SEX AND THE SALON
DEFINING ART AND IMMORALITY IN 1863

“A history painter takes a nude woman, makes a portrait of her with a few modifications most often inspired by vague recollections of the Old Masters, and then says: 'It's a Venus!’ Nothing of the sort: it's a model and nothing more. These paintings are only académies.” With these words, written in his review of the 1863 Salon, Maxime Du Camp condemned the false pretensions not of Edouard Manet’s Le Bain (or Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe, as it is now known), exhibited in the Salon des Refusés, but of Alexandre Cabanel’s Naissance de Vénus [Birth of Venus] (Fig. 16) and Paul Baudry’s La Perle et la vague (Fable persane) [The Pearl and the Wave (Persian Fable)] (Fig. 17). Du Camp’s comments, like those of many other critics who decried the overly contemporary hairstyles, body types, and alluring glances of nudes depicted in official Salon paintings, suggest that the current reputation of Manet’s Déjeuner as a succès de scandale because of its shocking combination of two contemporaneously dressed males with two unclad and unidealized females both simplifies and misrepresents the critical climate surrounding the 1863 exhibitions. By isolating observations by Salon critics about this painting and by relying on later, primarily Third Republic, biographies of Manet, art historians have often failed to register the stylistic clichés and political and aesthetic agendas that underlay all critical and biographical writing: Furthermore, since the language of criticism participates in a field of écriture, ranging from philosophy to jokes, just as the pictorial imagery that it purportedly explains partakes of all preceding visual imagery, the pub-

Figure 16. Alexandre Cabanel, Birth of Venus, 1863. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. (Photo R.M.N.)

Figure 17. Paul Baudry, The Pearl and the Wave (Persian Fable), 1863. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

lished responses to Manet's painting can be understood only by probing what concepts such as ideal nude, Venus, and moral art meant to artists, censors, politicians, and novelists. At the heart of reactions to the double Salon of 1863 were current debates over
the lines between the aesthetic and the erotic. But underlying all condemnations of inappropriate pictorial representations were fears of social contagion, political anarchy, and moral decay that had been triggered by the Realist movement and the famous literary censorship trials of the 1850s.

That Manet's three paintings exhibited in the Salon des Refusés were discussed at all is a testimony to his already well-established ties to the world of petty journalists and aspiring lithographes who generated such writing by the inch. He had admittedly won a third-class medal in the 1861 Salon for his Espagnol jouant de la guitare [Spanish Singer] and had attracted the attention of the formidable critic Théophile Gautier, but his presence in the Paris art scene was recent and primarily confined to the circle around the unconventional poet Charles Baudelaire. As correspondence among critics and artists confirms, the production of Salon criticism was by no means the result of an innocent confrontation between writer and works, but a negotiated affair of mutual favors, requests by editors to feature certain artists, solicitations by artists, and submissions of photographs to reviewers before the vernissage, and careful concessions to the recipients of imperial patronage. As we shall see, most of the critics who mentioned Manet favorably had good reason to do so.

The single greatest determinant of whether or not a critic cited Manet was whether he or she discussed the controversial Salon des Refusés at all. Virtually none of the family, ladies, or illustrated magazines did so; neither did the Catholic press. Serious journals such as the Revue des Deux Mondes, Revue contemporaine, Le Correspondant, and La Revue de progrès were also silent on the alternative exhibition. Coverage in the large Parisian dailies or weeklies was, however, much better. Although Le Moniteur universel, Le Pays, and Le Temps concentrated on the official exhibition, Le Siècle, La Patrie, La France, La Gazette de France, L'Indépendance belge, and Le Constitutionnel cited not only the Refusés show but also Manet. The art, comic, and entertainment press was fairly mixed, with Manet cited in Le Théâtre, Le Petit Journal, Le Figaro, La Vie parisienne, and Le Courrier artistique. The rare journals that featured discussions of paintings in the Refusés but did not cite Manet included the Musées des familles, the Gazette des Beaux-Arts (as we will see, an interesting omission), L'Opinion nationale, L'Esprit public, and the Revue française.

As Alan Krell has demonstrated, the critical responses in 1863 to Manet's Déjeuner and his other paintings, when they appeared, were far from unfavorable. The most commonly lauded aspect was his technique of paint application, which was hailed as fresh, vigorous, young, lively, and individualistic. Zacharie Astruc, a Republican painter and critic who by 1863 was friends with the Realist champion Champfleury as well as younger artists such as Fantin-Latour, Legros, and Manet himself, wrote some of the most enthusiastic praise in the short-lived journal Le Salon. This journal's support for Manet is understandable, since the previous year its publisher, Cadart, had underwritten the Société des Aquafortistes, of which Manet was a member. Astruc's defense of the Refusés appeared only in the paper's last issue, published on May 20 after the prefecture of police had closed it down, ostensibly because the journal was sold near the sales area in the official Salon. In fact, as Astruc asserted, his journal was being persecuted because he had criticized Hippolyte Flandrin's official portrait of the Emperor in an earlier issue. His comments on Manet must be seen, then, as a parting shot at an oppressive artistic and political establishment, and he paints the artist as a victimized avant-gardist. Citing Manet's recent show in Louis Martinet's commercial gallery, Astruc praised the landscape in the Déjeuner as having "such a youthful and living character that Giorgione seems to have inspired it." No mention is made of the paintings' puzzling subject.

Second to Astruc in his promotion of Manet was Edouard Lockroy, another young Republican artist and writer who had fought with Garibaldi in Italy before becoming a war illustrator in the Middle East for Le Monde illustré and serving as Ernst Renan's artist during his researches in the Holy Land in 1861. Lockroy had just returned to Paris and joined the Saint-Simonian community at Ménilmontant when he began his journalistic career and reviewed the Salon for Le Courrier artistique. The paper was predisposed to promote Manet, since it was the house organ for Martinet's gallery at 26, boulevard des Italiens, where Manet had exhibited since 1861 and had had a large show in March 1863. While humorously noting that Manet had the talent to displease the jury, Lockroy added that he had many more abilities: "M. Manet has not said his last word. His paintings, whose qualities the public can't appreciate, are full of good intentions. We have no doubt that M. Manet will over-
come one day all the obstacles that he meets, and we will be the first to applaud his success."

Continuing the tone of Astruc's and Lockroy's pieces, a writer for *Le Petit Journal*, using the pseudonym Le Capitaine Pomplius, characterized Manet as the victim of an unjust jury who possesses "frankness, conviction, power, universality, that is to say, the stuff of great art. He sees nature clearly and translates it simply, luminously." This writer, who may be Baudelaire's and Courbet's friend Fernand Desnoyers (or his brother, Carle), asserted that Manet's *Déjeuner* (which he identifies as *Baigneuses*), with its "male" and vigorous color, brings the countryside right onto the Salon wall. Tying the young painter to the tradition of Goya and Courbet, Desnoyers, like Lockroy, admitted that only the connoisseur could appreciate this "exceptional sketcher." His one caveat was that the work was still only a sketch and that Manet must develop his powers further.

The qualified comments by Desnoyers find their echoes in mixed reviews of the *Déjeuner* by Jules Castagnary, Arthur Stevens, Arthur Louvet, Adrien Paul, Louis Etienne, and Théophile Thoré. Castagnary, a long-standing friend of the Realists and of those artists who interpreted the everyday life of their time, noted the hubbub surrounding Manet's works and praised them as good sketches. But he then criticized a flabbiness of painting, a loss of definition in the details of anatomy, an absence of what he termed "conviction and sincerity." Arthur Stevens, the brother of the popular Belgian genre painter Alfred Stevens, writing for *Le Figaro*, a journal friendly to Manet, praised Manet's talents as a colorist but argued that he neglected form, drawing, and modeling; in the *Déjeuner* there were vigorous blacks and "air," but "relief was absolutely lacking." Thoré, Paul, and Louvet likewise commended the energetic and qualities of color, light, and air in the *Déjeuner* but found fault with particular aspects of the painting, such as the evenness of strokes with which all objects were treated. Manet's "quick and lively manner" also pleased Etienne, who published a brochure defending the Salon des Refusés.

These writers, who appreciated Manet's technique, and many of those who saw nothing of value in Manet's submissions, nonetheless were confused or amused when they confronted his choice of subject in the *Déjeuner*. Etienne dubbed the painting a "logographic," or word puzzle, and described its foreground female as "a Bréda of some sort, as nude as possible, lolling boldly between two swells dressed to the teeth. These two persons look like high school students ('collégiens') on holiday, committing a great sin to prove their manhood." Stevens likewise apologized that he "could not explain what the painting was trying to say." Paul described the scene as two students chatting with "the most vulgar nude woman" who at first looks as though she's been robbed of her clothes, but "no, her clothes are there, two steps from her, and she doesn't seem to even think of them. She sits, chatting calmly about the Closerie de Lilas [a popular dancehall and restaurant], at which she must be less an ornament than a fright." For Didier de Monchaux, the subject was "fairly scabrous," for Louvet, the foreground woman was "pointed, angular, without modeling. . . . What a strange fantasy to undress completely the woman who is seated on the grass and to leave the shift on the one who is bathing." Thoré found the nude female ugly, the subject "very risqué," but reserved his venom for the reclining male on the right "who doesn't even have the idea to take off his horrible padded hat outdoors . . . it's the contrast of such an antipathetic animal to the character of a pastoral scene, with this undraped bather, that is shocking." Perhaps the critic who was most offended by the indecency of the picture was Philip Hamerton, an aspiring English painter and etcher writing for the *Fine Arts Quarterly* whose sympathies lay with the photographic detail of the Pre-Raphaelites rather than with the crass realism of the new French school. Recognizing the *Déjeuner*'s similarities to Giorgione's *Pastoral Concert*, whose dubious morality he felt was "pardoned for the sake of its fine colour," Hamerton found Manet's "modern French Realism" offensive in its contemporary dress and situation. In a burst of what might be written off as Anglo-Saxon puritanism, Hamerton dismissed Manet's and other Realist works "in the same class, which lead to the inference that the nude, when painted by vulgar men, is inevitably indecent."

Underlying many responses to Manet's submissions to the Salon was the belief that the artist had purposefully tried to scandalize the public with his outlandish color, sloppy finish, and incomprehensible subjects. Ernest Chesneau remarked that Manet would possess taste "the day he renounces subjects chosen to scandalize." The
implication was, of course, that the critic was onto Manet’s game and was not, in fact, outraged. Even though Manet’s painting showed nude women next to dressed men in a situation that was certainly foreign to respectable bourgeois behavior, the figures’ failure to interact with one another and the women’s lack of coy gestures and glances did not identify the male viewer as either a passive voyeur or an active consort. The painting in that sense remained “chaste,” inspiring laughter perhaps but not moral offense. The laughter may have hidden a certain anxiety about the meaning of the picture and its ambiguous sexuality, but the act of laughing repressed or sublimated sexual tension and made it unthreatening (one cannot presumably laugh at a nude woman and feel sexual desire for her at the same time).

Even within the Salon des Refusés, Manet’s painting was not always considered the most immoral. That prize was shared with Rodolphe Julian, a twenty-three-year-old debutant who was a student of Alexandre Cabanel and Léon Cogniet. Better known today for the long-lived private painting academy that he founded after the Franco-Prussian War, Julian exhibited three works, including Le Lever [The Awakening], a view of a couple greeting the dawn after a night of love. Inspired by Alfred de Musset’s famous poem Rolla, the painting, like all of Julian’s early works, has disappeared, but it can be recognized in a caricature of the Refusés just above Manet’s Déjeuner (to the left of the foot of the Polichinelle judge [Fig. 18]). Girard de Rialle called it the “succès fou” of the Refusés and said that it had been rejected because of the eccentric pose of the woman. Like the figures in Manet’s large painting, Julian’s were dubbed vulgar: “This woman seems to be dirty; she is covered with black spots on a skin that is already too dark to be feminine.” Louis Labet, who was generally sympathetic to the Refusés, cited “this noisy joke that draws us to Julian’s The Awakening. I don’t know how to talk about it with decency.” He added that “the legs, the back, the feet (ah! the feet), finally all the hideousness that this Andalusian of the Faubourg-St. Marceau offers for sale are painted with a hitherto unknown color, and that we would dub, if you will, the belly of a coolman.” The references to prostitution and vulgarity that surface in writing on Manet are echoed here.

Positive comments also mark Julian as someone to watch in the future. Louis Enault, who didn’t mention Manet, said the public

Figure 18. Marcellin, Salon de 1863: Les Refusés, from La Vie parisienne (July 11, 1863), p. 275.
laughed at Julian, but that he perceived the germ of a painter and a colorist in his work. Thoré commented that The Awakening showed a nude getting up next to a dressed man and that the work, despite its tasteless composition, was broadly painted from life. Unlike Manet, however, Julian was willing to compromise with the jury in order to win acceptance. On April 17 he had written the administration volunteering to paint a drapery around his female nude to modify her indecency. The administration apparently ignored this request, and the work was relegated to the Salon des Refusés.

In contrast to the flutter of reproaches inspired by Julian and Manet's mixtures of undressed females and dressed males, the two "official" Venuses by Cabanel and Baudry prompted long-winded discussions of the immorality of the current age and the inappropriate arousal of sexual desire in high culture. Prior to the public opening of the Salon, Napoleon III had purchased the Baudry, and the Empress had paid a reported 40,000 francs for the Cabanel. The two painters, both former Prix de Rome winners, were already identified with the Bonapartist regime. Attacks on them may be read as indirect stabs at the Emperor and his court, whose sexual intrigues were avidly discussed at dinner parties even though they could not surface in the censored press until the Commune, when they became explicit in countless scurrilous caricatures.

The overwhelming presence of nude female flesh in the 1863 Salon struck most critics and visitors, causing Gautier to dub it the "Salon des Vénus." As is documented in a two-page caricature by Marcellin in the June 13 issue of La Vie parisienne (Fig. 19), in addition to Cabanel and Baudry (see nos. 316 and 91), Amaury-Duval, Meynier, and Briguous submitted Venuses, while Appert, Bouguereau, Lansac, Monvoisin, Schützenberger, Mazerolles, Ehrmann, and Blin, among others, introduced nudes in mythological, bathing, and biblical scenes. Since most of these genres of painting were high on the academic scale of importance, reviewers who used subject matter as an organizing principle started with Cabanel and Baudry and then ranked the other nudes in descending order of success.

Writers who wanted to stay in the good graces of the court and to defend the time-honored tradition of the juried Salon accepted Cabanel's Birth of Venus and Baudry's The Pearl and the Wave (Persian Fable) (normally considered a Venus despite its fabricated reference to an Orientalist source) as models of feminine beauty and idealized art. The only debate was over which of these works (or, rarely, the other Venuses in the Salon) was the more successful. The Cabanel was generally acclaimed as more idealized, better drawn, and more classically "chaste," whereas the Baudry was commended for its luscious Venetian color and more unctuous paint application. Most critics acknowledged that both so-called Venuses were creatures of love who cast seductive glances. Hamerton, who had chided Manet for indecency, waxed eloquent over Cabanel's dazzling goddess: "The form is wildly voluptuous, the utmost extremities participating in a kind of rhythmical, musical motion. The soft
sleepy eyes just opened to the light are beaming with latent passions; and there is a half childish, half womanly waywardness in the playful tossing of the white arms.” He did not, however, condemn this figure. The half-opened eyes also attracted Didier de Monchaux, who claimed that they successfully expressed the idea of the birth of life: Cabanel was a spiritualist, and “one can look at his Venus without a bad impression.”

Baudry won the laurels from critics who were more “progressive” – in their advocacy of color over line – and, in some cases, had even found value in Manet. Leading the reader through a verbal stroke down the various parts of the model’s body, Gautier extolled the return of artists to beauty as their main subject and favored the serpentine line and “adorable femininity” of Baudry’s figure, whose prepubescent smile contrasted with her body “showing the signs of love.” Astruc added a footnote to his supplementary issue on the Salon des Refusés, stating that he particularly regretted not being able to discuss Baudry’s “siren with a mysterious hero’s head beamed and terminated with a troubling and fantastic twist.” The Manet defender Lockroy admired Baudry’s ability to combine individuality with classical beauty and dubbed him a “modern Athenian.” Unlike Cabanel’s Venus, whom Lockroy found too clean and pristine, Baudry’s girl was a “pretty, abandoned child.” Tellingly, defenders of both Cabanel and Baudry projected “childlike” qualities of innocence on the nudes’ expressions and body types in an effort to argue for the paintings’ morality.

The most violent criticism of the prominent display of nudity in the Salon came from two opposing camps that shared a disapproval of the Emperor: the first was those Republicans, Orleanists, and liberals who had been censored during the 1830s and were part of the Bonapartist opposition; the second was the Catholic right, who felt that the Emperor’s Italian policy had not been supportive of Pope Pius IX. To represent the first category, we can return to the Salon criticism of Du Camp, with which we began this essay: Du Camp, a defender of Realism and the poetry of industry in 1853 whose journal, La Revue de Paris, had been closed down in December 1856 for publishing the first installments of Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, was writing his first Salon criticism for the Orleanist Revue des Deux Mondes in 1863. He rather self-righteously argued that “one of the first qualities, perhaps the principal, of art is chastity. Titian’s Venus, Correggio’s Danaë, Raphael’s Galatea are chaste… They are goddesses and they have none of the provocations of women.” In contrast to the Venus de Milo, which is admired first as a form and only later recognized as a woman, he felt that the nudes of his day should be banished to an Oriental harem:

They have nothing to do with our tormented life, where woman has her great and beautiful function to fulfill. If she’s temptation and voluptuousness, she’s Delilah and Omphale. If she’s rewards and shared duties, she’s the woman of our time. To these Venuses who have been painted with such ease, we can cry Heine’s anathema: “You are only a goddess of death, Venus Libertine!” for they are less than courtesans.

Cabanel’s figure, according to Du Camp, was only a pretext: “His Venus isn’t being born, she is revealing herself… To justify appreciate this work… you must see it in its true milieu, at a ball, at that moment of intoxication that music, perfume, and dancing create.” Likewise, Baudry’s The Pearl was not a real subject: remove the shell and you have “a woman, and in what a posture! with what a glance!” In conclusion, Du Camp mused that “the nude ceases to be honest when it is treated in such a way as to intentionally exaggerate certain forms at the expense of others and is forced to produce an impression totally different from that of beauty.”

Similarly, Stevens, Castagnary, and Thoré condemned the official paintings as immoral. Stevens, echoing Du Camp, wrote that “the morality of this Salon I find in the success of the Cabanels and Baudrys, and I cry with my compatriot Shakespeare, ‘Sad! Sad! Sad!’” The Cabanel, he moaned, was not heroic but erotic art: “one step more and we would fall into works destined to charm the last days of an old habitué of the Opera or excite the precociousness of collégiens.” Castagnary, a writer opposed to the regime, called Baudry’s work a “Venus of the boudoir… the pretty woman with her look of a Parisian dressmaker would be better on a sofa.” Further associating these Venuses with prostitution, Thoré proclaimed that not only did they lack reality but they were bloodless phantoms who could be made into “colored lithographs for the small boudoirs of the rue Bréda.”

Although not writing a Salon review, the philosopher and former political exile P. J. Proudhon most explicitly associated the
eroticism of the 1863 Salon with the social decay that he felt was encouraged by the Empire. In his posthumously published Du
prinçipe de l’art, in which he defended Courbet’s anticlerical Retour
de la conférence (Return from the Conference) (a painting excluded even
from the Refusés), Proudhon described his visit to the Salon:

[T]here was in a room, in the place of honor, a figure of a nude
woman (Baudry’s The Pearl), reclining and seen from the back, that
I assumed was a Venus Callipyge. While exhibiting her shoulders,
supple waist, and rich locks, this Venus, by an effort of will, turned
her head to the viewer: blue, naughty eyes like those of Love, a
provocative face, a voluptuous smile. She seemed to say like the
streetwalkers on the boulevard, do you want to come see me?52

This was art that served no uplifting social purpose and could
become moral only by the artist “putting a chance on the anus” to
show the syphilitic outcome of unfettered sexuality. Proudhon felt
that the public should cry out against such licentiousness, but it had
lost its will since such works told well. Elite patronage, including
that of the Emperor, who had even purchased a Leda holding a
swan between her legs, was the cause of this decline.53

The Catholic press not only condemned Cabanel and Baudry
but reprimanded critics such as Gautier and Claude Vignon, who
had defended them. Barthold Bouniol, a staunch Bonapartist writing
for La Revue du Monde Catholique in June 1863, was scandalized by
the crowds around the Salon nudes, which even included young
women with their mothers as cicerones.54 In a postscript the next
month devoted to “La morale de ces messieurs,” this writer chided
Gautier for his praise of the Venuses and even accused Du Camp of
hypocrisy in his purported outrage at the paintings. For the opposition
magazine of M. Bulloz (Revue des Deux Mondes) to become a
“docteur ès morales” was surprising, and “gentlemen, excuse me for
saying it, but for people who have pretensions to philosophical
gravity you risk seeming to want to compete with the Guigniol
theatre with these peculiar parades of virtue.”55 What this writer
found even more astonishing was that the critic Claude Vignon (a
pseudonym for Cador, Noémie) in Le Correspondant, “which the
Church counts among its most zealous defenders,” had designed to
admire Cabanel’s work.56

Despite the importance of the female nude in the history of

Western art and her seeming celebration in classical sculpture, the
Catholic press in 1863 cited a body of archaeological and historical
literature which contended that all depicted nudes aroused desire
and were signs of social decadence. Désiré Laverdant, a former
Fourrierist who embraced Catholic socialism after 1848,57 in Le
Mémorial Catholique repeated the familiar association of Cabanel’s
and Baudry’s immodest figures with “the most degraded streetwalkers
in the heart of the brothels of Paris, London, Vienna, or Saint
Petersburg.”58 Referring to the writings of Ernest Beulé, Alfred
Maury, Prosper Mérimée, Ludovic Viter, César Daly, Léon de
Labord, Hyacinthe Hussin, Louis de Rouchaud, and others, he
further reminded the reader that “representations of nude women,
even in sculpture, are the sign of decadence in Greek art.”59 Accord-
ing to a substantial body of nineteenth-century archaeological liter-
volume and even Periclean Greek sculpture depicted female
goddesses, including Venus, draped.60 In the fullest discussion of the
evolution of Greek religion and sculpture, Maury, extensively cited
by Laverdant, traced the degeneration of the cult of Aphrodite from
the goddess of marriage and chastity into Aphrodite pandemos (lover
of many gods), or Venus vulgatia in Latin, “the goddess of courte-
sans, the personification of the vice galante.”61 Maury also repeated
the story that Praxiteles’ celebrated nudes were modeled after
famous courtesans.62 Therefore, for Laverdant, Second Empire
painters were merely repeating the degenerate practices that marked
the decline of Greek civilization in which prostitutes influenced
heads of state and served as models for artists. What was needed was
the substitution of Christian art for these pagan practices and the
depiction of the soul and holy spirit, not just the body.63

Laverdant’s position, albeit justified by a large body of scholarly
writing that was itself moralizing, remained unusual in the 1860s.
Most critics accepted the idea that Greek sculpture set an unrivaled
standard for ideal beauty and the “healthy” aesthetic contemplation
of the naked body. The very issue of the differences between Greek
and modern attitudes toward the nude had come to the fore in the
1861 Salon, where Jean-Léon Gérôme’s Phryné devant le tribunal
[Phryne before the Tribunal] (Fig. 20) was prominently featured. The
painting depicted the climax of the story of the celebrated Greek
courtesan Phryne, who had been accused of impiety by Euthias
and had been brought before the Athenian judges. Her former
lover, Hyperides, a noted orator, defended her and, at a crucial moment, pulled off her veil to reveal her sacred beauty. The judges, thinking they saw Venus herself, acquitted her.64

Although Gérôme had already achieved wealth and fame for his small, meticulously finished, neo-Greek scenes, this canvas was criticized not only for the contemporaneity and ugliness of its female protagonist but for its unlikely depiction of the figures’ gestures and expressions.65 As Gautier, Thoré, Claude Vignon, and Léon Lagrange all observed, the Greeks were accustomed to seeing nude bodies, and that of Phryne would have inspired only admiration, not the lasciviousness expressed by Gérôme’s leering old men.66 Furthermore, Phryne herself should not have been depicted hiding her face with her arms, since she too would have found nothing indecent in her state of undress.

If there was debate over how a nude in a classical setting should be depicted, there was even more confusion about how a contemporary undressed woman should be shown. As A. J. Du Pays commented in his review of the 1863 Salon, “today we know what a pretty face, beautiful shoulders, handsome arms, a pretty figure are; but as a result of the profound difference between the moeurs of the moderns and those of the people of antiquity, the beauty of corporeal forms, the science of the nude have become some sort of mystery into which only sculptors and painters are initiated.”67 Most writers (except Laverdant) agreed that the most perfect and, consequently, chaste rendering of female flesh was the Venus de Milo. Ever since its arrival in Paris and presentation to King Louis XVIII in 1821, this statue had had an impact on French classical studies comparable to that of the Elgin Marbles in Great Britain. Quatremère de Quincy in April 1821 hailed it as “a lesson in ideal beauty”:68 Comte de Clarac the same year pronounced that the statue was not “Venus, goddess of the pleasures of the senses” but a goddess “reuniting all the celestial beauties of the soul with all the perfections of the body.”69 Whereas recent scholars have dated the work to 120–80 B.C.,70 Quatremère de Quincy associated it with the studio of Praxiteles, and Clarac placed it older than the Medici Venus. The mysterious goddess from Milo thus became archaized and purified, removing it further from the “degenerate Roman copies” scorned by Quatremère de Quincy.

Second Empire writers reiterated the breathless praise of the first European viewers of the Venus de Milo without specifying exactly what features marked her as an aesthetic ideal. Thoré in 1863 wrote: “One finds with reason that the Venus de Milo is chaste; she provokes love by feelings of beauty.”71 Proudhon, complaining of the lewd stances of the elders in most depictions of the chase Suzanna, said such a biblical nude should inspire respect, the way the Venus de Milo did.72 We can surmise that the oft-noted “chastity” of the statue derived from her draped lower body; her expressionless, serene face; her missing arms, which left her action to the imagination; and the slightly worn and pocked surface of the stone, which lacked the slick, sensual finish of neoclassical sculptures by Canova. Perhaps comparable to Leonardo’s Mona Lisa, whose charm derived from the ambiguities of the facial expression and what the viewer could not see, the Venus de Milo was (and remains) timeless, unlike any living woman in costume, body type, or expression.

Beneath the Venus de Milo could be ranked, in clearly definable steps that varied slightly with each author, a series of nudes that
were increasingly less beautiful, less virginal, and more contemporary. In a June 1863 column on the latest literary trends, Alphonse de Pontmartin, a legitimist conservative, recalled that "the Venus de Milo is more chaste than the Venus de Medici, that the latter is more chaste than Ingres’s The Source, which, in its turn, is more decent than the Venus of M. Baudry, which is much less indecent than the statuettes of Pradier, which are less immoral than the corner photographs." Midway in this list, which progressed through time and down social classes, were often inserted the great Venetian Renaissance Venuses of Titian, which Du Camp deemed chaste but Eugène de Montlaur and Thoré recognized as more sensual. Close to the cloying, mass-produced statuettes by Pradier and the reprehensible provocation of paintings in the 1863 Salon would have been placed rococo works by Boucher, which were mentioned by several critics as frivolous and erotic. Uniformly at the bottom of the scale were the nude photographs that had begun circulating in Paris in the mid-1850s and that suffered not only from the unmediated imperfections of the bodies of the young models who posed for them but also from the widespread disdain for the entire medium by the intelligentsia (Fig. 21).

These laundry lists of chaste art and appraisals of which lips and hips were the most beautiful should cause us to question what was really at stake in art and literary criticism. References to courtesans and prostitutes – whether as causes of the decay of Greek civilization or as inappropriate models for Cabanel, Baudry, and Manet – disguised widespread anxiety over the shifting social status of contemporary women and the difficulties of reconciling sexuality and public morality. As we have also suggested, charges of proliferating immoral art also implicated the decadent imperial leadership that had encouraged conspicuous consumption and apparently, condoned adultery and lewd behavior. In the early 1860s the hottest amusements were the wild cancan of Rigoloboche, the vaudevilles featuring adulterous wives and ruthless courtesans by Sardou, Barrière, and Dumas fils, and the carte de visite portraits commemorating all these performances. Cynically, the Goncourt brothers in 1860 summarized what seemed to be a calculated play by Bonapartist officials: "Pornographic literature does well under a Low Empire. I remember a couplet inserted by M. Morguard in The Wandering Jew that I heard the other night at the Ambigu: the sense of it was that it's no longer necessary to engage in politics, but to amuse oneself, tell dirty jokes, and have fun. One turns people, like lions, by masturbation."

At the same time, the relation of art to such a debauched contemporary scene continued to be contested. In what critics recognized as a continuation of the seventeenth-century debates between the "ancients" and the "moderns," journalists, novelists, and visual artists used the Salons as a forum for assessing art’s appropriate subject matter and its responsibilities to its public. Implicated in this discussion was the role of the state as an artistic patron. If art did not incite the public to improved moral and civic behavior, then how could one justify state purchases and subventions? Was it good enough for art to be only "beautiful" form, and did beautiful form necessarily inspire better citizens?

The critical reactions to Cabanel’s and Baudry’s Venuses and to
Manet’s less noticed Déjeuner reveal that whereas writers found it easy to locate the official female nudes within a tradition of art history, they typically were groping for precedents for the large Manet canvas. The painting’s undressed female protagonist lacked the idealization of the Venus de Milo, the modesty of the Medici Venus, the flirtatiousness of the Baudry, the contorted poses of Pradier’s figurines, and the glossy flatness and small scale of the photographic académie. The figures, both male and female, were contemporary, but the scenario was unlike any picnic at Asnières. The gestures seemed rhetorical, suggesting dialogue, but the faces were immobile and stared off in inexplicable directions. The work was large, approaching the scale of history and mythological paintings, but the subject was at once a landscape, a genre scene, a pastiche of portraits, and a study from the nude model.

In its illegible narrative and forthright presentation of a potentially scabrous situation, Manet’s painting recalls the radical style and subject of the earlier suivi de scandale, Madame Bovary. The trial of Flaubert’s novel in 1857 for outrage to public and religious morality and good behavior, under the censorship laws that had been reinstated after Bonaparte’s 1851 coup, centered not so much on the novel’s tale of adultery and suicide but on Flaubert’s failure to establish a clear narrative voice that condemned Emma Bovary’s behavior. The prosecutor, Ernest Pinard, argued that the novel undermined Christian morality and glorified adultery; the defense attorney, Marc Antoine Sénard, countered that the novel inspired virtue through its horrible depiction of vice. Recent literary critics have demonstrated that these two opposing readings of the novel’s intent and relationship to contemporary life were conditioned by the disjunctions between Flaubert’s subject matter and his style, which varied from “objective” third-person description to quoted dialogue to what has been designated “free indirect style.” Free indirect style is a narrative technique in which, according to Stephen Ullman, “reported speech masquerades as narrative.” It uses the third person and narrative, usually past, tense, but translates the character’s internal thoughts in a way that often confuses whether the author or the character is speaking.

Although the peculiarities of Flaubert’s narrative voices were not noted in the critical responses to the novel when it was published after its author’s acquittal in February 1857, the overall effect of its style and its seeming neutrality were often discussed. Cuviller-Fleury in the May 1857 Le Journal des Débats commented that Flaubert put into the novel “as little of himself as possible, neither imagination, nor emotion, nor morality. No reflection, no commentary; a supreme indifference to vice and virtue.” Flaubert was repeatedly compared to a photographer who dumbly recorded all the trivial world placed before him, or a surgeon who dissected reality with his scalpel. Both analogies hinged on the apparent mechanical qualities and lack of human feeling common to Flaubert’s style, photography, and the newly professional domain of surgery that critics found revolting and even fearful.

Despite, or perhaps even because of, the violent reactions to Madame Bovary, the novel inspired numerous imitators and fueled a debate over the appropriate role of art as an agent for moral improvement. In 1858 Ernest Feydeau, a friend of Flaubert’s whose only previous publications consisted of a collection of nationalistic poems and a history of ancient funerary practices, published his first novel, Fanny, another tale of an adulterous relationship between an older married woman with children (in this case a Parisian) and her vulnerable young lover, whose life revolves around the stolen moments that the couple passes in his apartment. Justly forgotten today, the novel has none of Flaubert’s stylistic innovations, but at the time of its appearance it was considered a successor to the unidealized Realism of Flaubert’s work. The influential critic Sainte-Beuve praised the novel’s visual imagery and, making the same allusions to dissection and the camera, compared it to a perfected instrument that seized and fixed the changing plays of sunlight from life. However, other critics, including de Pontmartin, continued their attacks on the invasion of crass materialism and immoral behavior into the arts and even directly chided Sainte-Beuve for defending such a work. In a later letter in 1860 responding to attacks in Le Moniteur universel, Sainte-Beuve upheld his earlier judgments as a moral critic and praised Feydeau’s two most recent novels.

The apparent failure of young writers to have underlying moral principles prompted Emile Montegut in an essay that appeared in 1861 to warn of the dangers of a new “scientism.” Wandering through the landscape of life and stopping before a thousand trivial fragments, an anthill or a mole hole, these writers in his opinion
lacked “a great moral, philosophical, or religious preoccupation” that would give value to their work. What they produced seemed to be “notes of a surgery student or minutes of a clinic course.” The important thing for Montégut was not to understand reality scientifically but “to feel it poetically.” Montégut’s comments were echoed in the criticism of Gustave Merlet, a literature and rhetoric professor at various Parisian lycées who launched an attack on Realism in the early 1860s. Responding to the Goncourts’ _Germinal_ (1865) and their _Idées et sensations_ (1866), Merlet compared Realist novelists once again to photographers: “the moral world doesn’t offer to the photographer the accidents of the face, color, and line; by preference he is enclosed in the physical world that is like an immense studio, full of models that all have equal importance to his eyes.”

Feydeau’s own defense of his writings and that of his friends appeared as the preface to his novel _Un Début à l’opéra_ , dated April 1863. Complaining that none of his detractors considered whether or not a book was well written, Feydeau traced the history of the relation between art and morality and emphasized that bad characters and licentious situations were often featured in literary masterpieces. A great artist, he claimed, did not obey rules but only himself, “his nature, that collection of aptitudes, tastes, affections, antipathies, inclinations, qualities, and faults that constituted his individuality, his temperament, his character.” To the charge that he was a Realist, Feydeau agreed only if Realism was defined as “the modern system that consists of painting nature (or humanity) as one sees it,” rather than the taste for low subjects or the depiction of nature as it is. Novels did not destroy morals, he argued, but rather contemporary morality, which Feydeau painted as weak and corrupt, affected morals: “Too many morals in the works; not enough morality in moeurs,” he concluded.

The exhibition of Manet’s _Déjeuner_ during the heat of these debates over art and morality was yet another test of the artist’s right to privilege style over subject matter. Even though his emphatic, broad brushwork and perspectival distortions were more apparent and personal than the seemingly invisible, precise verbal notations of Flaubert, Feydeau, and the Goncourts, Manet’s artificially constructed and pastiched scenario broke the inherited rules for coherent allegorical compositions and careful painting, just as Realist novels mixed dialogue, botanical description, and snatches of slang conversation. The undressed model recalled the uncorseted adulteresses and prostitutes of the new fiction but failed to rest comfortably either in the present-day world or in the mythological past. The painting, in short, had no clear subject, and blatantly seemed to flaunt that fact.

The comparisons that a few contemporary critics noted between the _Déjeuner_ and Giorgione’s works, specifically the _Pastoral Concert_ in the Louvre now attributed to Titian, reinforce the idea that Manet’s oil was not about a story but at some level about the act of painting. Certainly the two nude women and elegantly dressed young men as well as the landscape background and sensual color prompted this comparison, which was made by Hamerton and Astruc. But these critics, and even Manet himself when he reinterpreted the scene, may have been aware of Giorgione’s reputation as an artist who was interested in form and color and not content. Francis Haskell, in an essay on the reputation of the Giorgione painting, has posited that it became known as a subjectless scene only after the exhibition of the _Déjeuner_ and Manet and Zola’s invention of the argument, “forget the subject and its implications.” This interpretation, according to Haskell, was then taken up by Gautier, who described the _Pastoral Concert_ as “a bizarre composition with an astonishing intensity of color” and noted the peculiar lack of involvement of the elegantly dressed gentlemen with the adjacent nudes. Speculating on Giorgione’s motivations and anchoring him within the art for art’s sake camp, Gautier observed that the painter, in this supreme artistic indifference that thinks only of beauty, has only seen a happy opposition of beautiful fabrics and flesh, and in effect there is only that . . . The _Pastoral Concert_ doesn’t draw many people [in the Louvre], but rest assured that those who are looking for the secrets of color stop in front of it for a long time . . . and make full sketches and copies that they keep on their studio walls as the surest color scale an artist can consult.

Gautier’s reading of Giorgione as a revolutionary painter and his figure composition as subjectless was not original, however. It has often been noted that the Venetian School ever since the writings
ment with their models (from Vasari's tales of Raphael and the Fornarina to Mürger's Scènes de la vie de Bohême), a second discourse of equally long lineage emphasized the artist as the disinterested appraiser of female flesh. For our purposes, the best exposition of this stereotype can be found in the Goncourt's Manette Salomon of 1865, in which the authors recount the story of a nude female model posing before thirty students in Ingres's studio who suddenly started and grabbed up her clothes when she saw a roofer staring at her from a neighboring building. For both the model and the male student, the studio situation was supposed to act like a huge dose of saltpeter: "It's in the pose that the woman is no longer woman, and for her men are no longer men." 106 The artist at work is lost in the contemplation of lines and shadows and, like Paris judging his three goddesses, apparently deflects his libidinal instincts into his critical faculties. The experienced model similarly is supposed to shed her culturally imposed shame with her clothes and return to an Edenic innocence. As had been metaphorically represented in Ingres's painting of Raphael and the Fornarina, in which the Renaissance master admires his canvas while ignoring his flesh-and-blood model and mistress seated on his lap, art overcomes and surpasses the mundane reality of sexual desire.

By staging Victorine as an artist's model, neither modest nor enticing, Manet challenges the viewer's morality. In effect, he is saying, if you find this woman sexually desirable, you are not identifying with the painter who saw her as forms and colors. The artist's morality is asserted as different from and superior to that of men of the world, an argument that we today may challenge as yet another artifact of the enlightenment definition of the aesthetic, but one that Manet's contemporaries still touted in defense of their professional autonomy.

We may, however, probe a bit deeper into Manet's construction of a confrontational and peculiarly unseductive female totally unlike those of Cabanel and Baudry. Victorine as depicted in the Déjeuner may metaphorically embody the situation of the model in the studio, but Manet's stripping off of coded signs of flirtation and his frank rejection of passive, curvaceous suppleness make her reminiscent of the fearful, physically repulsive woman that populates countless Realist novels. Emile Zola, who was soon to become Manet's friend and defender, in his autobiographical Les Confessions de Claude introduces a livid, pallid prostitute who at once disgusts and then seduces and obsesses the young hero. The Goncourt's similarly depict female characters who have secret sexual appetites (Germaine Lacerteux) and palpitating and devouring moist flesh (La Fille Elisa) and who destroy their lovers' careers (Manette Salomon). This misogyny and identification of the female as the source of social and physical contagion is replayed to a certain extent in the lives of the major Realist writers, which are marked by sexual (or castration) anxiety and a withdrawal from heterosexual attachments (the Goncourt, Flaubert, even Baudelaire). 108

One could entertain the notion that the artistic depiction of a woman who bears none of the traditional symbols of desirability and "beauty" at an unacknowledged, repressed level perhaps reflects a painter's and writer's deep-seated ambivalence about (or even lack of desire for) women. Manet's extreme objectification of female flesh, introduced in the Déjeuner and continued in Olympia, may be more than a manifesto of the Realist's right to paint what and how he pleased; it could express Manet's own inability to reconcile sexual arousal with bourgeois love. 109 What lay at the heart of the Realist agenda and its negative representations of women during the 1850s and 1860s may have been the obsessive devotion to craft and artistic creativity in lieu of the formation of more significant physical romantic liaisons.

NOTES

2. In addition to the Déjeuner, Manet exhibited Mlle V. . . . in the Costume of an Espada and Young Man in the Costume of a Major, as well as three etchings.
5. Paul Mantz's failure to cite Manet in the Gazette des Beaux-Arts was not
Innumerable ways of playing and foiling the others’ game (jouer, déjouer le jeu de l’autre), that is, the space instituted by others, characterize the subtle, stubborn resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. In the early autumn of 1994, workers waiting at bus stops, children on their way to school, flâneurs for pleasure and flâneuses from necessity, businesspersons hurrying to meetings, and lovers setting out on assignations in cities the length and breadth of Britain found themselves gazing at billboards situated at busy crossings and overlooking abandoned urban wastelands from which leered down the head of a popular comedian, Alexei Sayle, super-imposed upon the body of Victorine Meurent (Fig. 33). To be more precise, this leering, bearded head, wearing a knitted beret, burst through a blown-up reproduced detail of Manet’s Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe at precisely the point where Victorine’s head, familiar from Manet’s painting, would normally be found. The lettering – typeface courtesy of Toulouse-Lautrec posters – announced “Alexei Sayle in Paris. A new Sitcom. Fridays 3.30 pm. 4.”

How should we regard this phenomenon? Is it simply yet another example of the penchant of advertisers with their scant artschool education to arrest public attention by parodying an internationally celebrated high-art image? Is it a clever, if tasteless, strategy for encapsulating (and then marketing) Frenchness – a kind of populist version of the assumption found among some academics working on post-Renaissance culture that Paris is the location of all that is significant, a phenomenon that a colleague once labeled “Paris envy”? Is it yet one more demonstration of a now well-established pattern in which this particular painting has been targeted in a widespread practice of appropriation in popular graphics? Typical of this pattern are the record sleeve of Go Wild in the Country, released by Bow Wow Wow circa 1981–2 and representing a tableau vivant of the Déjeuner formed by the members of this rock group (Fig. 34): Posy Simmonds’s 1980 Guardian cartoon featuring the imaginary Jocasta Wright as an art student outmaneuvering her politically correct and priggish male tutors (Fig. 35); Sally Swain’s reversal image Mrs Manet Entertains in the Garden (1988) (Fig. 36); and a variety of picture postcards including one in which the naked woman has spent six years getting her M.B.A. but still finds herself having to use her body to make a business deal and one in which the woman invites the second man to undress in an attempt to get rid of an after-dinner bore who drones on about motor cars.
Figure 34. Bow Wow Wow, Go Wild in the Country, record sleeve, 1981–2.

All this might tell us something about a poverty of imagination among a generation of graphic designers, or something about the taste for parody in Western culture in the second half of the twentieth century. It might be regarded as an interesting example of the ways in which the margins subvert the center and how popular culture annexes and transforms dominant discourses, thereby undermining them. In short, it might be regarded as offering a fine case of cultural hybridity. Should art historians, however, pay any attention to such manifestations? Do they have an impact upon Manet’s painting as it hangs in distinguished and distinctive surroundings in the Musée d’Orsay in Paris, and does it provide any meaningful and productive entree into a discussion of a painting that has been as intractable for art historians as it has apparently been malleable for cartoonists and graphic designers? Indeed, so intractable is the Déjeuner that it has tended to be passed by in favor of Olympia (Fig. 13): that was the place where adversarial art historians made their mark. The pace was set by Georges Bataille in 1935, who could scarcely contain his impatience to move from the Déjeuner to the Olympia of two years later, stating:

The nude of Le Déjeuner would be a woman – a real woman, like those bathing in the Seine. But the sturdiness of the finished picture, with its inevitable effects of incongruity, left him dissatisfied; he felt that there was something arbitrary about the systematic elaboration of the Déjeuner. Though he said nothing, he now deepened his enquiry into the effects to be drawn from the transposition of one world into another. He abandoned the men in frock coats, clearing the stage of everything except the nude herself and a maidservant, as he had seen them in the Urbino Venus. . . . In the intimacy and silence of her room, Olympia stands out starkly, violently, the shock of her body’s acid vivid—

Figure 35. Posy Simmonds, Guardian cartoon, 1980. By kind permission of Posy Simmonds.
he considers exclusively (and briefly) as a contrast with the *Olympia* before which the critics failed, it is argued, to notice the quotations and revisions they had laughed at in the *Déjeuner.*

In historiographic terms, what *Olympia* has offered the art historian is the opportunity to access the topic of prostitution and thereby open up discourses of class to which those of gender were subordinate—the project of progressive marxian art history of the 1970s. Race, which should also have been part of this discussion (given the presence of the black servant), tended to be occluded. The status of this servant and the plein-air setting apart, the chief difference between the *Déjeuner* and *Olympia* is that the former contains—in equal numbers—male and female subjects, whereas the latter contains only two women. It is these *apparent* binaries of male/female and clothed/unclothed upon which the parodists have conducted their experiments. Any attempt to extrapolate from the imagery of the *Déjeuner* as part of an agenda for the social history of art is fraught with difficulty; it is contemporary and yet incredible (it literally cannot be believed—it is, as Bataille expressed it, incongruous); it contains portraits (the painter’s brother Gustave, the Dutch sculptor Ferdinand Leenhof, and the model Victorine Meurent). But its formal affiliations link it to the tradition of historical painting; the figures recline with patrician authority in a distinctly nonurban environment that is neither aristocratic park nor productive agricultural terrain; it refuses any obvious distribution of power of the sort that comes so easily in a discussion of *Olympia.* Above all, it produces a dialectic in which gender is deeply unsettled and in which the binaries identified above disintegrate, leaving a semantic void.

For the parodists, two facets of the painting are above all a focus of attention. First, the possibility of inverting gender identities (as with Sally Swain, who does it peacefully and in a genteel manner, and Alexei Sayle, who violently tears the canvas to achieve his end) and second, the relation between nakedness and speech (as with Posy Simmonds and the two postcard parodies). I shall suggest that parody does indeed instruct us about the “matrix” image. Although parody works with subversive mimicry and is often deflationary, its chief characteristic is analytic; it seeks out weaknesses or inconsistencies in its original and displays them self-consciously to a knowing audience. Thus, the audience assumed by Alexei Sayle’s poster is “in the

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Figure 36. *Mrs. Manet Entertains in the Garden,* from Sally Swain, *Great Housewives of Art* (London: 1988).

ness softened by nothing, intensified, on the contrary, by the white sheets.

Nearly thirty years later, in naming the *Déjeuner* one of those paintings that exemplify the city as a “free field of signs and exhibits,” typifying the combination of display and equivocation that he takes to be the chief new characterization of modern life, T. J. Clark takes us into a semiotic era. But the focus of his attention is, like that of Bataille, effectively *Olympia* rather than the *Déjeuner,* which
know.” This is a sure sign not only of the canonical status of the
Déjeuner but also of the widespread (if unacknowledged) recognition
of its “incongruity.” Parody does not travesty; it establishes a creative
and ironic relationship with its original. Unlike caricature, parody is
essentially about art, not about life; it foregrounds stylistics and
through subversion does not destroy but reinforces dominant modes.
I shall take these parodies as critically instructive and use them as
a way of discussing the painting’s narrative structure. That the nar-
native structure of this particular French painting is especially pow-
erful is evinced, I suggest, by the evident desire of anglophone
viewers to insert themselves as enunciative subjects in the image’s
silent spaces. Just as popular culture diverts resources and reuses
them, so it may also serve as guide to the divisible components of
the image field once it is separated from aura and from its history.
Let us, then, ask what we have here once the image is detached
from its high-art tradition and (in the imagination at least) removed
from the walls of its Parisian art gallery? The components of this
narrative are food and drink, convivial company and leisure pur-
suits (boating and bathing), sex, and speech—all elements calcu-
lated to contribute to a good story. Add a frog and a goldfinch and
an apparently sunny day and we appear to have the ingredients of a
typically mellow Impressionist narrative of bourgeois pleasure. In
fact, as virtually everyone agrees, the components of this narrative
do not add up as they should; they do not produce that kind of
story; they are (to cite Bataille again) strident.

The most immediate impediment to an accommodation of the
Déjeuner into the poetics and politics of the contemporary and
quotidian as analyzed by scholars of Impressionism is the disjunc-
ture between contemporary masculine dress and a female nude.
But this alone would not be sufficient to attract claims of incon-
gruity at the time of its exhibition and ever since. That disjunc-
ture is, after all, a time-honored one, and the very referencing of Giorgi-
gone should have permitted recognition, however disapproving.
Nor does the nude, I suggest, put Manet “in Courbet’s camp as a
realist out to shock the conservatives.”10 Visual realist polemic of
that kind would have been all too obvious and therefore all too
easy to categorize and thus to dismiss. What is disconcerting—and
consequently destabilizing—about the Déjeuner is the fact that it
does not merely borrow from the great Renaissance masters—it
parodies them. It is to all intents and purposes a history painting,
albeit one with an ironic relation with tradition. Arguably, it is the
propensity to pastiche in the technical sense11 (a propensity well
explored by writers as diverse as Maunier and Sandblad12) that pro-
duces, in turn, such a fertile field for the parodists.

The question of history was a challenging one to the generation
of the 1860s. Baudelaire in 1859 saw the age as inimical to history
painting and extolled the religious painting of Delacroix as works
of an artist “as great as the old masters, in a country and century in
which the old masters would not have been able to survive.”13
Odilon Redon also identified the period as unsympathetic to the
nonnaturalist and remembered the first half of the decade of the
1860s as a time when “we were in the midst of Avant-Garde natu-
ralism” and it was peculiarly difficult for an artist attracted by “the
uncertain at the boundary of thought,” a quality he found epitom-
ized in the protoallegorical figure of Dürer’s Melancholia.14 Most
symptomatic of the contestation over history painting were the
government reforms of 1863, which wrested control of the École
des Beaux-Arts from the Academy and which provoked an intense
debate about the definition of artistic originality and the educa-
tional system most likely to foster high art.15

The rhetoric of the real dominated the avant-garde of the 1850s
and 1860s. Courbet declared in his letter to a group of students in
1861: “I also believe that painting is an essentially CONCRETE art
and can only consist of the representation of REAL AND EXISTING
objects. It is a completely physical language that has as words all
visible objects, and an ABSTRACT object, invisible and non-existent,
is not part of painting’s domain.”16 By situating, to use Paul Janot’s
words, the real in the unreal17 (contemporary dress in combination
with a classically inspired female nude), Manet’s painting trans-
gresses the imperatives of the avant-garde to which, at this time, the
historical is inimical. By deploying the mechanism of history paint-
ing, the genre and the practice that a modernist historiographic tra-
jectory tends to define as oppressive, Manet’s image ruptures the
polemics of the avant-garde. But since history in the sense of istoria,
the grandest and most venerated of genres, has to coexist with such
signs of modernism as cravats and petit pain as well as freely handled
paint in the Déjeuner, the idea of history is deployed also, as we shall
see, to critique the very traditions upon which history painting
depends. In Courbet, for instance, it is popular art forms and the lower genres that penetrate and threaten the plenitude of la grande peinture. But with Manet it is la grande peinture that becomes the instrument through which a critique is produced both of the limitations of contemporary subject matter and of the easy and bombastic narrative mode of academic history painting.

The parodies with which I opened serve to explain how the incongruities of Manet's painting work to critique the idea of the real, and with what effects history painting is deployed in parodic mode. The act of anachronistic occupation of high art by popular culture that we notice in the advertisement for Alexei Sayle's sitcom consists in grafting a particular and unequivocally male head onto the body of the female nude. As is the way with creative parody, this does not startle by its impropriety or threaten the masculinity of Alexei Sayle but rather serves to draw attention to the sturdiness of Victorine Meurent's body as represented in the Déjeuner. It reminds us that her gaze is utterly unlike that of the female figure in the central fragment of Monet's Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe of 1863–6 (Musée d'Orsay, Paris), that Manet's female nude has a thick neck and stocky shoulders, and that above all she has muscular thighs at evident variance with both the "pneumatic" academic paradigm of Cabanel, the buxom fleshiness of Courbet, or the exposed female body as depicted by Degas or Renoir. Nor is the body of this female model depicted with the seductive tension apparent in Olympia. In short, this female body does not fit into the typology of the female nude for reasons other than those that have been frequently rehearsed with regard to Olympia. An explanation is, of course, simply that the masculine characteristics of this figure got carried over from the well-known source of Manet's pastiche in the engraving by Raimondi after Raphael's Judgment of Paris (Fig. 11). To accept this at face value would be, however, to suggest that Manet was an unsophisticated plagiarist rather than a highly inventive pasticheur. The question remains as to why, in presenting a female nude so prominently, should Manet leave space for doubt about sexual characteristics when rhetorical strategies for ensuring difference are readily available?

Sally Swain also plays on the ambiguities of Manet's female nude; she wholly appropriates the figure and turns it into an unequivocally male figure by removing the breasts and adding facial and body hair. The transformation of female into male nude has as one of its consequences a reassessment of the clothed male figures. Parody, by its critical mode, destabilizes. Manet's male figures were defined in their masculinity by contrast with the female nude; now that masculinity is nude there is no place for clothed male figures. By revealing the woman to be a man, the status of the depicted men is raised into question with the outcome that they, in turn, become women. As is the way with parody, the process leads us to wonder whether in fact we ever understood them in Manet's painting to be fixed in their manhood, whether those softly draped clothes, delicate hands, and limply arranged thighs belonged to female bodies at all. We think of Georges Sand, Rosa Bonheur, Romaine Brooks, and other famous female cross-dressers and wonder if the incongruities with which Bataille and others have felt so uncomfortable are calculated contradictions. In social terms both parodies iron out the uncertainties in the power relations that Manet's painting produces; in the first, woman is excluded, and the picnic becomes an all-male affair; in the second, the confederacy of women puts the men in the shade.

The chief point of intervention for the parodist is, then, the masculinization of the represented body of Victorine Meurent. The element that provoked this is, I suggest, less the stylistic characteristics derived from Raphael (muscular thighs) than the peculiar narrative structure of the Déjeuner and, in particular, the formation through which a female subject is effectively detached through nudity and through handling from the group and addresses the viewer. If we take ourselves, for a moment, outside the exigencies produced by the notion that this painting concerns the contemporary, if we forget Baudelaire and his waxed boots, we might find that Manet's image sits comfortably in a tradition defined by the expectation that there be unity of action, that imagery should function dialectically insofar as gesture and expression may be read. This allows us to invoke the parodists as commentators in the manner of Le Brun's commentary on Poussin's The Gathering of the Manna of 1639 (Louvre, Paris). Just as Poussin's academic commentators saw no difficulty in detaching a main group from the composition as a whole in order to consider its special effects, so the parodist may legitimately ignore the second female figure, the boat, and other
elements (signs of a time prior to the moment represented) and concentrate on the discursivity of the central group.

The central group stages – though it cannot reproduce – an act of enunciation. Manet depicts the physical accompaniments of a speech act made before an audience. The gesture of the left-hand male figure (he who is situated to the female nude’s right) is that of speech, and since the expressive hand is on the same plane as the nude we should understand that it is to her that the speech is addressed. Although the ostended right hand gestures for emphasis, the weight is on the left arm and the body is tilted back in Etruscan or Roman dining mode. This formation produces a powerful effect of distancing, which suggests ritualized relations at odds with the social and the contemporary. Put quite crudely, men do not speak to women in this way in paintings of this period either by academic artists or by artists associated with Impressionism. Men commonly lean over the backs of garden benches, they stand upright on terraces, they prop themselves against trees, they discourse endlessly, but even in moments of apparent alienation they are unremittingly seductive, inclining their bodies, bending their ears, insinuating themselves into the magic circle of female company, commanding attention by their proximity and their carefully controlled and frequently hatted heads.

Manet’s nude does not respond, does not even acknowledge this act of speech. The semantic change, strengthened by the ad locutio gesture of the man’s right hand, meets the blank wall of female nudity. The ineffable mobility, the condition of discursivity to which history painting aspires and which is pastiched in this speaking figure (solemn in its enunciating as Alexander at the tent of Darius or Anthony before Cleopatra), is bounced off the unyielding nude figure whose extraordinarily erect posture establishes a stern vertical resistance to the disorderly manifestations of nature and culture that spill within and around this group. The deliberate and harsh line of this figure’s back offers no possibility for permeation or engagement of any kind.

The masculine attributes of the nude in Manet’s painting that are picked up in parody are necessary for the decorum of this procedure – the act of speech. Equally, it is imperative that the figure is female. The social narratives of the following decade seem often to clearly posit a male speaker and a female listener or listeners.

Manet’s Boating of 1874 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and Argenteuil of 1874 (Musée des Beaux Arts, Tournai) fall into this category. The quintessential painting for this gender division is Renoir’s Bal au Moulin de la Galette of 1876 (Musée d’Orsay, Paris) where the faces of the two women in the foreground reflect back to the viewer the quality of enunciation delivered by the young man whose back is toward us but whose eager forward-leaning posture and raised left hand indicate an act of speech. But Manet’s speaker addresses his female companion with the gesture not of a lover but of a rhetorician. The appropriate recipient of such an address would have been male. But equally had the auditor been male he would have had right of reply. By making the figure female – and by making her naked – Manet provides a listener who is addressed in a proper manner but for whom any response would be improper. Her averted gaze does not absorb his discourse but deflects it. Nudity, femininity, and the stern posture all combine to act as prism to this act of speech, bouncing the imagined words out of the controlled image field and into the viewer’s space. The second man and the second woman, in their absorptive states, are evasive and make clear to the viewer that there is no escaping this trajectory, no evading the acute prismatic effect of the central female figure.

Figures that gaze out of images are normally subordinate and work to draw the attention of the viewer into the picture space that is occupied by a dominant group. One thinks, for example, of Titian’s Venus vanhoun Family of 1543–7 (National Gallery, London), or figures in paintings by Poussin or Le Brun. With Manet it is the dominant central figure that gazes out. The defining characteristic of narrative is, as Hayden White has so amply demonstrated, closure. That which differentiates chronicles or inventories or other kinds of writing from narration is the structure that ends in closure. Manet’s painting with its utilitarian suggestions both of the contemporary and of epic history painting offers a narrative about enunciation but a narrative that is structured in such a way as to refuse closure. The prismatic effect throws out any possibility we might entertain that these individuals are engaged in conversation. If we were able to believe that they discoursed with one another in a free play of social intercourse, that would suffice; our need as readers to have an episode, to be rewarded with unity of action, however
desultory that action, would be satisfied. What Manet does, instead, is to stage precisely the conditions associated with the most highly developed forms of narrative painting but to deny the necessary closing of the circle. The parodists, by turning the woman into a man or by rendering her vocal (typically, by giving her a balloon containing commentary on the situation) restores to the image the symmetry of the group. And I say restore because parody works on the occluded and the implicit. In restoring the painting’s unity — in ironing out its incongruity — the parody also robs it of its tension. That tension is the creation of an artist intent upon interrogating the condition of discursivity; in laying open the terms of history painting’s pact with the viewer. The Déjeuner sur l’herbe invites us to contemplate the story of how stories get told.

NOTES

1. This essay is a further development of ideas about Manet’s Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe, which I first put forward in Chapter 6 of my book Naked Authority: The Body in Western Painting 1830–1960 (Cambridge: 1990). I am grateful to Paul Hayes Tucker for enabling me to rethink my position with regard to this complex image and to all those friends who have continued to draw my attention to parodic expositions of Manet’s theme. I am also grateful to Peter Burton for willingly dashing out with camera to capture Alexei Sayle before he disappeared from the hoardings.


3. A second poster, simultaneously launched, showed Alexei Sayle bursting through a Toulouse-Lautrec image and being kissed on the cheek by a woman.

4. “A” stands for BBC television Channel 4.

5. I have to thank Thomas Crow for this witty observation.

6. The first of these is printed in the American Postcard, Inc., New York, “Misguided Masterpieces”; the second was produced in England by Ian Daniell, c. 1990. One might also mention that Picasso’s 1960s series of drawings after the Déjeuner sur l’herbe, which seem in their “mastery” so secure from what Rosalind Krauss identifies as the rhythmic beat of an alternative and subconscious modernism, have been recently compared to that staple of popular culture, the flip book; Rosalind Krauss, The Optical Unconscious (Cambridge, Mass.: 1993), ch. 5.

7. The debates over Olympia have gone on since the painting’s first exhibition, but they were lent particular impetus by the attention of T. J. Clark in a series of accounts initiated with “Preliminaries to a possible treat-

ment of ‘Olympia’ in 1865,” Sewn 21 (Spring 1980) and by the continuation of this discussion in The New York Review of Books in the form of a discussion with Françoise Cachin.


11. I use the term not in the derogatory sense of mindless borrowing (that runs close to plagiarism) but in the sense of a practice that does not iron out ambiguities but exposes them. It differs from parody in that it involves a mixture of styles and motifs from different sources forming a patchwork. It has the element of a game in common with parody.


15. The locus classicus on this conflict remains Albert Boime, The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century (London: 1971), but the topic remains one that is very much alive. Art History 20, no. 1 (March 1977), which is devoted to academies and art schools in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Europe, will further the debate.


18. It is interesting to note that the revised and extended edition of Hugh Honour and John Fleming’s A World History of Art published in 1991 features a reproduction of the head of Manet’s nude female from the Déjeuner on the front of the dust jacket. It serves in a revisionist way to make a point about Manet as protomodernist in his handling of paint surfaces. It is, however, tempting to conclude that it was necessary to omit the troublesome body in order to make this point.