There are two ways to avoid defining a term: withdrawing from the difficulty, or assuming it unnecessary. Proper names and general classifications render things familiar. Often a name or term becomes so widely used that one thinks its range of reference could be no clearer. 'Impressionist' is such a title, employed by art historians and critics with great ease and rarely if ever given the exclusive definition that one assumes it could readily receive. The historical record, however, reveals no single moment at which a definition of the term became bounded and fixed. Indeed, partial or non-exclusive definitions have been derived from several areas of study and these interrelate in a confusing manner. In order to determine exactly who might be a genuine 'impressionist', both the initial and the more recent commentators have considered one or more of the following: (1) the social group to which the artist belonged; (2) the artist's subject-matter; (3) style or technique; and (4) the artistic goal or purpose. Each category has presented its own peculiar difficulties.

First, the social group. While this area provides some clear distinctions, they are of only limited application to the general problem of definition. An artist might be labelled a genuine impressionist in recognition of his having voluntarily united with others; in effect, he demonstrates that he considers himself an impressionist by participating in one or more of the eight independent exhibitions called 'impressionist' by the press and by the artists themselves. In other words, the title 'impressionist' is conferred on anyone who associates with the group; and, by a principle of commutation, such an individual's style becomes exemplary of the group style (unless it is radically deviant). Given a strict application of this criterion of professional affiliation and personal sympathy, Degas remains an impressionist, even though some nineteenth-century critics claimed that his style necessarily excluded him; and Cézanne must be included even though, for many twentieth-century viewers, his style appears antithetical to impressionism. Acknowledging how problematic these two cases have always been, one might argue that, at the very least, the emergence of the loosely organized exhibiting group provided a focus for the original definition of the impressionist position. 'Impressionism', however, also existed outside this social boundary, even within the...
society of the ‘Salon’, the annual government-sanctioned presentation of works for public viewing. Ironically, it appeared there in the person of the elderly Corot, who gave moral support to the young independent painters but continued to exhibit among the officially honoured and privileged. On the basis of elements of both subject-matter and style, Corot was described in 1875 as a superior, poetic kind of ‘impressionist’. And he was not alone in introducing aspects of the ‘new’ art to the Salon audience; in 1877, a critical review bearing the title ‘L’Impressionnisme au Salon’ discussed an extensive movement with almost no reference to the members of the independent group. A somewhat later review distinguished members of two parallel movements, the impressionists of the Salon and ‘les impressionistes purs des expositions indépendantes’. During the 1870s and 1880s, much of what could be seen in Monet, pissarro, or Degas apparently could also be seen elsewhere. Categorization based on membership in an exhibiting group could never have been definitive since it was from the very start confused by independent considerations of subject-matter and style. Once named, ‘impressionism’ seemed ubiquitous.

Second, subject-matter. Definitions of impressionism determined by subject-matter, just as those based on social affiliation, lead to awkward inclusions and exclusions. Critics and historians alike have stressed the significance of plein-air subjects – views of the sea, the landscape, city streets, and the vie moderne of Parisian cafés. By this standard, however, one would be forced to include a number of artists who at the Salon of 1872 exhibited views of the environs of Paris notable for their simple and direct execution. One of them, Stanislas Lépine, showed later with the independent impressionists, the others did not; but even Lépine is today only rarely discussed as a genuine impressionist, for he lacks a major stylistic characteristic – unconventional bright colour. Théodore Duret, who tended to use stylistic criteria in order to classify the various painters, excluded Lépine for just this reason when he wrote his early, account of the impressionist movement.

Third, style or technique. Like definitions determined by subject-matter, those dependent on observations of style present difficulties. Critics and historians have repeatedly called attention to the bright colour and sketch-like finish of impressionist paintings, but again too many works of the late nineteenth century display these same qualities. Some nineteenth-century critics, most notably Charles Bigger and Henry Houssaye, attempted to define impressionist colour more precisely, linking it to the elimination of effects of chiaroscuro; but such considerations led to the exclusion of Degas from the impressionist camp. It was quite common for Degas to be denied any central role in the development of impressionism for reasons related to his technical procedure, despite his long association with the group that participated in the independent exhibitions and his innovative representation of motion and of modern urban life – clearly aspects of ‘impressionist’ vision. When viewed in isolation, style does not identify impressionists with ease. […]

Fourth, the artistic goal or purpose. It might seem consequently that an adequate definition of impressionism would have to be more comprehensive and synthetic, the result perhaps of a determination of the artistic aim behind the formation of a group of artists who (along with others) shared an interest in a certain kind of subject-matter and certain stylistic innovations. The definition of the goals of impressionist art may indeed inform more purposeful distinctions in the other areas of investigation, but one must take into account the fact that early observers who knew the impressionist painters – among them Jules Castagnary, Théodore Duret, and Georges Rivière – either insisted that the aims of these artists were not unique at all or spoke hardly a word about aims. Instead, technique often became the focus of their commentary. Castagnary, for example, discussed the impressionist paintings exhibited in 1874 with regard to technical innovation: ‘the object of art does not change, the means of translation alone is modified’; impressionism should not be for its ‘material means’, not its ‘doctrines’. Similarly, in writings of the late 1870s, Théodore Duret and Georges Rivière, who were on close terms with the independent group of artists, stressed the technical innovations of the radically sketch-like surface, and noted especially the juxtapositions of touches of unusually bright colour. While Castagnary warned of the danger of such technique becoming idiosyncratic and ‘idealized’, Duret and Rivière implied that it had simply been necessitated by the concern for a more accurate observation of nature. In their different manners, both Duret and Rivière allowed for variation in an individual’s sensation of nature but emphasized that impressionist colour was in fact derived from a nature directly observed, a nature that everyone could experience. In this sense impressionist colour was more ‘natural’ or ‘true to nature’. Neither critic explained openly how the notion of individualized sensation could be reconciled with that of an objective naturalism. This question remains unresolved, usually even unasked, and is of central importance to an understanding of both impressionism and symbolism.

How does one come to understand the apparent contradiction implicit in the notion of an art of specific and perhaps innovative techniques, which seems nevertheless to lack goals particular to itself? In investigating the aim or purpose of impressionism, one encounters in the early critical comments a substitution of means for ends. Critics distinguished impressionist art for the manner in which it attempted to render nature, or more specifically, to render the ‘impression’. Of course, this manner or style was directed at something, at the expression of a fundamental truth, the ‘vérité’ so often mentioned in the theoretical and critical documents of the period. When impressionism was seen in the most general terms, as a naturalistic art aiming at truth, its purpose, as Castagnary and others recognized, could hardly be considered new. The independent artists’ preoccupation with the ‘impression’, however, seemed to set them apart, so that their technical devices for rendering the impression – sketch-like brushwork, lack of conventional drawing as well as modelling and composition, and, especially, unconventionally bright, juxtaposed hues – were described as if sought as ends, effects difficult to achieve, having meaning in themselves. These effects were often found in the work of naïve or untrained artists, yet they could be praised as the
product of a most scrupulous and 'advanced' observation of nature if seen in the context of an exhibition of 'naturalistic' painting. As Zola wrote of Jongkind's art in 1868, 'one must be particularly knowledgeable in order to render the sky and the land with this apparent disorder ... here ... everything is true [vrai].'

In summary: if the art for which the term 'impressionist' is now usually reserved is to be defined with some precision, it must be understood with regard to specific technical devices applied to a very general problem of both discovery and expression, a problem so fundamental to the art of the late nineteenth century that it often went unstated. The problem is that of the individual's means of arriving at truth or knowledge, and the relation of this individual truth to a universal truth. Impressionists and symbolists shared this traditional concern. The impressionist artists distinguished themselves by the \textit{manner} in which they conceived and responded to the issue. For the impressionist, as the name implies, the concept of the 'impression' provided the theoretical means for approaching the relation of individual and universal truth. The artists' characteristic technical devices, such as accented ('spontaneous') brushwork and bright colour, are signs of their practical application of the theory of the impression.

The term 'impression' can bear very physical signification, as when it is synonymous with 'imprint'. It suggests the contact of one material force or substance with another, resulting in a mark, the trace of the physical interaction that has occurred. Photographs are often referred to as impressions, as are the images of one's own vision. In both cases the term 'impression' evokes a mechanistic account of the production of images by means of light; light is conceived as rays or particles which leave their marks or traces upon a surface, whether the photographic film's chemical coating or the eye's retina. The impression is a surface phenomenon — immediate, primary, undeveloped. Hence, the term was used to describe the first layer of an oil painting, the first appearance of an image that might subsequently become a composite of many such 'impressions'.

As primary and spontaneous, the impression could be associated with particularity, individuality, and originality. Accordingly, any style, if regarded as the sign or trace of an individual artist, could also be the impression left by that artist's true nature upon any surfaces with which he came into contact. By following this line of reasoning, Émile Deschanel (in 1864) explained that the word 'style' derived from 'stylus', the writing tool which leaves a characteristic mark corresponding to the personal touch of the individual; he could then consider style a true impression. 'Style is ... the mark of the writer, the impression of his natural disposition [\textit{L'impression de son naturel}] in his writing.' In Deschanel's usage, the term 'impression', which one might first regard as a reference to very concrete external events (one object striking another), is extended into the more internalized realm of character, personality, and innate qualities. The romantic critic Théophile Thoré similarly allowed the term to bridge the gap between the external and the internal, the physical and the intellectual or spiritual, when he used it to explain how

'poetry' (the most transcendent artistic quality) differed from 'imitation'. Thoré associated imitation with a photographic imprinting that amounts to a mere copying; 'poetry', in contrast, is 'invention, is originality, it is the manifested sign of an individual impression [\textit{une impression particulière}]. Poetry is not nature, but the feeling that nature inspires in the artist. It is nature reflected in the human mind.'

The impression, then, can be both a phenomenon of nature and of the artist's own being. In his study of the practice of painting in nineteenth-century France, Albert Boime defines the term 'impression' as it came to be used by painters and their critics, and stresses its dual association with an 'accurate' view of nature and an individualized or 'original' sensation belonging to a particular artist. Boime also notes the importance of the related concept of the 'effect' (\textit{effet}) for both academic artists and independents such as Jongkind and Monet. He states that the term 'impression' was nearly interchangeable with 'effect'. Consequently, a painting entitled \textit{Effect of Sunrise} might also be labelled \textit{Impression of Sunrise}; but, as Boime writes, 'the distinction is this: the impression took place in the spectator-artist, while the effect was the external event. The artist-spectator therefore received an impression of the effect, but the effect seized at any given instant was the impression received.'

Boime proceeds to ask why impressionists such as Monet tended to describe their works as impressions rather than effects: 'The answer resides in the subjective connotation of this term.' The impressionist, that is, wished to call attention to the particularity or originality of his sensation of nature. It was his sensation; yet, as Boime writes, it was considered to represent the external effect with 'accuracy'. Boime leaves aside the epistemological issue of the impression at this point in order to pursue the significance of the nineteenth-century notion of originality. [...] His discussion raises two perplexing questions which remain unanswered: To what extent can the rendering of an admittedly subjective impression be thought of as revealing an external effect? And how can the 'accuracy' of the presentation of this effect (and the artistic sincerity and originality associated with it) ever be evaluated by a critical observer? To deal with the first question entails an investigation of the concept of the impression as it is found outside artistic circles, in the field of psychology; and to approach the second involves a consideration of the concept of 'truth' (\textit{vérité}) among painters and their critics.

It was not until the nineteenth century that psychology, the study of sensation, emotion, and thought, came to be generally regarded not merely as a branch of metaphysics but as a natural science, an area of empirical research into the physiology of perception. Terms such as 'psychologie psychique', 'psychophysiologie', and 'psychophysique' were commonly used. One of the standard definitions of the word 'impression', in accord with David Hume's use of the term, was of direct relevance to the new psychologists: the impression is the 'effect produced on the bodily organs by the action of external objects' or, more specifically, the 'more or less pronounced effect that external objects make upon the sense organs.' The latter quotation is from the dictionary written by Émile Littré, the noted positivist who was himself
involved with studies in the new psychology. In 1860 he published a general statement on the problem of perception and knowledge of the external world. For Littre an external object cannot be known; only the individual's impression of it is known as real or true. In other words, one can never have absolute knowledge of the external world in the manner that one does have absolute knowledge (or experience) of an impression; one's view of the world is induced from one's experience of impressions and is necessarily relative. The significance of Littre's argument for the questions under discussion lies in the implication that the most personal impression, if somehow presented publicly (say, by means of a painting), would reveal as much 'truth' about the world as would any other genuine impression. As a result, the rendering of an impression could be an 'accurate' expression of both the artist and his natural environment.

Littre put special emphasis on the primacy of the impression:

Yes, there is something that is primordial, but it is neither the [external] subject nor the [external] object, neither the self nor the nonself [non-moi]: it is the impression perceived ['l'impression perceue']. A perceived impression does not in any sense constitute the idea of the subject or of the object; it is only the element of these ideas [which develop] only when the external impression [i.e., physical resistance or contact] and the internal impression [i.e., pleasure or pain] are repeated a certain number of times.

The impression, in other words, is the embryo of both bodies of one's knowledge, subjective knowledge of self and objective knowledge of the world; it exists prior to the realization of the subject/object distinction. Once that distinction is made, the impression is defined as the interaction of a subject and an object. An art of the impression, the primordial experience, could therefore be seen as both subjective and objective. [...]

In 1904, a number of years after critics had begun to discuss specific impressionism works in terms associated with symbolist art, Fernand Caussy published an article entitled 'Psychologie de l'impressionnisme'. He identified impressionism as an art of rendering the first impression but made a basic distinction between Manet's 'visual realism' and the 'emotional realism' of Monet and Renoir. As Castagnary had done thirty years earlier, Caussy stated that Monet and Renoir presented a distorted idiosyncratic image in accord with their own emotional responses to nature; and for him, as for Castagnary, this would lead to a subjective 'idealism'. In other words, Manet's rendering of the impression was objective, while Monet's was subjective. Nevertheless Caussy argued, the two arts are intimately related, and differ only in that one is the product of an inactive nervous system passively recording visual observations, while the other is the product of irritability and attendant strong emotion. In Caussy's over-extended analysis, one sees the full implications of Castagnary's original comment: 'These artists are impressionists in the sense that they render not the landscape, but the sensation produced by the landscape.'

The conclusion to be drawn from the writings of Deschanel, Littre, Castagnary, Caussy, and others is this: an art of the impression (or of sensation) may vary greatly from artist to artist, in accord with the individual's physiological or psychological state or, in other terms, with his temperament or personality. Whatever truth or reality is represented must relate to the artist himself as well as to nature. Indeed, one might say that the artist paints a 'self' on the pretext of painting 'nature'.

Notes
1 Théodore Péricot, Salon de 1874, Le art et des artistes de mon temps, Paris, 1875, p. 32.
2 Frédéric Chevalier, 'L'Impressionnisme au Salon', L'Artiste, 1 July 1877, pp. 32-39. [...]
4 Paul Mantz, Salon de 1872, Gazette des beaux-arts, 2 per., vol. 6, July 1872, p. 45.
10 Paul Signac, for example, wrote in 1890 that the 'arrangement of both impressionism and neo-impressionism was to give to colour the greatest possible force [l'éclat]; see Signac, D'Émile Delacroix aux néo-impressionnistes, ed. François Cachin, Paris, 1966, p. 131.
12 See, e.g., François-Xavier de Burbant, Traité théorique et pratique des ornements qui sont nécessaires à tout aménageur de tableaux, Valenciennes, 1846; orig. ed., Brussels, 1828, p. 45. The related technical definitions of the word 'impression' from the fields of printing, dyeing, and photography also refer to primacy. On some aspects of the relationship between the visual 'impression' and the printer's 'impression', cf. Michel Morlot, 'La Pratique d'un artiste: Pinocchio graveur en 1880', Histoire et critique des arts, June 1979, p. 16.
13 Émile Deschanel, Physiologie des émotions et des artistes, ou essai de critique naturelle, Paris, 1884, p. 9[...]
14 Thus 'impressionism' as a mode of critical writing was defined as the most subjective, relativistic manner of analysis, an appreciation that could never reach any objective conclusions; the 'impressionist' critic would consider each work as the product of a unique personal view. See Ferdinand Brunetière, 'La Critique impressioniste' (1891), Études sur la littérature contemporaine, Paris, 1900, pp. 1-30.
15 Théophile Thoré (Thoré-Bürger), Salon de 1844, Les Salons, 3 vols., Brussels, 1893, vol. 1, p. 20[...]
17 Boime, Academy, p. 172.
18 Impressionism has only rarely been studied in relation to nineteenth-century psychology. Teddy Bruines provides a brief but thoughtful discussion of the Impression in relation to Théodore Ribot and Hippolyte Taine in his Mutual Aid in the Arts from the Second Empire to the Fin de Siècle, Figure, no. 9, Uppsala, 1972, p. 102. More recently, Marianne Marcussen and Hilde Ørsk have signalled the importance of Taine's De l'intelligence in their article 'Le Rêvé chez