The famous naturalist writer Émile Zola (1840–1902) had been interested in art since his boyhood in Aix, where he had not only been a close friend of the young Paul Cézanne, but had also been one of a group of young art lovers; his interest in painting lasted throughout his whole life. It was Cézanne who first introduced his friend to the young painters of the "Batignolles group," as they were called in the early 1860s before they began to attract notice as the "Impressionists." Pissarro, Monet, Degas, Renoir, Fantin-Latour and, of course, Manet, to whom Zola was to devote most of his critical studies, made up this group; the model for the artist-hero of Zola's novel Claude Lantier was probably based chiefly on Manet.

In 1866 Zola's Salon, which had appeared serially under the name of "Claude" in the Événement, unleashed a storm. Starting out with a scathing denunciation of the jury, he had gone on to devote an entire laudatory article to the work of the young Édouard Manet, whose two entries for the Salon, The Fifer and the Portrait of Rouvière (The Tragic Actor), had both been rejected by the jury, and whose Olympia had raised such a scandal in 1865. By 1867 Zola had established a close relationship with Manet, and in the spring of that year he began negotiations with Lacroix for a new edition of the Contes à Ninon to be illustrated by Manet—a project that failed to materialize. In 1868 the painter completed the famous Portrait of Zola, now in the Louvre, depicting the writer at his desk surrounded by his books, papers, Japanese prints, and, prominently displayed on the wall, a reproduction of the Olympia.

It was in 1867 that Zola developed his little article on Manet from his Salon of 1866 into a longer, more detailed appreciation. In the beginning of the year he prevailed upon Arsène Houssaye, director of the Revue du XIXe Siècle, to accept about twenty pages devoted exclusively to Manet, which were published several months afterward by Dentu as a sort of publicity brochure for the private exhibition that Manet had opened in May on the Place de l'Alma, as Courbet had done in 1855. Édouard Manet, a Biographical and Critical Study, as the brochure was entitled, was received with customary sarcasm by the press, and with encouraging response only from Champfleury and Sainte-Beuve.16

In conclusion, if I were being questioned and were asked what new language Édouard Manet spoke, I would reply: he speaks a language of simplicity and exactitude. The new note that he contributes is one of blondness, filling the canvas with light. The translation that he gives us is a precise and simplified one, achieving its effect through large units and broad masses.

We must, and I cannot say it too often, forget a thousand things, in order to understand and enjoy this talent. It is no longer a question of searching for absolute beauty; the artist paints neither a story nor a soul; what is generally called composition does not exist for him, and the task he imposes upon himself is far from that of representing such-and-such an idea or historical event. And for this reason we must judge him neither as a moralist nor as a man of letters; we must judge him as a painter. He treats figure painting in the same way that traditional artists are allowed to treat still life painting: I mean to say, he arranges the figures before him, more or less at random, and then is only interested in getting them down on the canvas as he sees them, with all the vivid contrasts that they make with one another. Ask nothing else from him than an exactly literal translation. He does not know how to sing or to philosophize. He knows how to paint and that is all; he has the gift (and this is exactly his unique temperament) of seizing the dominant tones in all their delicacy and thereby being able to model the things and beings that he paints in broad areas.
He is a child of our times. I see him as an analytic painter. All the problems have once more been called into question: science wanted a firm basis and therefore returned to a precise observation of facts. And this movement has been taking place not only in the realm of science; all the disciplines, all human efforts are directed toward the search for sure and definitive principles in nature. Our modern landscapists have gone far beyond our painters of history and genre because they have studied our countryside, content to translate the first spot of forest they come upon. Edouard Manet applies the same method to each of his works. While others rack their brains to invent a new Death of Caesar or a new Socrates Drinking the Hemlock, he calmly places a few objects and people in a corner of his studio and begins to paint the whole thing, carefully analyzing nature all the while. I repeat, he is a simple analyst; his labor is much more interesting than the plagiarisms of his colleagues: art itself thus leads toward certitude. The artist is an interpreter of that which is, and his works have for me the enormous charm of a precise description made in a human and original language.

He has been reproached for imitating the Spanish masters. I will agree that there may be some resemblance between his early works and those of these masters; one is always someone's son. But since his Déjeuner sur l'herbe he seems to me to have confirmed clearly that personality which I have tried to explain and briefly comment upon. Perhaps the truth is that the public, seeing him paint Spanish scenes and costumes, decided that he took his models from across the Pyrenees. From this it is not far to go on to an accusation of plagiarism. But it is good to know that if Edouard Manet painted espadas or majos it was because in his studio he had Spanish costumes which he thought beautiful in color. He visited Spain only in 1865, and his canvases have too individual an accent for anyone to find him nothing but a bastard of Velasquez and Goya....

The "Déjeuner sur l'herbe"

The Déjeuner sur l'herbe is Manet's greatest painting, the one in which he has realized the dream of every painter: to paint life-sized figures in a landscape. The ability with which he has overcome this difficulty is well known. . . . The public was scandalized by this nude, which was all it saw in the painting. "Good heavens! How indecent! A woman without a stitch on alongside two clothed men." Such a thing had never been seen before! But that was a gross mistake, for in the Louvre there are more than fifty canvases in which both clothed and nude figures occur. But no one goes to the Louvre to be shocked, and besides, the public took good care not to judge the Déjeuner sur l'herbe as a real work of art should be judged. It saw there only some people who were lunching out of doors after a swim, and it believed that the artist had been intentionally obscene and vulgar in composing such a subject, when he had simply tried to obtain vivid contrasts and free disposition of masses. Painters, especially Manet who is an analytical painter, do not share this preoccupation with subject matter which frets the public above everything else; for them the subject is only a pretext for painting, but for the public it is all there is. So, undoubtedly, the nude woman in the Déjeuner sur l'herbe is only there to provide the artist with an opportunity to paint a bit of flesh.

What should be noticed in this painting is not the picnic but the landscape as a whole, its strength and delicacy, the broad, solid foreground and the light, delicate distance, the firm flesh modeled in large areas of light, the supple and strong materials, and especially the delightful silhouette of the woman in her chemise in the background, a charming white spot in the midst of the green leaves. Finally the whole effect, full of atmosphere, this fragment of nature treated with a simplicity so exactly right, is all an admirable page upon which an artist has put the elements unique and peculiar to him.