Introduction

One of the most admired exhibits in the Paris Salon of 1765 was a painting by Greuze entitled *Une Jeune fille, qui pleure son oiseau mort* (fig. 1). It has remained one of the artist's best-known works, largely on account of a famous passage in Diderot's review of the exhibition, in which the writer moves from praising this 'delightful picture' to engaging the weeping girl in conversation and trying to console her. 'Why this dreamy, melancholy air? What, all this, for a bird?', he enquires, hinting that he doubts that it is the real reason: 'Come, child, open your heart to me . . . I am not your father, I am neither indiscreet nor severe.' Having elicited from her the confession that she had succumbed to the amorous advances of a young man, Diderot admits to the reader: 'I wouldn't mind too much being the cause of her pain.'[1] Subsequent commentators have generally followed Diderot in understanding the dead bird as a symbol of lost virginity and interpreted the painting as a titillating allegory of the transition from childhood innocence to adult experience. Diderot's text also, however, offers important insights into the dramatic structure of the work and, more specifically, into the way that the image programmes the viewer's response. On the one hand, the attractive female figure serves to arouse the interest of the (adult, male) viewer, thereby drawing him into imaginative participation in the scene while, on the other, the girl's extreme youth and the intensity of her grief elicit a quasi-paternal concern. The intended response is summed up by another critic: 'One wishes above all to console her. Several times I have spent whole hours gazing at her. I have been intoxicated with that sweet and gentle sadness, which is better than voluptuousness, and I have gone away imbued with a delicious melancholy.'[2]

Greuze criticism today takes it as axiomatic that viewers no longer respond to his work in the way that his original audience did and, for anyone seeking to demonstrate what the problem is, *Une Jeune fille, qui pleure son oiseau mort* provides a convenient case in point.[3] It is an example of the so-called 'Greuze girl', a type of picture that has above all served to damn the artist's name. The eroticization of adolescent girls that underlies these works is now likely to seem thoroughly disturbing, in the light of current concerns about child sexual abuse. It is rendered yet more problematic by the element of pathos and by the kind of articulation of the viewer's response highlighted by Diderot's commentary. The fundamental

1. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *Une Jeune fille, qui pleure son oiseau mort*, 1765. Oil on canvas, 52 × 45.6. National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.

accusation is that Greuze's paintings are contrived and artificial, that he at once manipulates and panders to his audience by gratifying a self-indulgent (and hence incipiently perverse) desire for emotional arousal. Even Anita Brookner, whose important 1972 monograph marked the beginning of a continuing reappraisal of the artist, betrays a certain embarrassment about his procedures. She comments, for example, that the pictures Greuze submitted to the Salon of 1765 'can be seen as an exploitation of every point on which he had ever won public approbation – uplifting, sentimental and decently pornographic'. Thus, she argues for his historical significance not on the basis of the sensational impact his work made on contemporary audiences but rather of his role as the forerunner of 'a much more important painter, Jacques-Louis David'.[4]

Subsequent scholarship has by and large endorsed Brookner's assessment, identifying Greuze as a crucial transitional figure in the development of French painting of the second half of the eighteenth century rather than as an artist worthy of sustained attention in his own right.

In this book my aim is to get beyond the standard disdain for the 'sentimentality' of Greuze and his contemporaries and to establish exactly how and why the artist should have been both so widely popular and so highly esteemed during his own lifetime. In order to do so, I shall be concentrating on the paintings on which his reputation rested, the large-scale moral tableaux of family life, which were seen at the time to rival history painting in their didactic ambition and expressive power. Their subsequent classification as 'genre painting', combined with the prevailing teleological view of French art of the later eighteenth century as leading inevitably towards Davidian history painting, has been a crucial factor in Greuze's relegation to the status of a mere precursor.[5] I shall argue here that he should rather be seen as the inventor and principal (though not the sole) exponent of a distinct genre, the painting of sentiment, of which *Une Jeune fille, qui pleure son oiseau mort* can, despite its modest scale, be taken as exemplary. The moral function of such a painting lies less in any overt lessons (though these are important) than in the identification that it promotes between the depicted and the viewing subject. From a critical perspective, it is impossible to ignore the asymmetry of the power relations involved in such an exchange; they include differences of class as well as age and gender.[6] Historically, however, I contend, Greuze's work played a significant role in producing and promoting a new moralized, fundamentally paternal(istic) sense of identity for the citizens of a regenerated social order.

The legacy of the Goncourts

There can be few artists whose reputation has shifted quite so drastically as has that of Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805). Highly successful and greatly admired during his lifetime, he has since been little regarded and much derided. In so far as he has any kind of public profile today, it is precisely as an example of the instability of artistic reputation. The contrast also, however, testifies to the very sureness with which he gave visual expression to the cultural values of his era. Greuze's reputation remained largely intact until well into the nineteenth century. Although his fame diminished in his later years and his works ceased to be received with the same acclaim as they had been during the 1760s, when he exhibited regularly at the Salon, he escaped the general obloquy that befell so many Ancien Regime painters around 1800. At the time of his death, he could still be commended as an artist of real distinction and a credit to the national

school. In Gault de Saint-Germain's *Les Trois siècles de la peinture en France* (1808), for example, Greuze is categorized as one of a select group of painters, who, resisting the decadent taste that had prevailed at the time, 'distinguished their century by striving . . . to endow art with morals, so as to inspire them in society'. He is praised in the highest terms: unique, irreplaceable, truly original, touched with genius, he has left 'a gallery of moral scenes, which will always be valued by art lovers'.[7]

In more recent times, however, it is precisely the moralizing character of Greuze's work, together with its sentimentality and its 'literary' qualities, that have been seen as the problem. The formalist values that came to dominate with the rise of modernism meant that ridicule or worse was the typical fate of pictures that tell a story, point a moral and address the emotions. Such works were deemed fundamentally inauthentic. Exemplary of this kind of attitude is a passing reference by Roger Fry to 'the maundering sentimentalities of Greuze', whom he cites only as evidence of the mistaken 'literary' aesthetic and moralistic values that prevented Diderot from properly appreciating the work of 'a supremely honest artist' of the same period, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin.[8] In the light of such denigration, attempts to rehabilitate Greuze have frequently drawn attention to his vivid portraits and, above all, to his stunning draughtsmanship as evidence of his purely artistic skill. A notable contribution in this respect was made by Edgar Munhall in the exhibition that he organized in 1976–7 to mark the 250th anniversary of the artist's birth.[9] It was, however, typical of Greuze's non-canonical status that the anniversary should have been marked by an exhibition independently initiated in the United States rather than officially in his native France. He was subsequently omitted from the major series of monographic exhibitions of eighteenth-century French artists staged in Paris between 1979 and 1989.[10]

If changes in taste at least partly account for Greuze's critical misfortunes, the explanation for the particular unease aroused by his work lies in a problem specific to the artist himself: the notorious 'Greuze girls', most of which were churned out by the artist during his impecunious later years. Although a fair number of the paintings of this type that go by his name are likely to be pastiches by other artists, they nevertheless form a large part of his œuvre.[11] Much sought after by collectors, these titillating images compromised his reputation as a moralist, which first came under sustained attack in the mid-nineteenth century. Latter-day perceptions of Greuze have in fact largely been shaped by the Goncourt brothers' essay on the artist, first published in 1863, which forms part of their volume, *L'Art du dix-huitième siècle*.[12] For the Goncourts, as for other nineteenth-century connoisseurs, he was chiefly to be admired for his masterly portrayals of young girls, which they evoke in characteristically highly coloured

prose. Unfortunately, so they argue, he failed to remain true to his own inspiration and lapsed into artifice and contrivance; led astray by the influence of Diderot, he devoted his talent to preaching virtue and, as a result, 'was destined to found in France the deplorable tradition of literary painting and moralizing art'.[13] This analysis expresses the aesthetic principles of *l'art pour l'art* and accompanying rejection of any utilitarian purpose for art; as such, it represents an anachronistic projection of nascent modernist concerns onto eighteenth-century painting.

The Goncourts' essay on Greuze is also informed by their conception of the ideal artist as a man who dedicates his whole life to his work and, for this reason, rejects love and marriage as snares that would prevent him from remaining true to his vocation.[14] Greuze emerges in the essay as a kind of negative illustration of their ideas, on account of the 'amorous temperament' that they ascribe to him. Drawing on previously published texts, they mention an early passion for the wife of his master, a painter in Lyon, as well as recounting the story of a love affair he is supposed to have had with an Italian princess while studying in Rome. Greuze's susceptibility to feminine charms is, however, most strikingly manifested in his marriage to Anne-Gabrielle Babuti, a ravishingly pretty termagant, who 'mutilated the spirit of the artist by imbuing him with a passion for money' and deprived him of 'the freedom and tranquillity of mind which favour the creation of noble and powerful works'.[15] Convinced as they are of the necessary connection between an artist's life and character and his work, the Goncourts are thus bound to find Greuze unconvincing as a moralist. According to them, 'his art . . . has a vice, it hides a kind of corruption, it is essentially sensual . . . A picture of family life, interpreted by Greuze, loses its seriousness, its gravity, its meditative calm.' The man reveals himself in the painter, 'investing all these moral narratives with a suspicion of libertinage'. He is, in other words, a hypocrite, veiling his weak sensual nature with 'an official veneer of virtue'.[16]

However, Greuze's failings as a moralist are not attributed by the Goncourts solely to his own temperament but also to the influence of the society in which he lived. The standard against which his scenes of family life are measured and found wanting is, naturally, 'the bourgeois serenity' of Chardin's domestic scenes, which, so they claim, was only made possible by their author's remaining in the humble, artisanal milieu of his birth and having virtually no contact with the fashionable world: 'Like the class it represents, his painting may be said to have escaped the corruptions of the eighteenth century.'[17] The Goncourts' conception of the period as one dominated by aristocratic leisure and pleasure, elegance and vice, leads them to view the cultural shifts of the latter half of the century, the turn towards sentiment and morality, as a decline into

2. Hyacinthe Aubry-Lecomte after Greuze, *La Paix du ménage*, 1851. Lithograph. Cabinet des Estampes, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

self-indulgent play-acting. Greuze, in their view, is the painter of a decadent society, one that they personify in the figure of an aging rake.[18] Overdetermined as it is by their insistence on viewing the artist's work as the expression both of his temperament and his epoch, the Goncourts' characterization of his vision of family life becomes tendentious – not to mention anachronistic – in its Victorian-style prudishness about the least hint of sexuality in such a context. Of Greuze's drawing, *La Paix du ménage* (fig. 2), for example, which depicts a couple cuddling beside a cradle, they disapprovingly claim that 'the parents

seem to smile with the smile of sensual pleasure, the gesture of the mother is the caress of the demi-mondaine'.[19]

Nevertheless, supplemented as it is with contemporary source material, the Goncourts' essay appears highly authoritative and had a decisive influence on the subsequent literature on the artist.[20] Camille Mauclair's 1906 monograph, for example, occasionally takes issue with them but offers essentially the same interpretation, at once deploring Greuze's rejection of purely pictorial concerns for a preoccupation with '*popularizing the moral idea*' and discerning in his work a typically eighteenth-century sensuality that compromises its didacticism, always supposing that 'such an art is not itself an error'. Greuze, Mauclair affirms, succumbed 'to the taste of collectors, to the magnetism of his wife, to the secret voice of his temperament'.[21] The double case against Greuze was even more forcefully prosecuted by Louis Hautecoeur, who went so far as to conclude his 1913 monograph with two analytical chapters, respectively entitled 'Les Procédés littéraires' and 'Le Sensualisme de Greuze'. Where Hautecoeur differs from his predecessors is in his much fuller treatment of the artist's cultural context, for which he drew on his own earlier article, 'Le Sentimentalisme dans la peinture française de Greuze à David'. After 1760, he explains, 'an epidemic of morality' took hold, a turn of phrase which serves to belittle the whole phenomenon as a kind of mass hysteria.[22] The overall effect is to reinforce a sense of Greuze's art as catering to the self-indulgent emotionalism of fashionable society, especially its female members.

These assumptions still pervade Anita Brookner's monograph, which states at the outset that 'M. Hautecoeur's thesis still holds good'. The legacy of the Goncourts is evident: 'the conflict between [Greuze's] sensuality and his puritanism', Brookner declares, resulted in 'mediocre pictures in which both qualities are uneasily muted'. His great Salon success, *L'Accordée de village*, is said to be 'a predominantly literary picture'.[23] Rather than insisting on the merely fashionable character of eighteenth-century sentimentalism, however, Brookner also seeks to elucidate the nature of *sensibilité* (as she terms it) as 'a moral and metaphysical movement'. It was, she argues, essentially a secular substitute for traditional religion and, while it involved serious attempts to construct alternative codes of morality, the emphasis on the experience of intense emotion also gave rise to a conviction that 'it was sufficient to feel the impulse of the heart in order to consider oneself in a state of virtue'. Hence, the 'equivocal amoral quality' of *sensibilité*.[24] This analysis informs the chapter entitled 'Greuze and the Pursuit of Happiness' in Norman Bryson's study of eighteenth-century French painting, *Word and Image* (1981). Like Brookner, Bryson argues that *sensibilité* makes it possible to enjoy a sense of rectitude while giving free rein to one's

emotions and desires.[25] Both exemplify its disingenuous logic by reference to Rousseau's novel, *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*, whose heroine engages in an illicit love affair with a man of whom her father disapproves.

In many respects, Bryson's discussion of Greuze represents the culmination of the Goncourt-inspired approach. Despite its sophisticated critical apparatus and dazzling structural analyses, it does not actually develop a new interpretative framework. As applied to Greuze, Bryson's opposition between 'discursive' and 'figural' aspects of painting has the effect of reinscribing the familiar tension between the 'intense literariness' of the artist's work and what Bryson describes as his 'outlawed libidinal energies'. The claim that the 'official discursive project' of Greuze's paintings gets distorted under the pressure of unacknowledged fears and desires essentially provides a psychoanalytical gloss on the Goncourts' assertion that the artist's 'amorous temperament' inevitably revealed itself in his art.[26] The result is to reinforce the limitations of their approach since, whereas they took account of the financial motivation that encouraged the production of the 'Greuze girls', Bryson disregards this kind of consideration and accordingly views these figures as evidence of a perverse obsession, thereby depriving Greuze of conscious agency and turning him into 'the Humbert Humbert of painting'. In deducing from his dark scenes of domestic conflict that he does not really preach 'the doctrine of the happy home', Bryson continues the reductive logic of interpreting the artist's œuvre as the unified expression of his personality.[27] It also maintains the tradition of refusing to take Greuze seriously as a moralist.

The ethics and aesthetics of sentiment

Recent scholarly work on Greuze has moved on from the Goncourt tradition of interpretation. To a large extent, however, this has been achieved by downplaying the cultural and social context in which he worked. Instead, there has been a tendency to consider his compositional innovations in relation to contemporary art theory and criticism, as in Michael Fried's path-breaking *Absorption and Theatricality* (1981), and also, most notably by Thomas Crow in *Painters and Public Life* (1985), to the institutional agenda of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. It is as if Greuze can only be recuperated for art history by detaching him as far as possible from his contaminating association with the cult of *sensibilité*.[28] Thus, though he can now be praised for the complexity and sophistication of his narrative scenes, there is a continuing reluctance (as, for example, in Mark Ledbury's work) to take seriously the pathos and moralism that constituted his principal claim not merely to fame but also to status during his lifetime.[29] In 1769, for example, after Greuze had failed in his bid to gain

admission to the Academy with the rank of history painter, one critic declared that he would never be able to accustom himself to regarding him as a mere 'genre painter'; it would be more appropriate, this writer argued, on the basis of the artist's 'philosophical, touching and novel scenes', to call him 'the painter of sentiment'.[30] An exploration of exactly what this appellation implies is all the more necessary in the light of important recent work on sentimentalism by scholars in other disciplines.

As a preliminary, it is important to explain why 'sentiment' (and 'sentimentalism') is the preferred terminology here, rather than the more familiar *sensibilité*.[31] To apply the latter term to works of literature and painting is problematic in so far as it obscures a crucial distinction between sentiment and sensibility in eighteenth-century usage. For Greuze's contemporaries, only the first of these two words could be used to qualify cultural products since the other pertained exclusively to living beings. The *Dictionnaire des arts* of Watelet and Lévesque, for example, notes that, in relation to works of art, sentiment is commonly understood to be 'the effect of sensibility. Thus, one can say that there is sentiment in the work of an artist, as one would say that there is in the work of a poet'.[32] In other words, it is the result of the sensibility of the maker. The primary referent of 'sensibility' is the purely physical faculty of receiving sense impressions but, by the mid-eighteenth century, the word had also come to connote an innate human capacity for being touched and moved, above all by the sight of a fellow human being in distress, which gave it an emphatically moral dimension. According to the abbé Dubos, for example, 'the natural sensibility of the human heart' had been placed there as 'the first foundation of society'.[33] 'Sentiment' covers much the same semantic field but also extends much further into the inner life, to designate insights and intuitions largely or wholly independent of the senses; especially as elaborated by Rousseau, it combines notions of conviction, conscience and consciousness.[34]

'Sentiment' lent itself to aesthetic discourse, therefore, because it referred not so much to direct sensations and lively emotions as to a stable and unified state of mind, one that could allow the individual to apprehend or to imitate an overarching order of truth, beauty and moral value. As this suggests, its connotations were overwhelmingly positive, not to say elevated: 'to have sentiments', the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* specified, meant 'to have sentiments of honour, probity, etc., praiseworthy sentiments'.[35] By contrast, 'sensibility' was always a more ambiguous quality, as likely to contribute to the unhappiness of the individual as to the good of society, and, by the mid-1770s, its status as a fashionable cult had led two of its most notable former proponents, Diderot and Rousseau, to adopt a critical attitude. Both now saw it as a form of weakness and even self-indulgence, either on the part of women in particular or of polite society

as a whole.[36] It was this negative construction of sensibility (which gave rise to the pejorative term, *sensiblerie*) that informed much of the subsequent scholarship on developments in later eighteenth-century French culture, not only the art historical writing already discussed but also the work on 'Preromanticism' carried out by literary historians such as Daniel Mornet and André Monglond in the first third of the twentieth century. Concerned far more with the longings and the lifestyle of the so-called *âme sensible* than with literature as such, they too laid the emphasis on empty exhibitionism and moral hypocrisy on the part of decadent aristocrats.[37]

The change in terminology that I am proposing is thus ultimately motivated by a concern to mark a distance from a (predominantly hostile) type of approach that focusses on *sensibilité* as a social and psychological phenomenon and neglects the aesthetic and moral dimension of *sentiment*. More recent contributions to the study of eighteenth-century French literature have, in any case, laid the basis for a new understanding of the whole movement. They have shown that the older work on 'Preromanticism' rested on a false dichotomy between reason and emotion, philosophy and sentiment (for the actual compatibility of the latter pair of terms, see the comment on Greuze quoted above), which gave rise to the conviction that *sensibilité* represented a movement of reaction against the Enlightenment rather than being, as scholars now insist, an integral part of it.[38] At the same time, the familiar psychological focus, with its attendant doubts about the sincerity of the *âme sensible*, has given way to a new appreciation of the essentially (as opposed to fashionably) social character of sentiment and sensibility.[39] Literary historians now emphasize that the concern with the interior life was counterbalanced by an orientation towards the world, which involved a commitment to moral instruction and also to social reform.[40] Symptomatic of these changed priorities is a partial shift of emphasis from the complex and troubling figure of Rousseau to his one-time friend, Diderot, whose allegiance to sentiment is clearly inseparable from his enlightened ideals. Equally, however, the more nuanced understanding of the Enlightenment that has emerged means that the work of Rousseau can more readily be related to that of the other *philosophes*.[41]

On the basis of these studies, it is possible to construct a preliminary definition of the cultural movement with which we are here concerned. On a schematic level, sentimentalism can be seen to involve a drive towards fusion; it aims at the dissolution of the barriers separating entities. For present purposes, perhaps the most important of the barriers that it works against is the opposition between the verbal and the visual. Whereas the art of Greuze was previously thought to represent the imposition of alien literary values onto painting, it has