



1 Jean-François Millet, *Chemin à travers les blés*, circa 1867, Pastels and Crayon on Paper, 40 x 50,8 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

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# Jean-François Millet from an Historical-Ecological Perspective: Imagination and Representation of Environment as Strategies of De-Alienation

## ***Avant la lettre: On Walking in the Field***

In Jean-François Millet's *Chemin à travers les blés* (Fig.1) makes a man his way through a field. A path leads in from the left edge of the image, cutting into the rich green of the young wheat and toward a farmhouse. The man leans forward under the weight of a hoe slung across his shoulder. He appears to be returning home from labour, where he has been breaking up the earth with heavy iron. The field lies like a carpet across the landscape, covering a slope that descends from the left and flattens out toward the path. From below, the sides, and above, the field, the vegetation, and the sky populated with birds press in upon man and house alike. The chosen angle lets both figures and architecture sink into the soft green mass. The pastel colour palette reinforces this impression, as the tonal shifts of the field blend gently into the peasant's smock. The brushwork in both the fabric and the grain merge; only the blade of the hoe gleams with metallic clarity. Environment and human presence do not appear as separate realms here, but rather as a pictorial unity. The scene is set in Barbizon, not far from Paris, yet there is no trace of the industrialized metropolis — but its factory chimneys already reaching into rural areas and its railways stretching toward Barbizon.

## **Art History, Millet and Ecology**

In the humanities, so-called ecological perspectives provide a theoretical and methodological framework for addressing relationships between human and environment and their historical reflections in art, which becomes apparent upon closer examination of Millet's work. This study likewise employs a method situated between art history and ecological thought. Its conceptual structure begins — with reference to Millet and contemporary Paris — from collective senses of alienation, which give rise to desires for de-alienation and to corresponding strategies. This leads to the hypothesis: Millet's works, especially those created after 1848, reflect an understanding of rural environment shaped by experiences of alienation and the urge for its overcoming. He aims to construct a natural-timeless counter-world to modern urban-industrial reality — a pictorial strategy of re-integration. He thereby projects an idea of lost, authentic human being as *conditio humana* onto the peasant way of life, conceived as being in accord with an authentic *natura naturans*.

The term ecology encompasses a wide range of meanings. This presents a methodological challenge and calls for a reflective use. When ecological questions are addressed, it is essential to clarify which specific understanding is being invoked.<sup>1</sup> Greg Thomas laid early foundations for ecological thought in Art History with *Art and Ecology in Nineteenth-Century France: The Landscapes of Théodore Rousseau* (2000). Methodologically and theoretically, Andrew Patrizio offers a significant contribution with *The Ecological Eye: Assembling an Ecocritical Art History* (2019). In *Der ökologische Imperativ als Paradigma einer engagierten Kunstgeschichte* (2022), Peter Schneemann calls for an (historical) ecologically

motivated perspective as he writes: “Art history thus draws attention to the ways in which art serves as a tool for developing new models of world experience and world-making.”<sup>2</sup> Such a perspective is focused and sharply defined; it does not claim to account for all aspects of a work but rather examines it through the lens of specific ecological questions. Non-ecological aspects must be taken into consideration, and theoretical frameworks should not be imposed upon the work. This study aligns itself with these methodological principles in approaching Millet from an historical-ecological perspective. It aims to uncover new aspects in his œuvre by focusing on the depicted relationships between human and environment, the problem of alienation, and the construction of a concrete idea of nature. Scholarship on Millet remains largely embedded within socially oriented art history, and his work is mostly interpreted considering social, political, or religious concerns. In addition to Greg Thomas, Nicholas Green addresses human – environment relations in *The Spectacle of Nature: Landscape and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth-Century France* (1990). Both, however, mention Millet only in passing. The only study to explicitly examine Millet’s conception of environment is Robert Herbert in *Naive Impressions from Nature: Millet’s Readings, from Montaigne to Charlotte Brontë* (2007). Herbert seeks to uncover Millet’s understanding of environment, using the term of nature, through literary quotations and historical context, yet he largely refrains from close engagement with the artworks themselves. Absent from the literature is an analysis that focusses the artworks and situates Millet within the broader nineteenth-century discourse of environment— or even within the problem of alienation.

### The Problem of Alienation

The theoretical discourse surrounding concepts of alienation provides the framework for this article central question. Reflections on alienation date back to antiquity and revolve around a core concern: how can the subject, once it has experienced itself as alienated, return to a *status quo ante*? With Rousseau, the discourse enters Enlightenment, and through Marx, it continues to shape debates up to today. Because the discourse on alienation often presupposes a specific and ostensibly objective conception of the human being, contemporary philosophy has largely distanced itself from the term and its claims to objectivity. In recent years the concept has been critically re-evaluated and is once again being productively engaged.<sup>3</sup> Achim Trebeß observes that the specificity of the concept lies in the culturally and historically situated reflection on human – environment relationships, and he identifies it as suitable for exploring this relationship.<sup>4</sup> Since Rousseau and Marx were not only the most influential thinkers on alienation but also present in nineteenth century Paris, the following focuses on them; Rousseau’s ideas often serve as references in the *natura*-discourse of the time, and Marx’s thought was known and resonated in Paris. Meanwhile, Millet is described as well-read in both contemporary and historical philosophy, making it likely that he was familiar with the thoughts of these two thinkers.<sup>5</sup>

Alienation plays a central role in Rousseau’s thought. He posits an ideal natural state — *nature naturelle* or *natura naturans* — where the human, as *homme naturel*, exists in an authentic, uncorrupted condition (*conditio humana*). In this state, human and environment merge into a unity and are fully integrated.<sup>6</sup> Society, the urban and particularly property, he understands as alienating forces that separates human from *natura naturans*. Through the experience of loss, hardship, or injustice, alienation becomes a tangible feeling. Even if, after Rousseau, absolute return to *natura naturans* is impossible, it remains necessary to strive toward it from within society. Rousseau proposes a fulfilment of this aim in *Emile* (1762), where, through the unifying element of environment experience, the subject can be guided by education to approximate the state of the *homme naturel*.<sup>7</sup>

Marx's concept of alienated labour is most extensively developed in the *Ökonomisch-philosophischen-Manuskripten*, completed in 1844 but not published until 1932. Nevertheless, the concept of alienation must have been familiar to Marx's 19th-century readers.<sup>8</sup> His idea of alienation is so deeply tied to the environment that it often was interpreted as a form of romantic natural philosophy. For Marx, *Entzweiung*, as alienation, is understood as a disruption of the relationship one ought to have with oneself and the environment. This gives rise to feelings of impoverishment and insignificance.<sup>9</sup> Marx traces this disruption back to industrialized capitalist wage labour. In such, one loses connection to one's own activity, and thereby to the world itself. It is, as he puts it, a "[...] disruption of the metabolism between humans and the earth."<sup>10</sup> Marx applies this not only to the working class but to the whole modern society, whose world-experience is thus fundamentally shaped by alienation.<sup>11</sup> The counterpart to the capitalist-industrial condition of alienation, for Marx, is appropriation (*Aneignung*) — the fulfilment of productive life, which wage labour suppresses. Appropriation refers to a state of identificatory engagement with oneself and the world through labour carried out directly in and with environment. Productive life here means labour as a metabolic process, through which both human and environment are transformed; one produces oneself by producing the world. This implies that the human being becomes part of a totality in which they engage authentically in a broader, cooperatively organized intersubjective productive existence. In this way, the "[...] true resolution of the conflict between man and nature."<sup>12</sup> becomes possible.

For Marx and Rousseau, alienation is a disruption of the human being's relationship to the environment understood as natural, while de-alienation represents an appropriative and integrative recovery of this original connection.

### The Problem of Alienation in Nineteenth Century Paris

Viewed from an historical-ecological perspective, examining urban society in nineteenth century Paris means investigating how people relate to the entity they understand as nature. The Paris of the early nineteenth century is marked by a rapid transformation of the urban, characterized by the displacement of perceived non-human environment in favour of urban expansion. Within Parisian society at the time, pervasive collective senses of alienation from a supposedly natural state of being is evident — often referencing Rousseau's idea of *nature naturelle*. This condition is frequently linked to perceived absence of nature.<sup>13</sup> This gives rise to collective urges for supposedly true nature experiences and an intensified engagement with it. Green refers to these phenomenon as "environmental awareness"<sup>14</sup>.

Théophile Thoré describes such a feeling of alienation in 1837 as follows: „Our Parisian life is completely abnormal; we have given an exorbitant development to intellectual life, and nothing to natural life, if one may put it that way. The balance is broken; and this is undoubtedly one of the reasons for our suffering.“<sup>15</sup>

In 1844, he expresses in a letter to Théodore Rousseau the desire to break free from this state of alienation: “Our civilization has torn man into fragments that are foreign to one another. [...] as for me, I would rather live on a beautiful patch of earth, half poet, half peasant, in a smock and wooden shoes [...], than chase after a fabricated and restless life. [...]“<sup>16</sup>.

That even visitors perceive the absence of nature negatively is evident in the account of an English press correspondent: „The streets are narrow, winding, overcrowded, in poor condition, and extremely repellent. The towering walls of the houses block sunlight from reaching the streets, and pedestrians recoil in horror from the gutters.“<sup>17</sup>.

These quotes exemplify a widely shared sense of alienation associated with a perceived absence of naturalness in 19th-century Paris.

### Feelings of Alienation in Nineteenth Century Parisian Society

The key trigger of these alienation-phenomenon seems to be the radical transformation of Paris's urban sphere. The technological and economic advances of industrialization impose new demands and possibilities on the modern city. The promise of work attracts many people from the provinces, doubling Paris's population between 1800 and 1850, overwhelming especially the hygiene and housing infrastructure. Fortifications and railways further alter the cityscape, while factories pollute the air.<sup>18</sup> In the 1840s, this accelerates, with the technical-industrial realm of the urban environment dominating perception over the natural sphere. Maurice Alhoy describes in 1844: „The crenelations crown the trees like once the magpie's nests; you search for a nightingale on the branches but see a sentry instead; the warbler no longer sings, but in the evening, you are pursued by vigilance!“<sup>19</sup>. A city guide from 1853 also describes the journey through the outskirts of Paris as follows: “[...] one must most often cross a dull plain, dotted with factories, without shade or greenery, where grey-pink plaster walls replace the flowering hedges, and which are permeated by all kinds of unhealthy and foul odours.”<sup>20</sup>.

These two quotes, representative of similar accounts, make clear that the transformation of the city is closely linked in perception to the displacement of perceived naturalness. The experience of the industrialized, transformed city is therefore perceived negatively due to the absence of felt like natural experiences. Furthermore, the urban changes lead to a decline in living conditions for large parts of the population. Poverty, misery, lack of hygiene, isolation within the masses, and moral decay in the form of crime are widespread. Additionally, uprisings and revolutions — such as the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848 — cause unrest. Coupled with the monotony of factory work and the general acceleration of life's pace, the life of the majority is broadly perceived as inhuman and, above all, unnatural.<sup>21</sup> Rebekka Fehl describes these circumstances as „the dialectical flip side of the Enlightenment,”<sup>22</sup> while Rolf Wedewer diagnoses the era with profound disappointment in the promises made by industrialization and the Enlightenment. He comments: “Science was expected to [...] enable a deeper understanding of nature [...]. Instead of a great sense of security [...], the result was objectification and isolation.”<sup>23</sup> Contemporaries, too, observe a correlation between poor living conditions, feelings of alienation, and the absence of naturalness. This becomes particularly evident in the reception of the cholera epidemic of 1832, for example in Alexandre Dumas' account:

“I remember the day it struck its first blow; the sky was sapphire blue, the sun full of strength, all of nature was being reborn in its beautiful green dress, with the colours of youth and health on its cheeks. [...] Suddenly, that dreadful cry rang out: Cholera is in Paris! [...] It seemed as though, in that very instant, a black veil had spread between the blue sky, the pure sun, and Paris.”<sup>24</sup>.

Furthermore a certain treatment of non-urban environments can also be understood as a root of such feeling of alienation. With industrialization, mechanization, and the increasing consumption and production of goods, a utilitarian relationship between humans and their environment intensifies. Environment is viewed as a resource to be exploited a means to human ends. This extractive understanding can be seen as a defining feature of 19th-century conceptions of nature in Europe. Such a conception

is rooted in the modern subject-object dualism, which regards the object as devoid of intention and consciousness, continuous, predictable and technically manipulable. Environment is thus understood as a passive object, made actively usable by the subject through technology.<sup>25</sup> This conception of nature is both a driver of the urban transformation and living conditions described and a root cause of senses of alienation. Feelings of alienation in 19th-century Paris thus stem primarily from the experience of an industrially transforming city marked by a perceived absence of naturalness. Senses of alienation are understood as symptoms of the non-natural city itself.<sup>26</sup>

### Reactions to feelings of alienation: *Reinvention of Nature*

As a symptom of alienation, the desire for de-alienation emerges, manifesting in various forms and projected onto different carriers. De-alienation here refers to a return to a presumed original and authentic state of being. Reactions to these feelings are diverse but consistently marked by an interest in and turn toward naturalness as a rejection of the urban sphere. This widespread cultural shift is described by Green as ‘reinvention of nature’.<sup>27</sup>

This manifests in representations of environment-experiences and imaginations. For example, in the 1820s, efforts by city authorities to establish public parks increase. This response to desires for de-alienation aims to bring supposed natural experiences into the city. The *Jardin du Luxembourg* is among the earliest public parks created for this purpose.<sup>28</sup> Jules Simon describes the experience of being there as follows: “[...] even in certain corners one could feel as if in the countryside. Nothing more pleasant, after a tiring day, than suddenly finding oneself hidden by these tall trees, forgetting Paris in the midst of Paris, feeling the invigorating scent of earth and vegetation [...]”.<sup>29</sup> Simon links escape from the urban environment directly to the park experience. Green also identifies dioramas — displayed in public spaces throughout Paris — as such constructed experiences of naturalness and expressions of desires for de-alienation. Invented and particularly popular in Paris at the time, dioramas typically depict landscape scenes. Thus, in dioramas, parks, and various other forms, a tangible materialization of a imagined naturalness takes place.<sup>30</sup>

Desires of de-alienation also show in countryside retreats and escapism. Rooted in a mid-18th-century tradition of withdrawing to rural suburbs, this practice intensifies and gains popularity in the form of local tourism during the first half of the 19th century. A key factor in this development is the construction of the railway connecting Paris to the countryside, enabling quick and affordable travel to areas around Fontainebleau. Julien Lemer describes such a day trip in 1847: „Solitude and walking through woods and fields; I especially love the changing attire of nature in spring, the tender green of young shoots in the early days of May, and the wonderfully sweet scents rising from the early blossoms.”<sup>31</sup>

Thus, the railway synchronizes the experience of the natural with urban life by bridging distances and enabling an escape from the „Moloch Paris.”<sup>32</sup> This can be read as an attempt to return to naturalness and is constitutive of the 19th-century experience of naturalness.<sup>33</sup>

But intellectual reflection on naturalness also increases: In the Rousseauian sense, a concept of *natura naturans* seems to be developed as a counterpoint to the culturally and socially artificial human sphere of the city. This discourse typically unfolds within the framework of cultural critique and intensifies between the 1820s and 1840s. A central aspect is the valorisation of rural lifestyle. Following Rousseau, who sees his *homme naturel* realized in the ideal of the peasant, urban alienation is often projected onto the rural as its imagined remedy.<sup>34</sup> This is socio-political and cultural-historical evi-



2 Jean-François Millet, *Le Semeur*, 1847, Oil on Canvas, 95,3 x 61,3 cm, The National Museum of Wales, Cardiff.



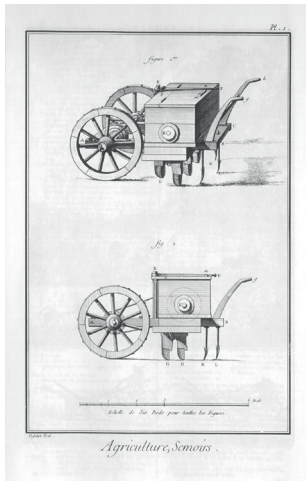
3 Limburg Brothers, *Très Riches Heures* (October), circa 1415, 29 x 21 cm, Musée Condé, Chantilly.

dent, for example, in Jules Michelet's *Le Peuple* (1840), in which he idealizes the true French people as closely tied to the environment. In 1837, Thoré describes the idea of the ideal peasant as follows: „[...] this lost fossil, this original and divine human being, this harmonious creature that echoes the music of the universe.“<sup>35</sup> It is therefore believed that rural life, in harmonic relation to *natura naturans*, embodies the constitutive human essence — the non-alienated *conditio humana* — that has been lost in the city. Thus, the rural becomes the counterpoint to the state of alienation found in urban life. Art also enters the discourse of *natura naturans* in the sense of Greens' 'reinvention of nature': from around 1840, the demand for paintings depicting environment and rural life increases; demand for landscape painting and rural genre scenes also rises. This reflect also needs for natural experiences.<sup>36</sup> Painting thus becomes a medium for conveying *natura naturans*. Thoré writes, for example: “Art to remind us of natural nature, *natura naturans*, as the ancients called it — the eternally fertile and lush nature that contrasts so cruelly with our artificial customs and all the painful inventions of an upside-down world.”<sup>37</sup>. Art becomes embedded in the discourse of *natura naturans* and serves as a strategy to materially express the theoretical *natura naturans* discourse.

Millet is no exception — he even feels particularly alienated and uneasy in Paris. Known to be socially withdrawn, Millet experiences Paris as a constant nightmare, living in the poorer districts where he is continually confronted with poor living conditions and the absence of naturalness. He repeatedly observes the loss of an 'original nature' and of humanity itself.<sup>38</sup> As misery increases in the late 1840s and revolution looms, Millet escapes with his family to Barbizon in 1848. The decision is final, and he will hardly leave Barbizon for the rest of his life.<sup>39</sup> Significantly, this coincides with the peak of



4 Jean-François Millet, *L'Homme à la houe*, circa 1860-1862, Oil on Canvas, 80 x 99,1 cm, The Paul-Getty-Museum, Los Angeles.



5 Anonymous, *Agriculture et économie rustique - Semoirs*, 1765. Copper Print.



6 Anonymous, *Agriculture et économie rustique - Labourage*, 1765. Copper Print.

by the Limbourg brothers reveals that the scene could just as well take place in medieval agriculture. While agriculture was rapidly modernizing in the nineteenth century, harvesting machines or steam plows should at least have been used occasionally in Barbizon, Millet consciously excludes these elements.<sup>40</sup> Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (1751) reports on simple machines such as the seed drill and the cart plow, which were already common in the 18th century. When comparing *L'homme à la houe* (Fig. 4) or *Le Semeur* with illustrations of agricultural machines (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6) from the *Encyclopédie*, it is remarkable that Millet does not equip his peasants with these helpful devices. Thus, Millet excludes not only industrial steam-powered tools but also those that were already in use before industrialization. An

urban transformation marked by the displacement of naturalness, collective feelings of alienation, and efforts toward de-alienation.

### Millet: Construction of Naturalness as a Strategy of De-alienation

Suffering from this feeling of alienation, Millet too is drawn out of the city, toward Barbizon. Considering the figure in *Chemin à travers les blés* (fig. 1), who sinks into a natural-determined world, one might read this as Millet himself seeking his way back to *natura naturans* as *homme naturelle*. But how exactly does this striving manifest in his works? Which aspects and methods does he apply? What kind of environment does he create through his art?

### Reduction and Destruction

A striking aspect is the destruction through reduction on multiple levels: Millet's work after 1848 shows no signs of the industrialized and modern world in which he lives not just in Paris but also in Barbizon. His depictions of agriculture include no machinery and hardly any tools beyond the simplest implements. Comparing Millet's *Le Semeur* (Fig. 2) with the *Très Riches Heures* (Fig. 3)



7 François-André Vincent, *La Leçon de labourage ou L'Agriculture*, 1798, Oil on Canvas, 213 x 313 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux.

anecdote further illustrates this deliberate exclusion of modernity: When Millet notices that shepherds in Barbizon wear modern military coats instead of their traditional cloaks, he has a cloak sent from Normandy to outfit a shepherd painting accordingly.<sup>41</sup> He thus alters the shepherds' existing clothing with great effort, intervening reductively and thereby destructively in reality. Furthermore, from 1848 onward, there is

a noticeable reduction of subject matter to rural themes. In doing so, he constructs a pictorial world that consciously excludes the modern city and industrialization. Millet opposes the knowledge and material production of his time with a visual-imaginative reduction of knowledge and technology.

A stylistic reduction is also evident: While the conservative academies advocate the academically standardized style of fine painting, as exemplified by Millet's teacher Paul Delaroche, Millet radically distances himself from this approach.<sup>42</sup> He mostly reduces his works to monumental single figures. Comparing François André Vincent's *La Leçon de labourage ou L'Agriculture* (Fig. 7) with Millet's *L'homme à la houe* clearly reveals his reductive visual language. Stripped down to the essentials, a solitary, de-individualized, and exhausted man replaces Vincent's narrative. Thick, textured brushstrokes take the place of delicate shading, and instead of the mouldboard plow, it is sheer muscle power with which Millet's man tills the soil.<sup>43</sup> Millet reduces the elaborate body of knowledge conveyed by the academies—with their conservative dogmas, rules, and mythological reference systems—to visual means that he himself considers simple and naïve.<sup>44</sup> Matthias Krüger vividly illustrates how this affected contemporary viewers. Thickly applied, non-academic painting and the smooth, academic style were understood as opposites in their expressive power: While academic painting was considered polite but insincere, restrained, and perfectionistic crafted, thickly applied paintings like Millet's stood in contrast often as symbols of sincerity, true humanity, labour, and vitality. However, they were also criticized as vulgar and superficial.<sup>45</sup> Théophile Gautier describes the contrast between Millet's works and urban society as follows: "M. Millet's painting has everything needed to make clean-shaven bourgeois bristle [...] It is impossible to see anything rougher, more fierce, more bristly, more uncultivated [...]."<sup>46</sup>

Reduction can also be understood as the typification and de-individualization of the depicted figures. Millet rarely portrays individual facial features; mostly, as in *Le Semeur* or *L'homme à la houe*, they are typified and de-individualized. By reducing individuals to types, Millet elevates them to representatives a general the *conditio humana*.<sup>47</sup>



8 Jean-François Millet, *Vigneron au repos*, circa 1870, Pastels and Crayon on Paper, 70,5 x 84 cm, De Mesdag Collectie, Den Haag.

Millet's life path can also be read as a conscious reduction of the urban-modern experience: His escape from Paris to Barbizon tries to exclude the modern and alienating impressions of the city. He deliberately chooses an environment shaped by the rural instead of the cramped workers' blocks, the oppressive air, and the crowds of Paris. Millet also shows an interest in pre-modern culture and times. Multiple sources describe how, even while in Paris, he immersed himself in texts by Homer or the Bible and sought refuge in the Louvre among the old masters.<sup>48</sup> Millet himself states that he does not intend to create art for society, but rather to show true *conditio humana in natura naturans*.<sup>49</sup>

As a basis and first step of the de-alienation strategy, one can understand a distancing that consciously excludes and reduces the urban-modern life experience and its alienating effects. In doing so, the urban experience is destroyed. This approach recalls the alienation theories of Marx and Rousseau: Rousseau leads his *Émile* out into nature, intending to educate him away from society and the city.<sup>50</sup> And Marx's idea of *Aneignung* as the counterpoint to alienation also takes place in an environment detached from the urban and modern wage labour.<sup>51</sup>

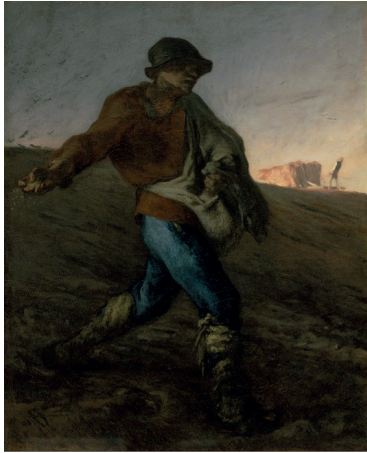
## Integration

In Millet's works and life, means of integration into environment stand out. This expresses Millet's specific conception of the *conditio humana*, shaped by the interconnectedness and integration of humans with environment. A prerequisite for this union is the destruction of the modern-urban through reduction.



9 Jean-François Millet, *Porteuses de fagots rentrant de la forêt*, circa 1853-54, Pastels and Crayon on Paper, 28,6 x 46,7 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Thus, the farmer in *Chemin à travers les blés* sinks into the green of the field, creating the impression that the environment integrates actively both human and culture here. This is also evident in the pastel *Vigneron au repos* (fig. 8): after the exhausting care of the soil with the hoe, the man collapses in ex-



10 Jean-François Millet, *Le Semeur*, 1850, Oil on Canvas, 101,6 x 82,6 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



11 Jean-François Millet, *Le Semeur*, 1850, Oil on Canvas, 99,7 x 80 cm, Yamanashi Prefectural Museum, Kofu.

haustion. In this exhaustion resulting from rural labour lies the integrative moment: the soles of his feet are stained with earth, which had collected in the soles of his discarded slippers and transferred to his feet through work. The colouring of skin and clothing only slightly separates from the earth, and the perspective nests the winemaker in the vines, which close behind him and spread around him; this creates the effect of an integrative unity of wine-

maker and (cultivated) environment.

In the drawing *Porteuses de fagots rentrant de la forêt* (Fig. 9), the integration is also vividly illustrated: the sketching of the trees resembles the gathered brushwood the women carry on their backs. The vertical strokes of brushwood and forest make the gatherers appear as integral part of the forest. The brushwood does not quite detach from the verticality of the trees and seems to bind the women to the forest. Gray on Gray, they merge with the woods.<sup>52</sup> Such tendencies can be observed in many parts of Millet's oeuvre.<sup>53</sup>

But also, his artistic practice centres on integration with nature: "l'impression force l'expression"<sup>54</sup>, Millet describes the credo of his creative process. Millet writes further: "One should be accustomed receiving impressions from nature only, of whatever kind they may be and whatever temperament one has. One must be soaked and saturated by it and think only what it makes you think."<sup>55</sup> By this he means that following the destruction of the urban, a sensory, immersive, and spiritual immersion into the natural sphere must occur to create expression. Through constant cumulative observation, often over many years, the spirit should sink into the non-human environment and be completely absorbed by it. Only in this way can *natura naturans* be recognized. To visually express the insight into *natura naturans* thus gained, Millet presupposes the spirit of a genius artist. Sensory perception is the source from which the ideal content is synthesized and concentrated onto the paintings. The academic tradition is thereby replaced by the individual perception and mental performance of a genius artist, to convey a universally valid statement about the relationship between humans and environment.<sup>56</sup>

During this process, Millet does not yet paint — at most, he draws — but he observes environment intensively. What follows is a prolonged engagement with the memories of these observations and the reconstruction of the natural experience in the studio through his paintings. This practice contrasts with the Barbizon *en plein air* painters and the tradition-oriented academic art, which Millet believed could not achieve a true representation of nature. Moreover, this approach opposes the fast, industrial-mechanical age of Millet and the modern subject-object dualism that sees the object as external, suggesting instead a more monistic relationship with the environment. Millet, in his self-conception as a



12 Jean-François Millet, *Le Semeur*, circa 1865, Pastels and Crayon on Paper, 43,5 x 53,5 cm, The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.



13 Jean-François Millet, *Des glaneuses*, 1857, Oil on Canvas, 83,5 x 110cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris..

mediator, aims to reveal this idea of *natura naturans* to the viewers and, through the experience of his paintings, to re-integrate them as well.<sup>57</sup>

Millet's working method can be exemplarily traced in the different versions of *Le Semeur*: the first version was created in 1847 (Fig. 2), followed by two versions in 1850 (Fig. 10 and Fig. 11), and a pastel version in 1865 (Fig. 12), which differ only slightly. Countless drafts and sketches lie in between. Millet thus had to dedicate himself cumulatively to years of observation and reflection on the subject, working on it for about twenty years. In the first three versions (Figs. 4, 15, 16), *Le Semeur* is embedded in a sombre autumn landscape, and the dynamic, sweeping twist of the body seems to integrate the man into the rhythm of nature. The cyclical passage of the seasons thus determines the condition of humans down to the very movement of sowing. The human being here fully aligns with the years rhythm, integrated into it except for the basic contours of his being.

In the last version, this rhythm is also taken up by the previously rather static landscape. The whipping weather follows the leftward motion of the arm, and birds presumably swarm out, attracted by the seeds, responding to the human action. Environment and human are integrative interlocked here. This applies both to Millet's working method that led to these works and to the representations of environment and humans in the works themselves.<sup>58</sup> The lifestyle of the rural population Millet observed also follows this scheme of embedding human life in nature. Also, contemporary art criticism often read *Le Semeur* as a depiction of true humanity in harmony with the environment. Gautier remarked, for example: "[...] There is grandeur and style in this figure with a violent gesture, with a proudly dilapidated posture, and which seems painted with the earth it sows."<sup>59</sup>

The aspect of integration into environment also appears in the theories of alienation and re-appropriation by Rousseau and Marx: Rousseau understands the *homme naturelle* as a primal state, in which man without a modern property-based society is absolutely integrated into *natura*. This integration takes place through work with environment, as in Millet's works and artistic practice. The idea of *Aneignung* as the opposite of alienation according to Marx is also characterized by integration: according to Marx, *Aneignung* means a real relation to the world, in which through work with the natural one productively produces oneself and the world. Through this immediate world-related labour, in contrast to the alienating factory work, self-realization and thus de-alienation are archived.<sup>60</sup>



14 Jean-François Millet, *Un vanneur*, circa 1847-1848, Oil on Canvas, 100,5 x 71 cm, National Gallery, London.

In Millet's works, work on and with the non-urban environment becomes tangible as an appropriative, re-appropriating concept: first, *L'homme à la houe* sweaty loosens and fertilizes the soil in autumn; then *Le Semeur* plants the seeds in spring; *Chemin à travers les blés* shows the fertile field flourishing in summer; *Le Faneur* proceeds to harvest; *Des Glaneuses* (Fig. 13) gather leftover grains; and *Un Vanneur* (Fig. 14) separates the chaff from the wheat. Afterwards, the chaff is burned to fertile ash on the field, as visible in the background of *L'homme à la houe*, and the cycle begins anew. Millet's figures thus act productively on their surroundings, are shaped by it, and shape it themselves. They enter a relation to the world and integrate themselves into the environment and the circle of year.

### Millet's Construction of a *Natura Naturans* as a Strategy of De-Alienation

Starting from a sense of alienation and driven by a longing for de-alienation, Millet seems to construct an imagination of naturalness through his work. His strategy consists in distancing himself — both in artistic practice and in life — from the industrialised modern sphere by means of reduction and destruction. On this basis, he seeks to access *natura naturans* and aims at the integration of the subject into *natura naturans*. The resulting works articulate a vision of the human being as inherently embedded within it. What emerges, then, are specific constructions of both environment and the human condition in it.

Millet places himself in a productive relation to environment in and reconfigures reality according to his inner vision. This is understood here as a constructive gesture from which the works and conception of environment emerge. In combination with the acts of destruction, this may be described as a deconstruction of the modern urban experience of alienation. This constitutes the core of Millet's strategy of de-alienation.

But what exactly does this construction look like? What is the specific painted form of *natura naturans* and *conditio humana* that Millet envisions?

In contrast to the perceived urban experience, the environments constructed by Millet are not separated from the human being. It is neither external to the subject nor positioned in antithesis to it, as posited by the classical subject-object dualism. Rather, according to this conception, environment and humanity are unified. As in *Chemin à travers les blés*, they are interwoven within a monistic and universal entity, in which the human figure — like the wheat stalk, the stone, or the sky — is integrated. Just as Millet himself seeks to enter a productive relation with his environment in the process of creation, so too do the figures he depicts. Millet conceives of this productive relation as rural, peasant life, which he observes and reinterprets freely according to his imagination. He thus equates himself and his creative process with the labour of the peasantry. In both, the *conditio humana* reveals itself only through



15 Jean-François Millet, *Un paysant greffant un arbre, dit Le Greffeur*, 1855, Oil on Canvas, 80,5 x 100cm, Neue Pinakothek, München.

a supposed productive unity with nature. Environment thereby becomes the site of labour, and labour upon it the moment of de-alienation.<sup>61</sup> Millet's *natura naturans* aims therefore not a pastoral-Arcadian idyll, but rather a site of sincere, authentic humanity within environment — in the sense of the biblical dictum: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.”<sup>62</sup>

A symbolic exemplar of Millet's strategy can be found in the *Un paysan greffant un arbre* (Fig. 15): A peasant is shown grafting a fruit tree, while a mother and child observe him attentively. The family depicted here is visually and thematically woven into its environment on multiple levels. Light pervades the entire scene, bathing the family, the ground, the vegetation, and the sky in a

warm, golden glow. The thematic arrangement of spatial planes further unites environment, culture, and human presence: In the background, the sky gives way to a building, upon which birds alight, linking architecture and atmosphere. This is followed by the garden, which, though vegetal, is clearly shaped by human intervention — further integrating environment and the cultural. It is within this garden that Millet places the human figures, weaving them into the cyclical processes. In analogy to the fruit tree — cut down and now regenerating through the grafted shoot — the mother and child can be read as allegories of birth and growth, equally inscribed within the natural cycle. That the depiction wants to express a timeless aspect of *conditio humana* is evident in its forward-looking references: the anticipated growth and flourishing of the tree, and the transmission of tradition embodied by the child. At the same time, the subject alludes to Virgil's *Georgics*, specifically Book II, which Millet demonstrably references in this work, where the grafting of trees is described.<sup>63</sup> In this way, the painting points to an ahistorical, yet specifically pre-modern dimension; the father's action constitutes a deconstruction: as an integral part of the environment, he intervenes in it. He inserts a shoot into the fresh cut of the tree, thus enabling the refinement of its growth. The old trunk and crown lie at his feet. The man alters the given reality through the act of grafting — destructing what was found and constructing something new.

And just as Millet understands *natura naturans* to include the productive act of intervention, so too is human agency here conceived as integrated into the cycle of nature.

## Conclusion: A Relationship of Non-Relation

The experience of alienation gives rise to a desire for de-alienation, and Millet's construction of supposed true nature and natural experience can be read as a strategy of de-alienation. This tendency is observable not only in his work but also within broader societal contexts and may be interpreted considering a 'reinvention of nature'. The historical specific idea of authentic naturalness constructed in Millet's paintings seems among others grounded in Rousseau's call for a return to a *natura naturans*,

as echoed in the period's philosophical discourse. In Millet's case, these ideals are projected onto rural life. The emphasis on labour in direct, physical interaction with environment also recalls Marx's notion of productive life as realised through appropriative work.

An historical-ecological perspective on Millet's œuvre thus proves fruitful, as his works construct a counter-image to dominant modes of urban modern experience. They seek to evoke an environment that responds to the desires and imaginaries of the urban subject. Rahel Jaeggi describes alienation as a relationship of non-relation: not the absence of relation, but a relation marked by a particular quality of alienation. Alienation implies distance from something to which one is immanently connected. It presupposes the idea of an ontologically prior relation, rendering the concept both normative and descriptive.<sup>64</sup> Millet's strategy of de-alienation may be understood in these terms: normatively grounded in the idea of *natura naturans* and the *conditio humana* and descriptively realised through its pictorial representation.

Like broader societal strategies of de-alienation, Millet's project seems dialectical. He seeks to negate the city in favour of *natura naturans* yet cannot fully escape its influence. His works enter a relation with that from which they claim to detach; they create connection under the sign of disconnection, while the desire to overcome alienation is itself culturally urban. The gaze toward the peasant, toward nature, and toward *natura naturans* is inseparable from the city. Thus, nature — framed as the opposite of the metropolis — is nonetheless bound to it. Urban consumer ideology also opens environment to a consumable gaze, and Millet's works become objects of consumption, especially for a city-based public. The construction of nature, as Nicholas Green argues, enacts the "living out of metropolitan priorities"<sup>65</sup> with Barbizon and the rise of local tourism serving as paradigms of this logic.

The naturalness imagined by Millet is not untouched or absent of humans; rather, the human and the instrumental use of environment are integral to his vision. He responds to the absence of naturalness with its productive deconstruction. As such, Millet transfers urban ideas of production into his vision of naturalness, and ultimately, he cannot fully sever ties with the urban-modern sphere.

## Abbildungsnachweis

1 Reproduced after: Chantal Georgel, *Millet*, Paris 2014, 185 — 2 Reproduced after: Chantal Georgel, *Millet*, Paris 2014, 300 — 3 Reproduced after: Chantal Georgel, *Millet*, Paris 2014, 300 — 4 Reproduced after: Chantal Georgel, *Millet*, Paris 2014, 247 — 5 Public Domain, the Encyclopaedia of Diderot and d'Alambert. Collaborative Translation Project, URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0001.330>, last accessed on 01.03.2025 — 6 Public Domain the, Encyclopaedia of Diderot and d'Alambert. Collaborative Translation Project, URL: [plate\\_18\\_2\\_1.jpeg\(881x1351\)\(uchicago.edu\)](plate_18_2_1.jpeg(881x1351)(uchicago.edu)), last accessed 01.03.2025 — 7 ©, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux — 8 Reproduced after: Chantal Georgel, *Millet*, Paris 2014, 149 — 9 Reproduced after: Chantal Georgel, *Millet*, Paris 2014, 316 — 10 Reproduced after: Chantal Georgel, *Millet*, Paris 2014, 301 — 11 Reproduced after: Chantal Georgel, *Millet*, Paris 2014, 10 — 12 Reproduced after: Chantal Georgel, *Millet*, Paris 2014, 303 — 13 Reproduced after: Chantal Georgel, *Millet*, Paris 2014, 241 — 14 Reproduced after: Chantal Georgel, *Millet*, Paris 2014, 71 — 15 Reproduced after: Chantal Georgel, *Millet*, Paris 2014, 157.

## Endnoten

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- 3 Rahel Jaeggi: *Entfremdung. Zur Aktualität eines sozialphilosophischen Problems*, Frankfurt am Main 2005, 7.

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- 7 Trebeß, 13–23.
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- 9 Rahel Jaeggi: *Entfremdung. Zur Aktualität eines sozialphilosophischen Problems*, Frankfurt am Main 2007, 13.
- 10 *Karl Marx. Friedrich Engels. Werke*, Volume 26,3, Berlin 1968, 303. Translated by the author.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 217. Translated by the author.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 218. Translated by the author.
- 13 See for several examples: Nicholas Green: *The Spectacle of Nature. Landscape and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth Century France*, Manchester 1990, Chapter 1.
- 14 *Ibid.*, Introduction.
- 15 Paul Cottin: *Thoré. Bürger peint par lui-même*, Paris 1900, 36. Translated by the author.
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- 28 *Ibid.*, 69.
- 29 Jules Simon : “Souvenirs de jeunesse” , in : Philibert Audebrand (ed.), *Faisons la chaîne. Contes, nouvelles et récits*, Paris 1890, 3. Translated by the author.
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- 31 *Ibid.*, 83. Translated by the author.
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- 37 Théophile Thoré : *Salon de 1847*, Paris 1847, 80–81. Translated by the author.
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- 40 Eberhard Schulze and Antje Schulze: *Jean-François Millet (1814 – 1875), Léon Augustin L’hermitte (1844 – 1925), Rosa Bonheur (1822 – 1899) und Julien Duprè (1851 – 1910) – französische realistische Maler der Landwirtschaft. Beschreibung von Bildern aus landwirtschaftlicher Sicht*, Leipzig 2020, 8–9.
- 41 Spies, 112.
- 42 This becomes clear in Millet’s deliberate reference to Palissy, with which he alludes to the academic painting of his time: „[...] I prefer to paint truth bare and unadorned with a rustic brush rather than corrupt it with the apparent color of lies.“, cited after: Herbert 2007, 540.
- 43 Notabene: Millet makes the man’s work harder by placing thorns and thistles on the ground, which evokes symbolism of the Passion.
- 44 Herbert 2007, 545.

- 45 Matthias Krüger: *Das Relief der Farbe. Pastose Malerei in der französischen Kunstkritik 1850-1890*, München 2007, 282.
- 46 Marie-Hélène Girard (ed.) : *Théophile Gautier. Crique d'art. Extraits des Salons (1833-1872)*, Paris 1994, 313. Translated by the author.
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- 48 Herbert 2007, 540.
- 49 Kessler, 190.
- 50 Trebeß, 20.
- 51 Jaeggi, 30.
- 52 Behind the work lies also a forestry-legal discourse: The diverse forest usage rights of the *Ancien Régime* were restricted in the 19th century through forestry reforms, turning a multifunctional forest into a simple timber supplier, thus giving rise to modern forestry. As a result, brushwood gatherers had to be reluctantly tolerated by the foresters, and gathering was often prohibited. To preserve the forest and the usage rights, Théodore Rousseau even initiated a petition to Napoleon III., Greg Thomas: *Art and Ecology in Nineteenth-Century France. The Landscapes of Théodore Rousseau*, Princeton 2000, 214–17.
- 53 Also striking is *Des Glaneuses* (fig. 13), which, as mentioned several times, almost merge with the earth through their crouching gleaning.
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- 64 Jaeggi, 48–49.
- 65 Green, 120.