, one by one, the appreciation of senses. This model is not at all phenomenological, for the statue, while in the state of development, is completely isolated from human interaction. Condillac’s treatise is characteristic not only by materialistic and sensualist
ideology, not unlike Greuze’s work (but only to a certain extent and we will see why).

In the eighteenth century, the theater was all the rage. Understandably, in a climate where appearance as a useful tool in social interaction, theater corresponded well to the taste for artifice so prevalent in the epoch. Diderot says in the *Paradoxe* about the real, the truth, and the natural in the theater:

Réfléchissez un moment sur ce qu'on appelle au théâtre être vrai. Est-ce y montrer les choses comme elles sont en nature? Aucunement. Le vrai en ce sens ne serait que le commun. Qu'est-ce donc que le vrai de la scène? C'est la conformité des actions, des discours, de la figure, de la voix, du mouvement, du geste, avec un modèle idéal imaginé par le poète et souvent exagéré par le comédien. (*Œuvres* 317)

Once again, simulation, rather than truth is a factor. What Diderot ascribes to the theater is the reality in the double discourse of the social sphere represented by Valmont and Greuze in the world of *sensibilité* promulgated by utilitarianism. Just as Valmont plays the role and sets up the masquerade convincing those who profit from his charity, Greuze too plays the role of the comedian whose pictorial discourse is to convince the population about the utility of morality. As Diderot says: Et pourquoi l'acteur différerait-il du poète, du peintre, de l'orateur, du musicien?" (*Œuvres* 309). With the difference, of course, that Valmont is well aware of the ruse, while Greuze's message is embedded, so to speak, in the larger ontological flux. Greuze, as opposed to Valmont, is impassioned.

Following Diderot, Valmont is the actor par excellence. He is the one who “c'est longtemps écouté lui même; c'est qu'il s'écoute au moment où il vous trouble, et

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approach, but also because it echoes the epoch’s restitution and valorization of
que tout son talent consiste non pas à sentir, comme vous le supposez, mais à rendre si scrupuleusement les signes extérieurs du sentiment, que vous vous y trompez” (Oeuvres 312). Valmont does all that; he is aloof. He is an aristocrat, corrupt by the historical process of bourgeoisification and feminization, but always an aristocrat. The bourgeois Greuze, on the other hand, inextricably involved in the discourse he illustrates, fits the disparaging judgment of Diderot: “C'est l'extrême sensibilité qui fait les acteurs médiocres; c'est la sensibilité médiocre qui fait la multitude des mauvais acteurs” (Oeuvres esthétiques, 313). Greuze, being himself the representative of the bourgeois discourse he propagates, is the “acteur extrêmement sensible”, and it is perhaps thus that we can situate (following Diderot) Greuze’s mediocrity. Seen in terms of Laclos’ vignette, Greuze's sensibilité would embody at once the honest folks, Madame de Tourvel, and the entire social text. And as we are constantly moving in a vicious circle, it also includes Valmont.

There is a difference between the double discourse of Diderot and the double discourse of a painter like Greuze. We can hardly talk about mediocrity in connection with Diderot. Unlike Greuze, the philosophe analyzes the ethical component from the objective point of view; a noble position indeed. But no omniscient point of view can clarify for Diderot the paradoxes of human condition. A true philosophe, Diderot is exploring seeking, and not finding the deciding truth; hence his dual narrative mode. His melodrama, Le Fils Naturel follows the Enlightenment's morality à la mode and is thus akin to Greuze's

the solitary subject (a notion so well expressed by Condillac's friend, Rousseau).
family sagas. In fact that melodrama is as unremarkable as is Greuze’s genre. However, it is as if Diderot was not satisfied with the drama per se, and adds Les Entretiens where the dialogue explores the double problem inherent in Le Fils naturel. Greuze, on the other hand, seems to be satisfied with the overt moral message and lets slide the implicit deconstructive dialectic. If Diderot is aware of the disconcerting duality which flattens tragedy into melodrama, Greuze contrives to cling to the tragic element, unaware that it becomes a ruse in the age of Valmonts.

If the son in Greuze’s La Malédiction paternelle is tormented by a tragic conflict (notwithstanding its diminished degree), the son in Le Fils naturel, Dorval, is removed one step further from such a spectacular predicament. His is the position of compromise. Diderot saw that virtue is not enough to disperse sad sentiment (which is not despair) for Dorval. As opposed to Greuze’s “son”, Dorval is virtuous to a fault, and his primary characteristic is melancholy. Greuze’s “son” acts out of passion, his project did not work out; the implicit message is that his fault is first of all his disobedience. However, since the referent of value in La Malédiction paternelle is the Family Father, and since he is linked, in the economy of the phallic symbolic order, to money (via the detour through the king and money represented by the recruiting officer) this referent’s value is diminished, as is the tragic pattern. Furthermore, Greuze’s characters
are not larger than life, they are members of the middle class; consequently they
do not evoke in us la terreur et la pitié. But the passion is there.

In the case of Dorval, Diderot does not pretend at all to tragic proportions:

He says in the prologue that Dorval is

l’homme rare qui avait eu, dans un même jour, le bonheur d’exposer
sa vie pour son ami, et le courage de lui sacrifier sa passion, sa fortune et
sa liberté [...] Il était triste dans sa conversation et dans son maintien à
moins qu’il ne parlât de la vertu, ou il n’éprouvât les transports qu’elle
cause à ceux qui en sont fortement épris [...] Son discours devenait
pathétique. (Le Fils naturel 26).

In Greuze the son sacrifices his family for the glory of monarch, and also his
own, even though in this case this glory is demeaned by the inherent monetary
interest, and the overall middle-class status of the character. Dorval’s sad self-
denial levels the passionate lift of tragedy. Needless to say, that self-denial has
been traditionally the destiny for women. Appropriately, Dorval is a man of the
interior space, mental as well as physical. Unlike Greuze’s “son”, he stays at
home and assumes his responsibilities to those around him.

Nicolas Wagner discusses melancholy in Greuze and links the sentiment
with Greuze’s mediocre ability as colorist. Wagner suggest that melancholy led
Greuze to the undistinguished look:

C’est que la peinture de Greuze ne relève pas purement et simplement de
l’art de manipuler des lumières. Il faut l’aborder par sa réalité propre. Si
Greuze a si obstinément travaillé dans le coulé, le lissé, le drapé lourd,
massif et violent, s’il a tant multiplié les agitations muettes, les poses
pathétiques, les orbites sombres, intensives, les regards agressifs et fixes;
s’il a représenté tant d’enfants misérables physiquement et envahis de

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10 My view, although it corresponds to many critics is necessarily anachronistic. Greuze’s drama reflects the sensibility of his epoch when democratization was heroic in its own way.
teintes nocturnes, froides; si Diderot a pu dire d’un portrait de Madame Greuze en vestale qu’elle était une ‘mère des douleurs’, tout cela ne doit pas être attribué à une maladresse technique, mais à quelque chose de profond dans l’artiste; j’appelle cela mélancolie. (28-29)

In the structuralist vein, Wagner sees not only Greuze’s narratives or the composition as befitting the decreased glory of the melodrama, but also stresses that Greuze’s banal use of color corresponds to his subjective bourgeois reality. Moreover, Wagner’s suggestion that Greuze’s grayish tones are the expression of the painter’s melancholy, points out Greuze’s correspondence with the pathos of Dorval.

Dorval’s melancholic disposition speaks of his introversion. The internal space where Dorval encloses himself is, according to Wagner, also Greuze’s preferred space. And the internal, or the subjective, also means, in the symbolic register, the feminine. And so, the Cartesian motion towards subjectivity and reason which is at the base of bourgeois capitalism is already instigated and supported by the intervention of feminine symbolism in the phallic order. The son in Greuze’s painting also motions toward himself in a gesture of recognition of his subjectivity, his guilt and his responsibility. He returns home (the feminine space) from the outside masculine space where the indifferent (to him) and incomprehensible masculine forces (the king, the army, the war etc.) victimize him. The two heroes’ fate (Dorval’s and the son’s in La Malédiction paternelle) shows that the inclination toward sensibilité or feminization is supported by the gesture of recognition of subjectivity and that such a motion is a moral gesture.
Interestingly, Diderot makes the father Lysimond, rather than the son Dorval, the adventurer. But Lysimond, just like the son in La Malédiction paternelle, is devastated by the external forces (the servant André tells how he found Lysimond in the dark, lying naked on the ground) and returns home. In Diderot's play, the plight of the father is similar to that of the father in La Malédiction paternelle or other eighteenth century representative fathers in that he is feeble and dying. But the long-lost prodigal Lysimond is the example of virtue, even though his virtue is a grade lesser than the virtue of his melancholic son. Son père, qui était si honnête homme, ne fut pourtant pas plus honnête que lui” (Le Fils naturel 188. Italics are not mine).

The characterization of the major protagonist Dorval as melancholic and pathetic coincides with the “in-between” genre scheme of Le Fils naturel. The calm, middle-status tone is Diderot’s conscious effort. In the Entretiens Dorval extrapolates on the construction of the play:

Je demande dans quel genre est cette pièce? Dans le genre comique? Il n'y a pas le mot pour rire. Dans le genre tragique? La terreur, la commisération et les autres grandes passions n'y sont pas excitées. Cependant il y a de l'intérêt; et il y en aura, sans ridicule qui fasse rire, sans danger qui fasse frémir, dans toute composition dramatique où le sujet sera important, où le poète prendra le ton que nous avons dans les affaires sérieuses, et où l'action s'avancera par la perplexité et par les embarras. Or il me semble que ces actions étant les plus communes de la vie, le genre qui les aura pour l'objet doit être le plus utile et le plus étendu. J'appellerai ce genre le genre sérieux. (Le fils naturel 156)

The genre sérieux, or the drame bourgeois, is a genre between comedy and tragedy and corresponds to the real condition of bourgeois and feminized masculinity. It is serious and has neither the sublime tragic nor the comic
element which would be introduced into a perfect tragedy by the external higher force in face of which the hero is helpless notwithstanding his manly attributes. This is the case of Oedipus. Oedipus is tragic because he, in spite of his excellent human faculties, can do nothing to avert the destiny outlined for him by the gods. He is blind to his real condition. (And symbolically becomes blinded at the end of the play.) The gods in Sophocles's tragedy, in their indifference to the well being of the human, do not prevent parricide and incest, but they punish him cruelly for the crime. Similarly, the son in La Malédiction paternelle is also punished for an act amounting to parricide. Nevertheless, today's viewer, contrary to Greuze's contemporary, might have some difficulty in reacting with horror. "Greuze créait le pathétique démocratique", as says Camille Mauclair (106. Mauclair's italics), and no longer can the democratized and profoundly eclectic postmodern culture tremble while facing Greuze's attenuated pathos; the ironies have already played out their equalizing course—and curse.

Unlike the case of Oedipus or, in a lesser degree, that of the son's in La Malédiction paternelle, no tragic destiny befalls Dorval. Dorval is the modern hero, one who directs his destiny, the one who decides; he is the direct agent. God (or gods as in Oedipus' tragedy, or the monarch in Greuze's melodrama) and hubris are absent from the fabric of Dorval's motivation. Also the higher forces are demeaned in Lysimond who, far from the omnipotence of God or gods is a weak and dying man. Thus the problem of parricide appears also in Diderot's play, but it is not spelled out at all; it is clear that Dorval, unlike Oedipus, is not
responsible for his father’s state. The Greek gods’ vigor in the classic tragedy is humanized into the mild benevolence of paterfamilias. The paterfamilias, aged and softened on his descent from Olympus to Earth, into the family sphere of woman, is inclined to guide his children toward bourgeois virtue. His force seems effective (it is the intervention of Lysimond that prevents the marriage of brother and sister, Rosalie and Dorval), but Diderot’s paterfamilias is not terrifying. The tragic notion is recast into a “natural”, feminized, avenue.

The hand movement of the son in Le fils puni reflects the gesture of Oedipus. Oedipus seems to point to himself with the hubris of the Cogito: “I am a man and I am the one who knows the world”. But his return from the external and dangerous space of the Gods into the internal, human space, that is to say into the feminized space of the Cogito, means also the beginning of his crisis; and, by extension, the crisis of the humanistic gesture.

A contained, real, and material ontology as opposed to the ideal represented by the glory of the gods is the outcome. Goux notes: “Dans la figure de l’Oedipe, cette armature [of the subjectivizing modality I consider as the prototype of the problem described in Diderot and Greuze] s’articule en trois actes: 1) Eviction du Père, 2) Promotion de l’Homme (et du Moi [the subject]), 3) Possession de la Mère” (Oedipe philosophe, 177). The phallic signifier descends

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11 James R. Rubin notes the frequency of the Oedipus theme in the eighteenth century history paintings and suggests that in that context Oedipus symbolizes the conflict between the old with the new; it is the pictorial metaphor of the opposition between the Old Regime and the Revolutionary order (141-71).
from the ideal and external space of Gods and kings down to home, to earth.

Goux notes:

Le retour à la matière et à l’ici-bas terrestre devient non seulement un appel à refuser les compensations postmortem pour une lutte dans la vie [as religion would have it], mais il prend aussi la forme théorique d’une représentation de la société et de l’histoire à partir des conditions objectives de la “base matérielle” d’où dérivent tous les idéaux, qui n’ont ainsi plus rien d’éternel et d’inconditionné. (*Oedipe philosophe* 179)

Thus, with the return of the Father to the Earth, or Home, a new ideality is formed. But it is an ideality which is incarnated in the material and the “real”. The myth of Oedipus is the precursor of the two *drame bourgeois*, *Le Fils naturel* and *La Malédiction paternelle*, and we can add the pathos of the Valmont scene the Goncourts astutely compared with Greuze. Oedipus, and after him, Valmont, Dorval, Lysimond, and Greuze’s fathers and sons, in fact the entire patriarchal culture, follow that gesture, which in the eighteenth century is expressed by a materialistic philosophical understanding supported by the “ideality” of bourgeois virtues as well as *sensibilité* and the feminization of mores.

Tragedy becomes melodrama, despair turns into melancholy at the time when the equalizing bourgeois economy allows women entry into the social scene, where they can effectuate pacifying reconciliation and neutralization of phallic passions. Greuze’s *La Malédiction paternelle* echoes the trend in painting, while the dramatic representation of the theater is exemplified and theorized in *Les Entretiens* by Diderot.

The moral message with which Greuze seems to support the supremacy of the paterfamilias is as dubious as is the noble stature of the entire spectrum of
fathers in the Valmont scene. Indubitably, the Goncourts' comparison of Greuze and the Valmont scene is useful in unraveling the evidence of the symbolic demise of the *paterfamilias* as the obvious next phase in the passage of the phenomenological avalanche which encloses and neutralizes the phallic signifiers, in the order of the paternal hierarchy: God → monarch/lord → family father. The reaction is catalyzed by the another phallic signifier, money.

The hero's genealogy—from Oedipus to Greuze's "son" and Diderot's Dorval, and we can also include Valmont in this abstraction—is marked by a gradual descent of the sublime paternal ideal. The lord (whom we have seen through the psychoanalytical optic already flawed) settles in the small, down-to-earth, homely and contained human condition—the domain of the *paterfamilias* as woman's space. On the level of economy this is expressed as the victorious advent of capitalism where money—the general equivalent—is the value indicator. On the level of art and literature, this is evident as realistic representation: Greuze's genre.
CHAPTER 5
REALISM AND CAPITALISM:
GREUZE THE PRECURSOR OF BALZAC.
L'IDÉALITÉ S'INCARNE DANS LA RÉALITÉ

The analogy between Greuze and Balzac was not lost on Xavier de Villarceaux, a nineteenth-century critic of Greuze and the painter’s compatriot partisan. He writes in 1868:

Quel historien contemporain oserait faire ombre au romancier Balzac. Greuze aussi a été un romancier. Et lui a aussi signé sa Comédie Humaine. Quelle variété de figures et de passions! Depuis la fillette de la Cruche cassée, jusqu’à la duchesse qu’il a peint en Madeleine [...] on pourrait décrire jusqu’à cent tableaux de cette Comédie Humaine qui est aujourd’hui une des pages vivantes de notre histoire. (17)

Just as it happens that the plastic art’s discourse often precedes literature, Greuze’s realism precedes the new literary genre, the realistic novel instituted by Balzac in the 1830’s. Realism in the domain of painting was, as many critics remarked, Greuze’s invention. Both Greuze and Balzac depict the bourgeois sphere and both instill an ideal aspect into the bourgeois reality motivated by capitalist economy and by Father’s Law. The ethical ideality ingrained in Greuze’s and Balzac’s Realism and the univocal point of view of the omniscient narrator—in many ways Balzac’s omniscient narrator’s discourse corresponds to Greuze’s didactic tone—enhance the solid centrality of the ethical referent (the Father). That Greuze’s genre paintings contain ambiguities subverting the overt
message is by now clear. Comparison of various paintings by Greuze with three
Balzac's texts, Gobseck, Le Médecin de campagne, and La Peau de chagrin
shows that the subversive trend reverberates and intensifies in Balzac.

The discussion of the progression of paternal power's demise from the
Enlightenment into the nineteenth century—from Greuze to Balzac—is based on
the theory, proposed by Jean-Joseph Goux who points out the homology
between paternalistic morality, Realistic representation made possible by the
"truth" of the omniscient narrator, and the noble and esthetic quality of the
precious metal gold, jingling and shining in the form of money. In the economy of
c commercial capitalism and in realistic representation "l'idéalité s'incarne dans la
réalité" as says Goux ("Catégories" 232), and the mixture of the ideal and the
real neutralizes the ethical foundation (paternalism) of the bourgeois regime. As
says Gobseck, the usurer and the hero in Balzac's short novel Gobseck "L'or est
le spiritualisme de vos sociétés actuelles" (132).

In his theory Goux postulates three functions of money, which he says
correspond to the three functions of language (as proposed by Lacan). 1) The
function of measure (or an archetype) corresponds to the ideal function in the
linguistic register. 2) The function of a token (this is the money in circulation
which is accepted in all transactions and which has the nominal value backed by
the state) concurs to the symbolic function of language. 3) The treasure function
of money corresponds to the real, or referential function of language
("Catégories" 230). In the nineteenth century, all three functions of money are in
effect concurrent with the three types of language functions. Gold money
encompasses the intrinsic value of the inert metal, gold. It is stable, traditionally standardized, and concrete. This imparts to gold money the ideal function of measure and archetype. The neutrality of gold money accords to the fiduciary system the function of general equivalent, it is the referent (the real function). Also, gold money as the circulating token in exchanges confers the symbolic function. Thus:

Lorsqu’un même corps monétaire est mesurant, circulant et à “valeur intrinsèque”, c'est-à-dire, en d'autres termes, lorsque les registres de l'idéalité, de la symbolité et du réel sont intriqués, alors nous sommes dans un mode de signifié qui est fondé sur la représentation objective ou l'optique réaliste. (“Catégories” 231)

The coincidence between the function of gold money and language and literature explains the workability of the Realist novel in nineteenth-century commercial capitalism. Balzac's and Zola's language (and I would add here that Greuze's images-as-language precede it) notes Goux, “participerait donc du même statut que la monnaie bourgeoise: stable, avec un étalon incontesté, une convertibilité assurée, un échange immédiat qui fait de lui un médium neutre” (“Catégories de l'échange” 232). Gold money is ideal in transactions because the value of things, concrete or abstract can be counted by it. Gold money seems to be the stable token through which value can be stated in an objective and unbiased way. By homology, realistic representation is ideal for expressing an objective and neutral—we can say true—point of view and to sustain the stability of paternalistic morality. This is accomplished in Balzac by the omniscient narrator and in Greuze by the narrative mimesis at large. Or is it?
Le réalisme, sous sa forme la plus schématique, la plus caricaturale, c'est l'optique de Gobseck.
Goux, “Le Principe de Gobseck”

In Gobseck, Balzac created a father figure at the same time grand and commonplace—a figure who is significantly connected with money. Goux states that the usurer Gobseck, because he is linked to the economy of money, impersonates conditions of the advent of the realistic mode of representation. More than that, Gobseck and Gobseck, the character and the novel, contain, suggests Goux, the seed of the modernist crisis of representation (“Le Principe” 193). These seeds were already planted in the Realism of Greuze, but in Gobseck Balzac exacerbates the contorted features of Greuze’s plan.

Balzac reached into Greuze’s epoch to draw out Gobseck’s ideological foundation. Gobseck is born in 1745.¹ He has a vast knowledge of the world which is congruous with the epoch’s zeal for exploration of the world. Finally, Gobseck is a philosophe, a philosophe “de l’école cynique” (140), a petrified Voltaire of sorts: “Gobseck ressemblait à la statue de Voltaire vue le soir sous le péristyle du Théâtre-Français” (136). But Gobseck, whose life “aussi s’écoutait-elle sans faire plus de bruit que le sable d’une horloge antique” (128), is aged and deprived of all that is human. He represents Enlightenment with no light. “[P]as de feu! pas de feu!” (146) he cries in alarm as he lays in the agony of

¹ Gobseck is ninety at the time of Derville’s narration, and was sixty-seven when Derville met him. He advises Derville: “je suis majeur depuis l’an soixante et un du siècle dernier” (139).
death. It is as if Gobseck were a father figure from Greuze whose fiery morality is extinguished.

In giving the usurer the ultimate power of arbitration in human affairs and stressing the importance of usury as being ultimately beneficial to the universe of Gobseck, Balzac underscores the fundamental importance of gold money and usury for the advancement of economy. In doing so, Balzac fastens on to the economic thoughts of the eighteenth-century philosophs of utilitarianism and the defenders of usury, Turgot and Montesquieu, and Bentham. Turgot categorically endorses usury: “Aucun motif ne doit porter à défendre le prêt à l’interêt” (285). Turgot explains that the borrower in general is not inclined to return money once he resolved his or hers financial problem. In such case, muses Turgot, the lender would decline the next time, and that would slow the economy. As Turgot observes, the usurer needs to charge interest to compensate for the risk of eventual loss and thus, in protecting himself, he promotes circulation of money and goods (276-287). Montesquieu also insist on the necessity of usury, its causes and conveniences. He notes that Jews

\[\text{inventèrent les lettres de change: et par ce moyen, le commerce put échuser la violence, et se maintenir par tout; le négotiant le plus riche n’ayant que des biens invisibles, qui pouvaient envoyés partout, et ne laissent de trace nul part.} \]

Les théologiens furent obligés de restreindre leurs principes; et le commerce, qu’on avait violemment lié avec la mauvaise foi, rentra, pour ainsi dire, dans le sein de la probité. (279)

The economy of usury, being beneficial to society, is thus considered moral enterprise. This eighteenth-century philosophe’s notion, as notes Goux, echoes in Gobseck where Balzac conferred onto the usurer the central position of a father.
Goux also points to the correspondence between this central role of “papa” Gobseck and the omniscience of Balzac’s third person narrator. This solidarity is consistent with Bentham’s notion that economic and moral values are congruent with the single point of view of total surveillance, in other words, they are the focal and omniscient point of the general and universal equity of human interests. They have the function of measure, referent, and symbol. And thus, as Goux says: “Entre le regard omniscient et central du dispositif panoptique de Bentham et l’omniscience dans la représentation réaliste du monde de Gobseck, il y aurait une étroite solidarité dont la logique de l’équivalent général complet pourrait rendre compte” (“Le Principe” 197).

Gobseck signifies the ambivalent features of Bentham’s model. Firstly, “papa” usurer—the epitome of money and its power—overseeing and regulating human affairs, occupies the controlling and omniscient position of a supreme being. Gobseck tells Derville: “Mon regard est celui de Dieu” (132). Elsewhere he compares his position with that of the king: “Nous sommes à Paris une dizaine ainsi, tous rois silencieux et inconnus, les arbitres de vos destinées” (132). In Gobseck resounds the optimism of the enlightened philosophes as seen in the case of Derville. His flourishing business (overseen and arbitrated by Gobseck) and happy and appropriate marriage conflate the contention of the congruence of commerce, usury, and morality.

But those happy notions are tainted with the neutralizing and reifying effect accomplished by the fiduciary regime. The scepter of the “monarch/usurer” is money, and money nullifies “His Highness”. Goux puts it this way:
Gobseck is reified and Marx’s words, “[il en est de l’homme comme de la marchandise” (Capital 59) can be applied to him. In short, when the real is superimposed onto the ideal, and when money becomes divinity, the supremacy of paternal power, of which Gobseck is a representative, is neutralized: while this position is focal and superior, it is also empty. Goux notes that Balzac created in the usurer “papa” Gobseck a grotesque embodiment of the deconstructive blueprint apropos the paterfamilias which, I argue, was designed by Greuze.

Gobseck’s neutrality rebounds on his “subjects” and effectuates an equalization and reification in human affairs. The usurer transcends all differences of social status and attenuates human passions as well. All is generally equivalent in his room. The difference of social status between the countess de Restaud and the worker Fanny Malvaut is erased. The usurer profits from the needs of his clients motivated in the case of the two women by passion. In Gobseck’s domain, passion undergoes a metamorphosis and the sublime concept becomes money. This is a notion echoed by Raphaël de Valentin in La Peau de chagrin: “Des élan’s de l’âme entraînent, subjuguient souvent un emprunteur, tandis que rien de grand ne subjugue, rien de généreux ne guide ceux qui vivent dans l’argent et ne connaissent que l’argent” (485)
That the process of negation whereby the power of money allows Gobseck to transcend humanity simultaneously rebouds is also evident from a slightly different perspective. As says Marx, "[c]hacun des sujets est un échangiste, c'est-à-dire a le même rapport social vis-à-vis de lui. En tant que sujets de l'échange, leur relation est donc celle de l'égalité. Il est impossible de déceler la moindre différence ou opposition entre eux" (Fondements 187). Since Gobseck profits from the business of selling money, he is one of the negotiators involved; this casts him back into the human condition. Thus his edifice, his metaphysical (or ideal) stature (which is really nothingness, being structured by the general equalization accomplished by money) is in reality grounded in humanity; this is testified by the designation "papa". And again, the process of the degradation of the paterfamilias is in motion.

In spite of his eminence and nullifying neutrality, Gobseck is, after all, a human being. The effigy of nothingness, as Goux calls him, might be exempt from love or hate, but he still is in a grip of a passion; it is a passion for gold and a passion to hoard commodities. Derville observes in him "le progrès de passion que l'âge avait convertie en une sorte de folie" (123). Balzac waits for the finale of the novel to show the trully grotesque side of the utilitarian point of view which Gobseck personifies. With age, Gobseck's mania to gather gold and various commodities intensifies. He is incapable of converting them into useful or "human values"; he gathers to gather. The general equivalent, gold money, becomes in the hands of the miser distanced from concrete life; finally it becomes a symbol, an abstract value. (This process is a function of time: the
aging of Gobseck seems to signify the growing span between the glory of
humanistic notions of the Enlightenment and the pedestrian bourgeoisie of the
1830's.) This abstraction, this distancing of commodities from immediate
usefulness brings forth equality and liberty, certainly. Gobseck is an example.
But: "[I]es économistes s'attachent ainsi à démontrer que les rapports
économiques expriment partout les mêmes catégories; on retrouve donc partout
la liberté et égalité de l'échange des valeurs sous sa forme simple: tout est ainsi
ramené à des abstractions qui ne sont rien moins que puériles" (Fondements
195); Marx sums up the paradox

In the case of Gobseck, the adjective "puéril" is an understatement.

Gobseck's senseless clutching onto goods, including perishable foodstuffs he
could never consume, speak rather of madness. What Derville finds after the
death of his "spiritual father" is decomposed food of all sorts:

Dans la chambre voisine de celle où Gobseck était expiré, se trouvaient
des pâtés pourris, une foule de comestibles de tout genre et même des
coquillages, des poissons qui avaient de la barbe et dont les diverses
puanteurs faillirent m'asphyxier. Partout fourmillait des vers et des
insectes. (146)

On the obvious level, the death of Gobseck accompanied by images of decay
conveys the moral message that greed leads to degeneration. But the message
is more charged. Our historical and postmodern standpoint grants another
interpretation: the rot associated with Gobseck, who on the symbolic level
embodies the signification of God, paterfamilias, money, phallus, seems to
foretell the instability of the phallic referent. As history progresses, commerce, in
the widest sense of the word, becomes more and more an element in the
endless rapport of manifold signifiers. Money (and gold) loses its referential or real and ideal function, its value becomes increasingly unstable and intangible and takes on mostly the symbolic function of a token. The function of measure and archetype is in crisis. The order of representation undergoes analogous development as manifested in the iconoclastic tendency of modern art and literature.²

There are certain values which are vital and which can not be abstracted into the general equivalent. Food, for example, is for direct consumption, and has a concrete and real value which resists abstraction. Images of decay signal dissolution of the real, or the referential, as well as of the ideal function. In the final analysis, putrefied food signals the dissociation of values. That is to say, the democratic equalizing and neutralizing process denotes liberty and equality—and Gobseck has all that. Gobseck also signifies the dissociation of measure of value (whose symbol is the phallus). In Gobseck the notions of liberty and tyrannical obsession with commodities which leads to madness are in juxtaposition. This paradox proliferates with avidity and feeds upon the phallic order that fathered it.

The putrefied food, an image so striking in the conclusion of Gobseck, is in contrast to the foodstuffs painted by Greuze in L'Accordée de village. In that painting there are healthy looking, wholesome loaves of bread displayed on the shelf above the father and the son. A firearm is suspended below that shelf, as if

² See more on this subject in Goux's Les Iconoclastes.
to protect the spoils. The fundamentals of life seem to be ideally represented: the phallic signifiers, the father, the son and the firearm are grouped below the food. They are connected with bread, the symbol of plenitude. (Certainly they have the function of measure and archetype.) This configuration of masculine images and bread accentuates the solidity of patriarchal order and the stability of family setting. But how steady is this position? By virtue of being suspended, the loaves are metasteady. In that image the metaphysical and the physical aspects meet. The force of gravity (a terrestrial force, assigned feminine status in the symbolic order, I note in passing), acts incessantly. The shelf with the loaves, so proudly represented as an attribute of paternal order, has the potentiality of falling down. The fall of the loaves, a physical possibility, would correspond to the decay of foodstuffs in Gobseck. In the metaphysical order, it represents the downfall of patriarchy. In L’Accordée de village the food is firmly in place as is the firearm near it, and the likelihood of either falling down is as remote as is the degeneration of the patriarchal order in the eighteenth-century France, the instability of gold money, and the crisis of representation; but the potential is there.

The conclusion of Gobseck allows a glimpse of the drastic change on all levels of social structure. But the entire novel, leaning ideologically and formally onto the construct of the Enlightenment, promotes a more optimistic prospect for the bourgeois ontology. Balzac believed, as did Greuze, in the feasibility of representation where the rapport between signifiers and signified is stable. In Gobseck, the narrator—be it the omniscient narrator, Derville or Gobseck—tells
the “truth” because the verisimilitude of expression is not yet contested. The
reader can “believe” the text without being challenged to too great a degree by
ironic subversion. In Balzac, as in Greuze, the stability of signs is incontestable—
or almost—in the same way as the value of gold is stable in their epoch.
Grandeur exists, if somehow degraded, in the *Human Comedy* and in Greuze’s
“Father Series”. In the realism of Balzac and of Greuze ideality is incarnated in
reality and but the seed of deconstruction already germinates. It is the aged
Gobseck who would be the continuation—and in fact a prediction of the
conclusion—of the philosophical and ethical concepts of the Enlightenment; and
of Humanism, as seen by the deconstructionist thought promulgated by Goux,
Foucault, Derrida, Irigaray, and others.

*Dr. Benassis and Greuze: The Defenders of Family Order*

The image of money and its inherent property to neutralize value and to
negate authenticity of paternal eminence often accompanies fathers in Balzac’s
novels, and is indubitably connected to the quirk in their nature (for example in
*Gobseck*, *Le Père Goriot*, or *Eugénie Grandet*). But not all Balzac’s novel have
such a virulent streak of grotesquery concerning the *paterfamilias*. In *Le Médecin
de campagne* Balzac depicts a father figure resembling more closely the
Greuzian model.

The melancholic Dr. Benassis, the principal protagonist in *Le Médecin de
campagne*, (1832), is another father figure in Balzac’s universe who is motivated
by the ideology which informed Greuze’s “Father Series”. A man of science,
fighter against prejudice and superstition, a philanthropist, he applies himself to
the betterment of living conditions of his region. Congruously with the moral
prescription of his period, he sees the family governed by paternal power as the
basic moral and legislative element of social structure. Benassis contemplates:

La base des sociétés humaines sera toujours la famille. Là commence
l'action du pouvoir et de la loi, là du moins doit s'apprendre l'obéissance.
Vus dans toutes leurs conséquences, l'esprit de la famille et le pouvoir
paternel sont deux principes encore trop peu développés dans notre
nouveau système législatif. (145)

Benassis's words echo Greuze's position.

The light of the Enlightenment, permeating the work of Greuze, illuminates
the post-Revolutionary legislative system expressed in the Code Napoléon. The
Code accords to the *paterfamilia* the primary power in family matters but,
contrary to the aristocratic precepts of the Old Regime, paternal power is
acknowledged through material assets. Benassis applies himself to increasing
the wealth of his region. His praxis echoes the Code's prescription that paternal
power is a materialistic concept first of all. Xavier Martin elaborates on the
importance of paternal authority in the Code and provides ample evidence of the
conflation of paternal power and propriety. Martin thus sums up:

Le 'bon père de famille' est l'homme qui gère rationnellement son
patrimoine, et du même coup, sans aucune doute, assure le bonheur des
siens, mais aussi, et d'abord, entretient l'ordonnance domestique pour le
profit de la société. (472)

Martin's exposition suggests that the Code, granting the family father legislative
authority within the family, considers the *paterfamilias* worthy of respect on the
grounds that he generates and holds onto wealth. Napoleon's prescription is
both bourgeois and aristocratic. It is congruous with the status of both lofty father
figure and a grand ruler he was. Conversely, the Code Napoleon, just like its
author, are planted in the salient social and economic structure, the bourgeoisie,
which necessitates legislation linking the eminence of paternal authority with
material wealth rather than with glory and honor. Napoleon has the referential,
symbolic, and ideal value of Father and of the golden coin; he is the stable
(relatively, as history showed) signifier.\(^3\) Napoleon, having the stature of an epic
hero, captivates the imagination of Romantics, among them Balzac.\(^4\) Importantly,
Banassis’s friend and interlocutor is the aged Napoleon’s soldier, Genestas. All
in all, *Le Médecin de campagne* is a “roman optimiste, moral, campagnard,
populaire, napoléonien, politique” as says Pierre Citron (16). *Moral*, often
campagnard and populaire are also the epithet describing Greuze’s genre
scenes.

Balzac has ulterior motives for writing *Le Médecin de campagne*. As did
many other Romantics, Balzac desired a political career and thus creates a novel
which is essentially a political pamphlet endorsing the popular glory of Napoleon
and his legislature. Moreover, in 1832 Balzac needed money and a novel
accessible to a large audience would bring profits. It seems reality has a way of
undermining the exalted ideals in Balzac’s universe, whether in his life or in his

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\(^3\) Napoleon I issued the 20-franc golden coin called napoleon which was minted
in the nineteenth century.

\(^4\) It is interesting to note, that according to Gaëtan Picon Napoleon is in fact the
last epic hero (68).
stories. Thus inasmuch as the novel directed to instruct and please in audiences while promoting paternalistic morality, Balzac’s project approximates Greuze’s.

Many vignettes narrated in *Le Médecin de campagne* idealize a rural family’s life in a distinctly Greuzian fashion. In this part of the *Human Comedy*, Dr. Benassis as a kind of Virgil leads his Dante, the soldier Genestas, through his domain: “Enfin c’était un beau pays, c’était la France!” (122). It is well worth citing at length a description of a home that Genestas visited. It is a setting where didactic notion, realistic representation, and the choice of imagery as well as characters recall Greuze’s rural genre scenes. Propaganda for the idealized simplicity of country life and its virtue, the importance of children, and the beautified motherhood are concepts where Balzac (in *Le Médecin de campagne*) and Greuze meet:

Le sol de ce territoire de famille était ferme et bien balayé, mais coupé par des fosses à fumier. Des rosiers, des lierres, de hautes herbes s’élevaient le long des murs lézardés. A l’entrée du carrefour se trouvait un méchant grosseillard sur lequel séchaient des guenilles. Le premier habitant que rencontra Genestas fut un pourcouf vautré dans un tas de paille, lequel, au bruit des pas du cheval, grogna, leva sa tête, et fit enfluer un gros chat noir. Une jeune paysanne, portant sa tête un gros paquet d’herbes, se montra tout à coup, suivie à distance par quatre marmots en haillons, mais hardis, tapageurs, aux yeux effrontés, jolis, bruns de teint, de vrais diables qui ressemblaient à des anges [...].

Genestas s’assit au coin d’une haute cheminée sans feu, sur le manteau de laquelle se voyait une Vierge en plâtre colorié, tenant dans ses bras l’Enfant Jésus. Enseigne sublimé! Le sol servait de plancher à la maison. A la longue, la terre primitivement battue était devenue raboteuse, et, quoique propre, elle offrait en grand les callosités d’une écorce d’orange. Dans la cheminée étaient accrochés un sabot plein de sel, une poêle à frire, un chaudron. Le fond de la pièce se trouvait rempli par un lit à colonnes garni de sa pente découpée. Puis, çà et là, des escabelles à trois pieds, formées par des bâtons fichés dans une simple planche de fayard, une huche au pain, une grosse cuiller en bois pour puerer de l’eau, un seau et des poteries pour le lait, un rouet sur la huche, quelques clayons à
fromages, des murs noirs, une porte vermoulue ayant une imposte à claire-voie; telles étaient la décoration et le mobilier de cette pauvre demeure. [...] 
Sous ce toit, digne de l'étalé où Jésus-Christ prit naissance, s'accomplissaient gaiement et sans orgueil les devoirs difficiles de la maternité. Quels coeurs ensevelis dans l'oubli le plus profond! [...] Ailleurs se trouve le Livre, le texte historié, brodé, découpé, couvert en moir, en tabis, en satin; mais là certes était l'esprit du Livre. Il eût été impossible de ne pas croire à quelque religieuse intention du ciel, en voyant cette femme [the widow Martin] qui s'était faite mère comme Jésus-Christ s'est fait homme, qui glanait, souffrait, s'endettait pour des enfants. (124-26)

This is Greuze in motion, dramatized almost in the manner of Diderot. The ethos and the pathos of the scene sum up Greuze's paintings (even though Greuze's country folk are a grade richer). The widow Martin reminds us of the type of a mother we see in L'Accordée de village or in La Malédiction paternelle. The young village woman appears in many of Greuze's rural pictures, usually in the role of a young mother as in Le Départ en nourrice (fig. 4), Le Retour de la nourrice (fig. 5), La Mère sévère, Le Goûter (fig. 23), L'Innocence endormie, Silence (fig. 3), Le Bénédicté (fig. 24), and many others. All depict scenes that could have been staged in the hut that Genestas visited. The religious motive in Balzac's description recalls the piety of Femme lisant—Retour sur soi même, La Prière de la jeune fille, La Bonne éducation, but most of all it recalls the painting which marked Greuze's success, Le Père expliquant la Bible à ses enfants (fig. 15). The children, "de vrais diables qui ressemblaient à des anges" (above quotation), appear in Greuze's rustic scenes and are often depicted alone in the most lovable attitudes, for example Le Petit Paresseux (fig. 25).

Order and comforting virtue reigns in that household. The food is well displayed and is reminiscent of the loaves of bread in Greuze's L'Accordée de
village. But contrary to *L’Accordée de village* where male predominance is
clearly evident by the focal position of the father, the son, the firearm and the
sack of money, the male presence in the hut, emphasized by the military status
of Genestas, is only temporary. The food is associated for the most part with
earthly imagery suggesting the female realm: battered ground, animals, children,
women. In spite of the paternalistic measure which permeates this book, family
order seems to be predominantly woman’s domain. Once again, this is also
evident in many Greuze’s pictures.

It is true that capitalist enterprise instigated by Dr. Benassis brings about
prosperity and sometimes even wealth to the citizens: thus far, Balzac complies
with the salient ethic. On the other hand, the doctor’s charity (he treats the poor
without taking money and is generous with his time and money), as well as his
fall in the realm of love, are traits of an epic hero (his *génie* as Baudelaire would
say). However, Benassis’ “epic” or *ideal* aspect is troubled by his cool-headed
scheming and calculating. He evaluates the effect of his charity in terms of
money. He admits: “En venant ici, j’avais renoncé à l’argent. Depuis, j’ai reconnu
que l’argent représente des facultés et devient nécessaire pour faire le bien”
(151). Benassis abandones the romantic and aristocratic notion that money is to
be despised, and assumes a bourgeois capitalistic attitude, a realistic function.

The outstanding father Benassis, however, is never happy and leads a life
of melancholy solitude. Similarly as in Greuze’s *La Malédiction paternelle*, his is
not a tragic lot; his story amounts to a melodrama. He does not die in action (as
an epic hero would die) but in bed. He has the same fate as Greuze’s patriarchs
who are for the most part depicted in bed sick, dying or dead (*Le Fils puni*, *Le Paralytique*, *Le Septimus Sevère*). And his friend Genestas? The aging soldier of the great Napoleon becomes a father to his friend's adopted son Adrien. Just as Greuze's sons carry the signification of future fathers whose paternal momentum has suffered through bourgeoizification of social and economic discourses, so is Adrien a somewhat bankrupt continuation of Benassis and Genestas.

Noticably, he is neither hero's real son but an orphan. The fact that he falls in love with the half-mad, if free spirited woman, named La Fosseuse (a name which suggests a grave and thus underlines the melancholy aspect so prominent in this optimistic novel) does not upgrade the glory of his maleness and a future progenitor either. Moreover, he is physically weak, a half-Jew, a detail which in Balzac's often stereotypical (and temperamentally anti-Semitic) universe would mean a connection with money (Gobseck too had a Jewish mother), a detail projecting the leveling of masculinity. Thus Benassis's melancholy, his banal death, Genestas's age, and the characterization and plight of their surrogate son are signs pointing toward a decomposition of paternalism and of the masculine Napoleonic glory otherwise overtly celebrated by *Le Médecin de campagne*. In the last analysis, the "objective" discourse, while endorsing paternalistic ethic, is, in Balzac, simultaneously a critique of fixed moral patterns.

The writer escapes the fate of Greuze's mediocrity inasmuch as he does not partake so obviously of the canon of moral prescriptions. Nevertheless, in *Le Médecin de campagne* Balzac closely resembles Greuze in the official moral tone. That novel is a contrived effort to preach the morality of simple life and the
virtue of paternal authority. But even in that novel the glory of the father figure is undermine by an understated and subtle irony, thus resembling Greuze's dubious standards in respect to the *paterfamilias*.

*Raphaël de Valentin and Greuze: The Romantic Spirit*

Dr. Benassisi who accepts money as the mean to his philanthropic ends is the true bourgeois father hero as Greuze would have him. He is certainly not penetrated by the "rays of the black son of the pecuniary power" (to borrow Goux's expression) as is the caricature of paternalism, Gobseck the usurer. Benassisis, as the symbol of the father figure, stands in between Gobseck and Raphaël de Valentin, the romantic persona-as-father figure in *La Peau de chagrin*, a hero who is resentful of the power of money.

In *La Peau de chagrin* (1830-1831) Balzac's romantic and poor hero, the aristocrat Raphaël, laments in bitter anguish the impossibility of aristocratic praxis in face of the hard nosed, money-obsessed hegemony. To the contrary to *Le Médecin de campagne* where Greuze-like imagery is seen in positive light, Raphaël in his frenzied narration makes almost oneiric association between a bill of exchange and Greuze's pathos, and the association is not optimistic.

Des élans de l'âme entraînent, subjuguent souvent un emprunteur, tandis que rien de grand ne subjugue, rien de généreux ne guide ceux qui vivent dans l'argent et ne connaissent que l'argent. J'avais horreur de l'argent. Enfin la lettre de change peut se métamorphoser en vieillard chargé de famille, flanqué de vertus. Je devrais peut-être à un vivant tableau de Greuze, à un paralytique environné d'enfants, à la veuve d'un soldat, qui tous me tendront des mains suppliantes. Terribles créanciers avec lesquels il faut pleurer, et quand nous les avons payés, nous leur devons encore des secours. La veille de l'échéance, je m'étais couché
The lack of transparency in the associative process evident in this paragraph is certainly due to Raphaël’s consumption of alcohol and his delirious state. But it is also structurally appropriate. It enhances the muddy ontology of commercial capitalism in which Greuze’s imagery—and Raphaël himself—are planted. This reality demeans the ideal virtue of Greuze’s characters (the old patriarch present in Greuze’s “Father Series”, the family of the paralytic in _Le Paralytique ou la bonne éducation_, or the bereaved widow in _Le Fils puni_). Taking into account Raphaël’s deprecating attitude toward money: “J’avais l’horreur de l’argent”, “rien de grand ne subjugue, rien de généreux ne guide ceux qui vivent dans l’argent et ne connaissent que l’argent” (above quotation), Raphaël’s vision of the metamorphosis of Greuze’s virtuous patriarch into the bill of exchange: “[e]nfin la lettre de change peut se métamorphoser en vieillard chargé de famille, flanqué de vertus” (above quotation), effectively lessens the moral sentiment Greuze had contrived to mobilize.

Raphaël includes himself as one protagonist in a Greuze-like scene in the capacity of a lord. However, he acknowledges his inability to fulfill the lord’s paternal duty as protector and benefactor. The conflation of money—or rather the bill of exchange—with a situation where he, Raphaël, should have acted as the father figure (the lord) signifies a subversion of paternal function in the capitalist economy. In the New Regime, the poor could always use an aristocrat’s protection to sustain life, but Balzac’s hero cannot provide it because
he is penniless. Raphaël's need of money links him to the low class, dragging lower his nobility. Raphaël's vision which connects Greuze's moralizing intent with the bill of exchange, points to the culpability of the pecuniary regime in diminishing the honorable position of Father. Thus Raphaël represents the fall of the edified figurehead because the hero is incapable of functioning as the lord, who is the extension of the power of the king; and the king, in his turn is the representative of God, the Celestial Father.

The evocation of Greuze's images leads Raphaël's associative process toward the lexical notion “une menteuse espérance” (above quotation). The entire sentence, “[Il]a veille de l' échéance, je m'étais couché dans ce calme faux des gens qui dorment avant leur exécution, avant un duel, ils se laissent toujours bercer par une menteuse espérance”, is charged with historical significance. The microcosm of Raphaël's situation mirrors the great Revolutionary process and its consequences. “Une menteuse espérance” would signify the illustrious and exalted Enlightened philosophizing, and the moral virtue endorsed by Greuze. Enlightenment ideology leads to the establishment of bourgeois hegemony, and with it follows a certain banality of existence which in effect victimizes Raphaël who adheres to the code of honor. In Le Médecin de campagne Dr. Benassis outlines the prospect:

Avec la monarchie nous avons perdu l'honneur, avec la religion de nos pères la vertu chrétienne, avec nos infructueux essais de gouvernement le patriotisme. Ces principes n'existent plus que partiellement, au lieu d'animer les masses, car les idées ne périssent jamais. (138-39)
Raphaël, the true romantic, turns to works of art and philosophy (to the artifice, re/presented reality) to define his rapport to the world. Unable to practice with satisfaction within the code of aristocratic honor, but unable to communicate or share within the bourgeois code, he is alienated and turns to himself in the aimless quest for the meaning of existence. He employs sentiment and intellect, not in interaction with others, but by the process of inversion. Raphaël de Valentin, the Faust of Balzac’s bourgeois world, is full of desire, but is paralyzed in action. He studies copiously, isolated in his room. He dreams of great passion and does not notice that love is at his doorstep. Finally, Raphaël wants to end his life. In short, his romantic predilection reflects the crisis of the modern human subject.

A comparison between Raphaël de Valentin in *La Peau de chagrin*, and the figure of the son in *La Malédiction paternelle* demonstrates a parallelism between Balzac’s romantic contention personified in Raphaël, and the melancholy notion in Greuze’s paintings. To a degree, it posits the plight of the son in diptych *La Malédiction paternelle: Le Fils ingrat* and *Le Fils puni* as the forerunner of Raphaël’s downfall. The point of comparison between Balzac’s text and Greuze’s pictures is Raphaël’s desire to commit suicide, and the downtrodden condition of the son in *Le Fils puni*. In both cases the sad state of the heroes can be connected to status of a soldier within bourgeois ontology. In *La Malédiction paternelle* the son leaves for the army in spite of his father’s exhortation. But Greuze’s “son” is in fact responding to a call from a Father placed higher on the ladder of patriarchal hierarchy, the king. Since the son’s
motive is money (represented in the painting by the recruiting officer) instead of military glory and honor, and since money flattens all value into one general equivalent, the outcome reduces the phallic edifice (the monarchy) because it demanded and paid for the service of a soldier very much in the manner a capitalist would demand and pay for the service of a worker. Now, Greuze's "son" is a bourgeois and a soldier. As I have noted previously, military service crushes him physically and mentally (the cane on the floor attests that he is crippled, and his anguished face and body language speak for his mental state), and the son's action indirectly kills his father and brings misfortune to the entire family. Greuze's drama thus depicts an operation where the force motivating a soldier has changed from feudal virtues (honor and glory) into money.

While Gobseck represents the reification of the patriarchal paradigm, Raphaël personifies the loss of the aristocratic masculine exclusiveness. Raphaël is a soldier removed further from the "noble cause" (of serving one's king in battle) than the son in La Malédiction paternelle. Sartre succinctly sums up the reason why, in the bourgeois milieu of Constitutional Monarchy, the Romantics (mostly aristocrats—Raphaël is Balzac's literary representative of the type) are incapable of satisfying in action their exalted ambitions:

À l'époque féodale et dans les tragéies de Corneille, les grands vassaux, liés au monarque par la foi jurée, sont des généraux actifs: ils se tiennent pour les agents de l'Histoire et, dans une large mesure, ils n'ont pas tort; il faut reconnaître aussi qu'ils donnent leur vie en effet qu'ils la risquent, en tout cas, au cours d'entreprises concertées. Aussi, pour restituer une idéologie en voie de disparition, Corneille vise au sublime pratique: ce sont les actes qui sont admirables et les propos n'exaltent que s'ils se rapportent à des actes. En 1830, au contraire, le sublime est verbal: il atteint son paroxysme lorsqu'elle situation rend toute praxis impossible ou,
ce qui revient au même, inutile. Il n'en demeure pas moins que l'Homme-tel-qu'il-devrait-être, après la chute de Charles X, s'oppose à la bourgeoisie triomphante comme le héros cornélien à la bourgeoisie montante. (L'Idiot de la famille)

Greuze’s imagery drew the pathway that implies why Cornellian heroism is no longer a feasible notion for Raphaël. In the 1830’s, Greuze’s “sons” usurp the glory from all the young noble Romantics like Raphaël. Active participation in the sublime praxis is condemned as a result of an operation which the hermeneutics of La Malédiction paternelle indicate. Greuze’s drames larmoyants, such as Le Paralytique or La Malédiction paternelle, are a nostalgic reminder of Raphaël’s diminished lordly paternal position. Greuze unveils the bottom line of the logistics of Raphaël’s paternal powerlessness and disillusionment: one simply needs money in the modern world to function (semi)honorable; and Raphaël does not have any.

The plight of Greuze’s “son” and “father”, as well as Raphaël’s destiny, are implicated in a regime which once provided a glorious retribution. Military obligation gave male aristocrats the possibility of honorable death in the service of the king. But the historical process of the advent of the bourgeoisie, coupled with a deterioration of the grandeur of the monarch (from Louis XV to Louis XVIII, the personal stature of the Bourbon kings decreases), does away with the glory of such a morbid proposition. The death of the father and the devastation of the son in La Malédiction paternelle, and the case of Raphaël, are ultimately a consequence of disillusionment. In both cases, the phallocentric edifice where valor is replaced by money neutralizes the human subject.
In the Romantic prescription, the glory of the valor-bound death-wish is recast in the notion of suicide. Notably, Raphaël, while poor, wants to die. As the story continues, however he becomes rich and wants to keep on living. But the conditions of his enrichment are such that he is condemned to a slow death. Wealth took away from the hero his élan as well as the possibility of the grand action (suicide). True, the wealthy Raphaël finds love, certainly a sublime notion, but the curse of money prevents him from enjoying it.

Unlike other Balzac's novels, *La Peau de chagrin* is spun along the convention of a fairy tale. (An old man gives Raphaël a magic skin which would fulfill all his wishes. Each time a wish is fulfilled, the skin shrinks and with it Raphaël's life expectancy.) Balzac's persistent inclusion of the pecuniary regime in the operation of Raphaël's Faustian dilemma (even Mephistopheles matamorphosizes in Balzac into an old merchant) make the entire story more "realistic"; it levels off to a great extent the ideal and sublime feature of Raphaël's destiny and turns the tragedy into melodrama. The mediocrity of the pathos of Greuze's images that Raphaël evokes seems to predict Raphaël's own generally equalized fate, a fate rendered thus by the neutral, cold but powerful influence of gold money, the general equivalent.

Baudelaire says about Balzac's protagonists: "Chacun, chez Balzac, même les portières, a du génie; toutes les âmes sont des âmes chargées de la volontée jusqu'à la gueule" (97). Baudelaire taps the ideal aspect in Balzac. In Greuze the *génie* of the hero is carried by the tableau's narrative (for example the father and the son in *La malédiction paternelle*). It is further underscored by
the grandiose baroque gesture of the brush stroke and the dynamic rhythms of composition. But the economic aspect of the bourgeois reality accentuated by a mediocre setting lowers the heroes’ génie (Balzac’s and Greuze’s alike) into the middle-class position. The bourgeois milieu demeans exalted tragedies and the magnificence of the drama is reduced and neutralized. This is the chagrin of the Romantics, expressed by Raphaël de Valentin, the aristocratic and romantic hero in *La Peau de chagrin*.

Realism is the foremost feature of mimesis in the epoch of commercial capitalism, and corresponds with the ideal aspect of the economic and moral concept. But, just as the future of money is destined to follow the direction of de-realization, and de-idealization, as it looses the stable value which gold holds in that period, so is mimesis heading in a direction where the reciprocal rapport between signifier and signified gains such a proportion and speed that all value is relative. In parallel, the patriarchal paradigm is eroding.

The epoch of Realism—including Greuze in the eighteenth century, but mostly Balzac in the 1830’s—is the high point of the coexistence of the three functions, real, ideal, and symbolic, in the fields of economy, linguistics (and literature) and the patriarchal ethic. It is also the historical moment when the commencement of deconstruction of those concepts can be appreciated. Just as in Balzac’s novels, so in the works of Greuze the referent function is in trouble (to a degree) and thus undermines the apparently straightforward ideal inscribed in the seemingly solid-gold ethical backbone of reality in their representation. A
representation which is, in the final analysis, the token or the symbol supposedly convertible into truth, the truth upheld by the power of Father.

Who is the person in power in Gobseck? who embodies supreme paternal power? What is the scepter he holds in his hand and with which he directs all sociability? He is the caricature of the Enlightenment's philosophe, shown as old and inert and greedy for gold. He is the usurer “papa” Gobseck who holds in his hand the magic wand, the bill of exchange. Let us remember, that it is the bill of exchange, Gobseck’s tool of trade, which reminds Raphaël de Valentin of Greuze.
CHAPTER 6

GREUZE'S FEMINISM IN THE SUBTEXT OF LA PARESSEUSE ITALIENNE AND LA MÈRE BIEN-AIMÉE

In Chapter 2, I have proposed that the banal aspect of Greuze’s work is linked to feminization of ontology. But this process of feminization, as I have also stressed, has always been a spin-off of phallocentric discourse. And if the value of femaleness did mark an appreciation in temporal progression from the interdiction of images and the deprecating (for women) exchange of women toward a more natural image of a woman in the eighteenth century, this process has been biased by phallocracy, and the result in the eighteenth century is still a woman as the useful subject for male sociability. The mixture of the real and the ideal resulted in the work of Greuze in a saccharine sentimentalization of female worth. Having said all this, I must concede that Greuze surpassed the mode of sensibilité and the propagandist slant by rigorous realism in La Paresseuse italienne (fig. 10) and by introducing the mode of the grotesque (probably unintentionally) in La Mère bien-aimée (fig. 2). In that painting the tropes of the grotesque, exaggeration, hyperbolism and excessiveness, impair the patriarchal paradigm of the fertile mother. More than that, those tropes liberate the mother’s body from heavy-footed ideological constraints which had incessantly determined female ontology.
In *La Paresseuse italienne* (1757), meticulous examination of nature allowed Greuze to penetrate the dark depths of the distressed psychological makeup of his sitter. I claim that Greuze’s fidelity to the nature of his subject inadvertently undermines the moral directive implicit in the derogatory title of the painting. On the surface, *La Paresseuse italienne*, a portrait in the genre of narrative painting, teaches a lesson about the unattractiveness of indolence and slothfulness. I argue that today’s standpoint demands a deeper understanding of the causality of her dejected demeanor; the epithet “lazy” is simply not a sufficient description of Greuze’s protagonist. To better demonstrate the ideological bias of the painting’s intended message, I juxtapose *La Paresseuse italienne* with Greuze’s later painting, *La Blanchisseuse* (first exhibited in the Salon of 1761), depicting an energetic young laundress.

Restif de la Bretonne attacks the vice of indolence:

> Le vice de la paresse, si dangereux en lui-même pour les deux sexes, destructif certain du bonheur pour les femmes, est beaucoup plus ordinaire qu’on ne pense!...Il faut le surmonter, ce vice, quand il est naturel, en se prescrivant à soi-même une règle qu’on ne transgressera jamais. L’ordre seul peut remedier (sic) à l’inertie, source de tout desordre (sic), et mère des crimes les plus atroces, qui trouvent plutôt-entrée dans une âme croupissante, que dans celle douée de la plus (sic) énergique activité. Toutes ces Malheureuses dont la vue revolte (sic), en fesant (sic) rougir, tous ces Infames dont la fin tragique excite l’horreur & la pitié, sont des Parsseuses & des Paresseux. Cette verité qui n’a pas besoin de demonstration, doit faire fremir Celles & Ceux qui sentent audedans (sic) d’eux-mêmes quelque disposition à la paresse. (23-24)

Bourgeois discourse, articulated here by La Brettone, valorizes work in contrast to the idleness of clergy and aristocrats. But as work is the virtue of the middle and lower class, it is even more objectionable when a member of that class
transgresses this moral imperative. La Brettoné’s moralizing discourse expresses the value judgment Greuze evoked in *La Paresseuse italienne*, where the props and the figure reflect disorder and stagnation.

The painting depicts a low or lower-middle class young obese woman sitting near the corner of a modestly furnished room; it could be her home or the kitchen of her masters. On the cabinet by her left side are some crockery and wine bottles, one of which is overturned. Some nondescript white clothing and yellowish ribbon hangs over a stand. On the floor about the figure are dishes in disorder and water spills from an overturned bowl. She is sitting bent over, hands clasped over her distended abdomen, leaning slightly toward the corner. Her limp hair is falling over her left shoulder. The upper torso is barely clad, as if someone pulled her blouse down from her shoulders and her breasts. A flimsy scarf barely conceals the naked skin of her right shoulder. The young woman has the left shoe on, the right foot is bare and the right shoe is lying on its side beside the bare foot. The woman’s empty gaze avoids the spectator and is directed to the overturned bowl. There is a window above the woman’s head, and although open, it seems to lead nowhere. Light comes from the right side of the painting, possibly from an open door. The color scheme is warm.

The ethical value of the image is dictated by the epoch’s tendency inclined to conflate morality, beauty and health as stipulated by doctor Pierre Roussel in his work, *Système physique et moral de la femme, ou tableau philosophique de la constitution, de l'état organique, du tempérament, des mœurs, & des fonctions propres au sexe* (1775). Roussel writes: “[l]’excessive indolence détruit
à-la-fois la santé, & ce que les femmes aimeroient plus que la santé, s'il pouvoit subsister sans elle, je veux dire la beauté” (92). Besides, “un excès d’embonpoint […] ôte au corps ses proportions naturelles, la souplesse & la légéreté” (120-21). Roussell clearly links beauty and morals. And Greuze’s (anti)heroine is not pretty. Now the standard dominating the bourgeois appreciation of woman’s beauty allows for imperfections of physiognomy as the natural condition which enhances woman’s attraction. As Philippe Perrot puts it, in the eighteenth century

[c]e n’est pas la beauté achevée—inhumaine—qui rend désirable, ni même les qualités compensatrices de la disgrâce, c’est l’agrément de l’irrégularité, le charme indicible de l’imperfection comme manifestation physique de la personne morale, comme forme sublimée par sa signification. (94)

But in La Paresseuse Greuze depicts a woman defeating all allowable charms of irregularity; her obesity and the flaccidity of her attitude are not the appetizing plumpness and softness of the voluptuous female flesh.

The woman in La Paresseuse is the reverse of the appetizing and industrious woman Greuze painted later in La Blanchisseuse (1761). This image appears to be the positive example of the proposed association of beauty and morals. Pictorial similarities underscore the dialectical connection between these paintings. There is the same cabinet and the positions of the models are similar; the cloth is this time thrown over a clothes’ line. The crockery is comparable, but it is more orderly in La Blanchisseuse, as if the objects had purpose for the life and work of the young laundress. The purposefulness of the props is in contrast with the abandon and disorder of the objects in La Paresseuse. The attitude of
the figure in *La Blanchisseuse* is direct and forceful, quite the reverse of the woman in *La Paresseuse*. The appetizing laundress who epitomizes robust health is sitting facing the room, she is not in the corner like the young Italian woman. Unlike the latter's evasive and empty stare, her gaze meets that of the spectator with coquettish directness. *La Blanchisseuse* is a sexually enticing image of a dynamic young woman who knows her place and is at ease concerning her duty. It is a painting which foregrounds the notion that the virtue of domesticity and industry are compatible with order and health, natural beauty, and lusty eroticism.

Critics of our times continue the reading of *La Paresseuse italienne* as suggested by the judgmental title. Louis Hautecoeur writes: “[Elle] est une grosse femme observée dans quelque salita de Naples ou quelque vicolo de Rome et qui, débraillée, dépoitrillée, déchaussée, affalée sous le poids d’une chair trop lourde, rêvasse parmi le désordre où se disperse sa volonté” (Greuze 22).

Hautecoeur’s position is, on the surface, neutral. Yet, since he stresses the negative aspects of Greuze’s sitter, his description simply foregrounds the title’s explicit opinion. Richard Rand underlines the allegorical aspect of the picture. He reminds us that Greuze probably borrowed form Dutch paintings the image of the discarded shoe, a motif indicating that she is pregnant or lovesick. But there is no spicy intrigue here. “If she is indeed pregnant”, writes Rand, “Greuze avoids any hint of scandal by giving the woman a wedding band” (*Intimate Encounters* 148). For Rand she is “en savates” (147), meaning that she is a downtrodden clumsy flop. Brookner stresses the sensuality of the painting and has this to say:
The slack, fuddled body of the woman who contemplates, without too much dismay, her overturned bowl of water, has a genuine appearance of things seen and for once has no sexuality reprimanded. There is enough sexuality in the picture, in the still life of the stocking and the shoe, for example, to render it wholesome. (Greuze 97)

Brookner considers the painting wholesome and finds no dismay in the face of the protagonist. As to Brookner’s expression “no sexuality reprimanded”, she alludes to the shy yet coy demeanor of Greuze’s Girl, chided benevolently by the contemporary viewer as is evident in Diderot’s reaction to La Fille qui pleure son oiseau mort (see Chapter 2).

Brookner did stress that La Paresseuse italienne is an example of a period of Greuze’s oeuvre when the painter painstakingly observed life around him. It is for this reason, I suggest, that the painting’s realism oversteps the boundaries of dogma as it reveals complexities which clash with the appearance of indolence. Looking at the painting, I consider different possibilities. Perhaps it was not indolence which caused the attitude of resignation and melancholy of Greuze’s model. For one, lethargy or laziness itself would not infuse such pathos in the woman’s physiognomy. Rather, they seem to be the symptoms of a deeper-seated anxiety stemming perhaps from physiological disorder. It is likely that besides pregnancy—or instead of pregnancy—the young woman suffers from different causes. I ask: Why is the woman sitting bent over, her hands crossed clasping her extended belly? Why is she so fat and so pale? What drains her energy so that she has left one foot unshod? Although all these attributes can be conceivably explained by pregnancy, a pathological condition is also indicated. Perhaps she is suffering from menstrual pain due to some uterine
abnormality? Could she have hormonal discrepancies causing her obesity and lacklusterness? Could her paleness be caused by anemia?¹ Those are certainly some possibilities of a malady which would explain her physiognomy. There are other signs pointing to distress.

There is the telling gesture of the ring finger on her left hand, the finger bearing the wedding band. This finger is trying to hide under the middle finger. This gesture compliments the integral state of the young woman, and needs to be considered. Chiromantic tradition argues that the ring finger is intimately connected with attitudes and relationships of people (Gettings 101). Although palmistry is not a science our epoch is enthusiastic to include into the field of valid psychological considerations, and the Age of Reason did not ascribe great importance to it either, the image of the hand provides an important complement to the rest of the expression of the figure and this detail of the body language cannot be neglected. In this case, it seems that the gesture points indeed to a troublesome relationship; the wedding band tells us she is married, and the attempt to conceal the ring finger points to a bad marriage. We do not see the husband. But we can speculate from the evasive gesture of the ring finger and the withdrawn expression, that he would not be a gentle, understanding and supportive character.

The mise-en-scène enhances the silent destitution of the young woman. She sits in the corner, as if she was cornered into her present situation. Her

¹ Obviously the first-look diagnosis is always speculative. Also, I regret that my diagnostic abilities are those of a laic. However, the physiognomy of the
revealing and disorderly dress indicates that a sexual encounter just took place, and the subject's bearing implies that it was not an exalted experience, to say the least. The window above her head is open but blocked at the same time, and is just like the heroine herself. She is blocked because, due to the pathology of her physical state, she can't accomplish the moral demands of the outside world. Hence her mental anguish. In effect, she is opaque to the contemporary voyeur: the painter, the husband, or the spectator and indeed to her self. The image is a silent and incoherent complaint. Like the window above her, she is obstructed by and to the larger world as well as her internal space; her psyche, is as muddy as is that window.

And so is the epoch's medical practice. As Roussel says, "une certaine faiblesses concoure (sic) à la perfection de la femme. Cela est encore plus vrai au moral qu'au physique: la résistance irrite le premier; l'autre en cédant, ajoute l'apparence d'une vertu à l'ascendant naturel de ses charmes, & fait par-là disparaître la supériorité que la force donne à l'homme" (18). But Roussel's designation, "une certaine faiblesses", has the tenuous and the poetic in it not appropriate to Greuze's model's low social status. This is not an upper-class woman, of whom it would have been said, according to the diagnostical prowess of contemporary doctors, that she suffers from vapeurs. There would not have been need, or even a question, of medical attention for the inert and lethargic woman Greuze painted. François Lebrun's observation that "les écrits des médecines ne dépassent guère un cercle étroit de gens cultivés et, en tout cas, 

protagonist suggests obvious health problems even a layperson can detect.
n’atteignent pas le ‘gros du peuple’” (22) suggests the status of medical care for
her class. In any case in the epoch, for the ailing woman whose lethargy or
vapeurs (according to class of the patient) were symptoms of a chronic
gynecological disorder, gynecological examination would have been out of the
question and even not desirable—for her, or for the doctors. Not only was the
probing considered a violation of feminine modesty (unless dictated by life-
threatening situation) but as Lindsay Wilson also points out, gynecology and
obstetrics were considered second-class medical practice (98). Doctors were not
eager to penetrate into depths of the mysteries of the uterus. (The fear of the
hole? The fear of castration?) The fact remains, that a woman of low class, in the
condition Greuze captured in La Paresseuse, is judged by her appearance and
her capacity—or lack of it in this case—to fulfill her duty as a good lover, wife,
mother, or a worker. And so, the distress evident in the figure enhances her
negative aspect and promotes the dismissive attitude of the title.

“The imperative of health: at once a duty of each and the objective of all”
says Michel Foucault (“Politics” 277). Greuze, while painting the reality of
everyday life, centered here, as he did in La Blanchisseuse, on a working-class
model. Foucault analyzes the role of medicine as the policing mechanism which,
as it became more available to the working class in the Enlightenment, was
designed to render workers healthy and therefore productive. Certainly, the
worker would have benefited. Unfortunately for the lower-class woman, suffering
from a chronic apathy and possibly a depression, there would not be much more
than the whip of moralizing discourse, an instrument which would only inflame
her condition. As far as resistance to do work, for whatever reason, Foucault’s argument regarding what he calls “the analysis of idleness” in the age of Enlightenment illuminates the utilitarian slant of the moralizing credo, as opposed to the more charitable and even compassionate view of the poor in traditional Christian discourse.

An analysis of idleness—and its conditions and effects—tends to replace the somewhat global charitable sacrilization of “the poor”. This analysis has as its practical objective at best to make poverty useful by fixing it to the apparatus of production, at worst to lighten as much as possible the burden it imposes on society. The problem is to set the “able-bodied” poor to work and transform them into useful labor force [...] Thus a complete utilitarian decomposition of poverty is marked out and the specific problem of sickness of the poor begins to figure in the relationship of the imperative of labor to the needs of production. (“Politics” 276-77)

Greuze, in depicting the allegory of indolence, *La Paresseuse italienne*, as not physically attractive and not healthy, and providing a foil to her in the appealing laundress in *La Blanchiseuse*, illustrated the utilitarian motivation vis-à-vis the standpoint of valuation of the body: the able body is the means to production and an image of it has a positive connotation, the indolent and/or sick body is not, and thus bears a stigma.

Another factor enters into play when discussing or painting a young woman in the eighteenth century: it is her erotic aspect. “Si la femme est faite pour plaire et pour être subjuguée, elle doit se rendre agréable à l’homme au lieu de le provoquer” says Rousseau (*Émile* 446). And she should of course please as a lover. Although *La Paresseuse* reflects erotic abandon, as noted by Brookner, the young woman’s demeanor transgresses even that prerogative. The disorder around her and the apathetic and resigned disposition of her fat
body and face suggests that her sexuality would be as foul as is the bad
disposition the title implies. Greuze parodied the erotic dimension by introducing
the image of a bare foot and a discarded shoe. Rand brought up the derisive
term “en savates” which would “retain the pun” as he says (148, note 2). The foot
and the discarded shoe were potent signs in the epoch. “Forme érotique
décalquée d’une marque d’appartenance, le pied mignon, d’ailleurs, et son
enveloppe ne sont-ils pas souvent le premier pas d’un rapprochement
amoureux?” says Perrot (72). But the fat young woman’s flat and large foot is not
the cute little foot of Marivaux’s Marianne. The detail of the foot implies rather,
that not only health, industriousness, beauty, but also the quality of sex is the
function of morality and that indolence demeans the erotic appeal of a woman.

La Blanchisseuse, on the other hand, provokes with her erotic appeal. Her
attitude impresses Diderot: “Cette petite Blanchisseuse qui, penchée sur sa
terrine, presse du linge entre ses mains est charmante; mais c’est une coquine à
qui je ne me ferais pas. J’aime ma santé” (Salon 1761 156). Another critic
judges the painting similarly as “une jeune Blanchisseuse de la figure la plus
intéressante, qui, pendant qu’elle se baisse pour laver son linge, lance un coup
d’œil aussi coquet que malin” (qtd. in Rand 158²). The industriousness of the
young laundress confers on her a positive moral judgment, certainly. But her
provocative sensuality “embodied in the wet folds of cloth that she wrings out
between her legs and in the general disheveled state of her setting, lovingly

² “Les Tableaux de l’Académie de la peinture, exposés dans le Salon du Louvre”.
rendered with keen attention to texture and color" (Rand 158) frightened Diderot. The directness of the girl's gaze and her position vex the philosophe, because he can no longer dominate this femaleness as he did with his benevolent and condescending speculation concerning *La Fille qui pleure son oiseau mort*. In the eighteenth century the appreciation of the natural condition of a woman had its limits. The provocatively open sexuality of the young laundress is on a par with a male's and thus the woman escapes the possibility of being mastered in the libidinal mechanism directing moral and erotic imperatives. This threatens not only Diderot. His reaction reflects the more global fright of the demasculinized feminine. Greuze's *La Blanchisseuse* transgresses the notion of the repression of femaleness, which had been—in the morality of patriarchy—based on the subjugation of women in masculine exchanges via sublimation, or in the economy of exchanges of women. In effect, her directness ratifies femaleness to the point that it escapes phallocentric boundaries. It is thus that in this painting Greuze surpassed the patriarchal directive about female sexuality and introduced a dimension which defies it. No doubt he had none of this in mind, but it is to his credit that he observed nature well enough to see and represent the provocative image and thus touched the imperative of virtue with irony.

Greuze achieved probity in *La Paresseuse italienne*. A contemporary critic observed "on trouve à la vérité dans chaque objet des détails les plus satisfaissans (sic), mais qui considérés avec le tout, ne font point d'accord et ne
peignant point l'air et la lumière" (qtd. in Rand 148). It seems to me that the lack of air and light the critic complains about are appropriate, for they enhance the inertia of the subject matter; this is not a painting about jolly female elegance of a seductive and/or virtuous woman, nor is it a simple portrait. It is a morally charged narrative genre painting. Light enters from the exterior of the painting, for the voyeurs to better see. Like the title, so the light illuminates only a certain point of view. The gaze organizes the story. But who is looking? Who is judging? The look and the judgment are inscribed in the moral directive of the Enlightenment as expressed by the discourses of Rousseau and La Bretonne. And because the judgment is negative, the light too should be disconcerting. But the light, complementing the reason of the title, glides smoothly on the surface. The language speaks, and the light illuminates the credo of masculine objective and Greuze's perspective. It is obvious that what it delineates is unsavory; the woman's pathos is a travesty and should not be taken seriously. A woman, particularly of a low class, would not deserve another judgment than that of the superficial valuation: her usefulness as a worker, a homemaker, a mother, a supporter of her husband, and a sex object. The depicted woman obviously does not satisfy any of the above (with the exception of the sex-object, and even that aspect carries a certain distaste), and her pathology would be explained by laziness.

Words and light can distort. Nevertheless, the light is not totally biased. In spite of the contrived title, Greuze proved to be a great painter in this instance. If

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3 Observation périodiques sur la physique, l'histoire naturelle, et les arts, 1757.
the condition of the subject is concealed by the derisive title, the image
nevertheless illuminates the complex pathology of the woman's condition. By an
ironic twist, *La Paresseuse italienne* reveals also the pathology of the dominant
discourse in regard to low-class women's status. Here Greuze unwittingly
stumbled on the sore point (for women) of the trend of feminization which has
never been considered from the point of view of women. But this trend did, in
fact, made it possible to make such intuition of woman's condition possible,
though, as is in the case of Greuze, it was veiled and twisted by the discourse of
current morality pronounced in the painting's title.

*La Paresseuse italienne* is more than ideological propaganda, it is a work
of art and as such it transcends the ponderous judgment of the title. Greuze's
rigorous realism in *La Paresseuse italienne*, contrived to serve current ideology
provides, nevertheless, for the deconstructive position. This is because, as
Catherine Belsley says,

[i]deology, masquerading as coherence and plenitude, is in reality
inconsistent, limited, contradictory, and the realist text as a crystallization of
ideology participates in this incompleteness even while it diverts attention
from the fact from the apparent plenitude of narrative closure. (664)

In *La Paresseuse italienne* the mode of uncompromising realism allows for the
deconstruction of "the plenitude of narrative closure" suitable to current ideology.
The negative aspect of the visual metaphor crumbles under scrutiny because
ideology can never encompass the complete human condition, which an artist
with a keen vision would, however, represent. In this instance, Greuze is that
artist.
In *La Mère bien-aimée* Greuze employed the mode of the grotesque. This is the understated mechanism which shakes up the validity of the moral content of the painting designed as the visual metaphor of the moral imperative of maternity. Mikhail Bakhtin said: “Actually, the grotesque [...] discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life. It leads men out of the confines of the apparent (false) unity, of the indisputable and stable” (48). The grotesque resists closure: it is in this vein I discuss *La Mère bien-aimée*.

On the right side of the picture we see a heap of six young children in various positions holding onto and climbing on their mother. She is sitting in a two-thirds view and has a crib by her left side. The bodice of her ample and relaxed dress reveals her bosom. A boy about seven years old caresses her head form behind. He stops the thrust of the composition to the right. This thrust is so powerful that it threatens to propel the group out of the painting, and with it the rest of the figures. Another support against the right slant is a girl seven or eight years old, gently holding her mother’s left arm. A cherub-like baby, as if landed on her mother’s chest, wants to turn her head toward him/her for a kiss. Two children behind the crib are fighting for a better location. A toddler with undone pants and shirt stands between the mother’s legs. She is obviously overwhelmed and gives in to the devouring attention of the children; she is swooning. On the left side of the painting stands a young man, the father, who evidently has just returned from a hunt. He holds a gun in a horizontal position in
his hand, as if pushing it out of the painting. What he sees halts his energetic entry. His other arm is outstretched toward his family. His legs and his arms are spread in surprise and he is leaning slightly backwards into the room as if to regain lost balance from the impact of the event he is witnessing. His face has an expression of cheerful amusement. His clothes are in disarray; the pants are somewhat undone. Two dogs follow the direction of his gesture and connect the image of the father with the group of mother and children via the central figure, the grandmother. The grandmother's direction has a slant to the right, toward the group. She is leaning on the crib with her left hand. Her right hand is almost the central point of the picture. It has the involuntary gesture of recoil. (As if she was saying: "Now this is too much, kids let your mother breathe!") Only a cat sits indifferently near the kinetic heap, showing her round rump to the audience. The interior suggests a well-to-do family. The sensual and sexual energy is remarkable: The semiotics of eroticism—the father with the erected gun and half undone pants, the children's caressing gestures and especially the boy with undone pants installed between his mother's legs who seem to echo the father's desire, the mother's expression of abandon, the dogs suggesting the animality of the thrust from the father toward the mother, and, finally, the pussycat showing apathetically her butt—are supported by signs of disorder: discarded clothes on the floor, upturned basket from which falls a book and other objects. The eroticism here is fruitful and moral, unlike the idle galanterie of Boucher's or Fragonard's erotic imagery. And so, unlike in La Paresseuse, the disorder in La Mère bien-aimée is full of joy and enthusiasm signified mostly by the enthusiasm
of loving children. Fertility is applauded. A guitar on the wall supports the mood of joy.

This is indeed an interesting painting. The composition topples the entire image to the right side as it is outweighed by the picture of motherhood. The right is the locus of the masculine and the left of the feminine in the order of symbolic signification. In *La Mère bien-aimée* the right outweighs the left, but it is not filled with masculine imagery. On the contrary, it is all female. It is as if the painting supported the notion that the feminization of manners tended to overcome masculinized ontology in the eighteenth century. The gun the father seems to be in process of discarding supports the notion that in the modern world the woman’s space dominates, while the notion of military glory is inappropriate.

As Diderot asserts, the message is moral:

*Cela est excellent et pour le talent et pour les moeurs; cela prêche la population, et peint très pathétiquement le bonheur et le prix inestimable de la paix domestique; cela dit à tout homme qui a de l’âme et du sens: Entretiens ta famille dans l’aisance, fais des enfants à ta femme, fais-lui en tant que tu pourras, n’en fais qu’à elle, et sois sûr d’être bien chez toi.*

(Chant 1765 196)

But in *La Mère bien-aimée*, the rampant eroticism of the rococo and the official moral directive collide to such a degree that even the cloak of intended morality of this painting does not conceal the sense of discomfiture. The two stages of Greuzian woman, the erotic girl and the married woman, coincide in this painting. While Diderot approves, his criticism also indicates the double standard of *La Mère bien-aimée*: 
La mère de ces enfants a la joie et la tendresse peinte sur son visage avec un peu de ce malaise inséparable du movement et du poids de tant d’enfants qui l’accablent et dont les caresses violentes ne tarderent pas à l’excéder si elles duraient; c’est cette sensation qui touche à la peine, fondue avec la tendresse et la joie, avec cette position renversée et de lassitude, et cette bouche entrouverte qui donnent à cette tête séparée du reste de la composition un caractère si singulier. (Salon 1765 195)

Diderot foregrounds the trend toward the intensified prominence of woman’s place in the social discourse (of men), at once as erotic subject and as bearer of ethical foundation; and of children of course. His writing makes it obvious that the philosophe was not unaware of the strange and disparate effect this juxtaposition produces. The malaise Diderot points out in respect to La Mère bien-aimée is the manifestation of Greuze’s ambiguity, which in this case is expressed in the language of the grotesque. Needless to say, neither Greuze himself, nor Diderot, were aware of the humor this mother, “fricassée par les enfants”, to use the expression of Madame Geoffrin imparts (qtd. in Goncourts, L’Art vol. 2 45). It is as if the overpowering femaleness would frighten the painter, and could only be dealt with a dash of understated, and, in all respect to Greuze’s serious aim, unintended sarcasm.

Isabelle Brouard-Arends in her comprehensive typology of literary representation of mother types in the eighteenth century comments that the type of “bad mother”, difficult to delimit exactly, is mainly depicted in comic works.

Comedy allows for inversion of heroism. But Greuze’s La Mère bien-aimée was conceived as a serious image, which celebrated the “good mother” type. The painting calls the viewer to take literally the message of maternal glory and no irony is intended. Yet the image escapes the boundaries of coercive morality. In
this painting, feminine values (even if male constructed) are so rampant that the impression is subverted as if in horror of the implication that women might take over the entire (social) picture.

Bakhtin writes about the Age of Reason: “All that is positive is placed beyond the sphere of laughter and represents an abstract idea” (119). This is contrary to the rococo mode:

Carnival forms serve a different role in rococo literature. Here the gay positive tone of laughter is preserved. But everything is reduced to “chamber” lightness and intimacy. The frankness of the marketplace is turned into privacy, the indecency of the lower stratum is transformed into erotic frivolity, and gay relativity becomes skepticism and wantonness. And yet in the hedonistic “boudoir” atmosphere a few sparks of the carnival fires which burn up “hell” have been preserved. In the of gloomy seriousness so wide spread in the eighteenth century, rococo perpetrated after a fashion the traditional carnivalesque spirit. (Bakhtin 119)

La Mère bien-aimée conflates the two aspects: the rococo lightness and the seriousness of the Age of Reason. Wantonness and erotic frivolity coincide with the moral directive, but the carnivalesque spirit does dominate the painting.

The image of the mother with her open dress, surrounded by children, the disorder and the undone clothes of the father, the mother and the children, as well as the animalistic, wild and unconfined notion implied by the dogs who eagerly lead the father toward the mother, the cat near the mother (the incalculable animal representing the female mystery not to be contained within phallocentric boundaries) suggest that the body is open to the outside world, to the larger cosmos and at the same to the material base.

The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the
world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots [the cluster of children in the painting, appending the body of the mother]: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. (26)

There is little concealment in La Mère bien-aimée; the thrust is toward the mother's womb. The womb is the lower stratum, the underground fertile space of the origin of life. It is also the sphere, although desired, also rejected by phallocentrism. It is the sphere of birth and merriment, and it is feminine. And this thrust decentralizes the universe of Father. In phallocentric discourse, a celebration of that thrust is antithetical to the sublimation of the feminine, it is generally accompanied by exaggeration, and is thus comical, as if laughter would smooth away the anxiety provoked by such open natural materiality and femaleness.

This open and natural body contrasts with the noble classical concept which, as Bakhtin says is “strictly completed, finished product. [...] The ever unfinished nature of the body was hidden, kept secret” (29). The Age of Reason, with its emphasis on anatomical determination of human subjects, and particularly the woman as the procreator, made a move from the closure of the classical body. Unwittingly it opened the door for the great and decentered materiality of function which began to override the ethereal idealism of the sublime. Here is the innovating aspect of Greuze. He celebrates the lower stratum, the feminine, and in doing so, he stumbles on the exhilarating grotesquery of the open and functioning maternal body. Granted, the grotesque
image of motherhood might imply the age-old contempt toward women. In the symbolic register, it might be understood as the repressive notion toward the feminine. Thus the “good mother” in *La Mère bien-aimée* also connotes the traits of the “bad mother” (a notion which corresponds to Brouard-Ardens observation about the inseparability of the types). Thus, if the maternal function is important, it is second rate in the economy of patriarchy. Hence the bemused and, we could say, condescending yet somewhat disconcerted smile on the face of the father who has just returned from the hunt, the quintessential masculine activity.

The father, the hunter, the warrior dictates life’s direction, and women’s function is necessary and pleasing, but inferior by comparison to male activities. Yet, laughter liberates. In this painting it liberates the maternal body from the constraints of ideology. By including a comical element in the seriousness of the moral message, Greuze lightens the burden of woman’s subservient status.

Bakhtin points out:

True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness, but purifies and completes it. Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naïveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. (122-23)

The comic element in *La Mère bien-aimée* allows for the possibility to perceive how stagnant, heavy, and unsatisfactory is Father’s dogma (the single meaning) and his prescription for women while it allows for complete and balanced gender differentiation.

“True wealth and abundance are not on the highest or on the medium level but only in the lower stratum” says Bakhtin (369). The surprise of the
painting’s father, the bewilderment of Diderot, are they not the signs of the great surprise of Humanism at the openness of possibilities afforded by materiality, maternity, and the freed cosmic possibility of unrestricted humanness? It is as if the image implies a certain release of the feminine from the initial incarceration of femaleness into the masculinized form which held strong for ages. It is as if in this painting’s hermeneutics, the mode of the grotesque allows us to grasp, if tentatively, a stage which would surpass the boundaries of phallocentric Humanism—permeated always, and increasingly as ages went by, by the intrusion of the feminine—which finally give way to the cosmic laughter of fertile material and maternal abundance.

I have proposed that Greuze’s mediocrity is the function of the feminist and bourgeois discourses of his age. And yet, those discourses allowed for the realism of La Paresseuse, a painting intuiting the devastating consequence of morality as it veiled woman’s condition. In La Mère bien-aimée, the grotesque mode lets us perceive possibilities which surpass the patriarchal morality of Father. Paradoxically, Greuze, while trying to uphold Father’s order, intuited further and more subversive horizons.
CONCLUSION

The bourgeois, the capitalist, the democratic means an esthetic which branches from the heroic masculine assertion of itself. The moment of the powerful centrality and erection of the phallus passes slowly away. All sorts of aspects, which are feminine enter into the mode of representation. The rococo esthetic or the mode of sensibilité which mollified the austere Enlightenment are manifestation of feminization which provide for a slide, a melting of the masculine sublime.

The complexity of the bourgeois ethos involves also an increased significance of the material over the feudal masculine ideal, a phase accompanied by the return of women into dominant discourse. There is a notion in Greuze which sensitively describes the truth about the condition of women and the precarious status of the phallic signifiers, God, Monarch and, finally, paterfamilias. Unwittingly, Greuze's tendency toward the ambiguous, and the ambivalent as if propelled him a step beyond himself. The moralist painter, all the while promoting the ideological prescriptions of his epoch, inadvertently unraveled its flaws. In short, Greuze's paintings and the morality they endorse, contain elements of ambiguity effectuating subversion of patriarchy.

It is an undeniable fact that the irony in Greuze is an aspect which brands bourgeois discourse at large. Greuze totally and unequivocally incarnates the
complex prerogatives of the age of Reason. It is the epoch where the *ideal* is penetrated and incarnated in the *real*, and the realism, materialism, and utilitarianism drags down the prospect of the didactic moral ideality in Greuze. It is thus that Greuze’s pictorial rhetoric, esthetic and ethic is authentically bourgeois. And being that, it must reveal what bourgeois is. Greuze’s vision? Being all bourgeois, it is a flattened greatness. And so, in defense of Greuze, we must admit that in spite of the unease a modern viewer might feel when contemplating his *drames bourgeois*, or perhaps because of it, Greuze’s work does, in the final analysis, reach the element of the sublime. But it is an inverted sublime. The greatness of Greuze lies exactly there: the sublime of Greuze is the sublime of the “somatic exhaustion” of patriarchy—to use Nietzsche’s expression (*The Birth* 9) which coincides with the economical and social changes in the later part of the eighteenth century. In other words, it corresponds to the banalization of values, the salient characteristics of the bourgeois discourse. We need to wait for Flaubert and Baudelaire for the self-conscious sarcastic laughter at the mediocrity of the discourse implanted in bourgeois, read modernist, artistic representation.
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