

REVIEW ARTICLES

Manet Bits

Paul Smith

Manet and the Painters of Contemporary Life by *Alan Krell*, London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1996, 208 pp., 30 col. plates, 155 b. & w. illus., £6.95

Manet by Himself edited by *Juliet Wilson-Bareau*, London: Little, Brown & Co, 1995, 320 pp., 239 col. plates, £19.99

Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s by *Michael Fried*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, 665 pp., 16 col. plates, 201 b. & w. illus., £35.95

12 Views of Manet's Bar edited by *Bradford Collins*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, 340 pp., 1 col. plate, 41 b. & w. illus., £45.00 hdbk, £13.95 pbk

I.

In 1874 Baudelaire's publisher, Poulet-Malassis, invented a Manet *ex libris* 'and its legend ... *Manet et Manebit*', which he explained to the painter as 'a play in Latin on your name ... meaning *he remains*, and ... he will remain'. The motto caught on, probably because it was thought to originate with the egomaniac painter himself, and as early as 1876 it was parodied in the visitor's book for the artist's open studio with the carping remark: '*Manet non Manebit*'. Although anecdotes,¹ these stories none the less demonstrate how writing on Manet has been dogged from its inception by a legend which has confused or conflated the work, the artist (in this role), the man and a fiction. Witness, *mutatis mutandis*, Zola's 'Edouard Manet – The Man and the Artist', his 'man[et] amongst eunuchs', Antonin Proust's *flâneur* (the Man/et-in-the-street), and Goncourt's Coriolis, the Manet in *Manette Salomon*.²

It is therefore salutary that Krell's bid to rethink the Manet clichés (especially those concerning popular art) warns against the error of early *ad hominem* criticism that devises an imaginary character to explain the art. Wilson-Bareau's scrupulous selection of the painter's statements and apocryphal remarks, *Manet by Himself*, largely avoids this trap but is none the less tacitly committed to the notion that the artist's stated intentions authoritatively explain his oeuvre. By contrast, Collins's anthology decentres the authorial Manet in making the *Bar* 'merely the vehicle for controlled experiments in methodology'. Indeed, the more rigorously the picture is theorized, the more the reader is given to wonder what 'Manet' is, and whether it is a credible project to talk about. These questions are to the fore in Pollock's epistolary speculations upon the possibility of a woman's 'view from nowhere', which take the ambiguity of the painting's spaces and

discursive position as reference points, but are more pressing still in Levine's appropriation of the *Bar* as a pretext for self-analysis in a personal voice. The cumulative effect of the methodological pluralism in this book (or its paradoxical consensuality) is that 'Manet' has no agreed use, and so is deconstructed by default.

This methodological incommensurability is most evident when different commentators' accounts are close enough to allow comparison to show that they do not describe the same thing. Boime, for instance, sees the *Bar* as an autobiographical representation of the invalid Manet's nostalgia for the sexual adventure of the *flâneur*, arguing that it also betrays anxieties about artistic and physical 'impotence', particularly in the truncated legs of the trapeze artist, which make reference to the tragic hero of Goncourt's *Les Frères Zemganno*. In contrast, Gronberg takes in the *Zemganno* reference as part of an argument that the painting indexes the *flâneur*'s attempt to resist the castration anxiety involved in his pose as subject *and* object of the gaze, which he enacts in a stiff *habit noir* that masks a narcissistic need to reassure himself with the sight of his 'heroic' body. By metonymy, Manet's *flâneur* is a 'joke', the barmaid is the displaced, phallic, object of his narcissistic gaze, and the 'silence' of the painting a transformation of his 'impotence' into a field for the pleasurable gaze. In so far as he enters the picture at all, Gronberg's Manet is Boime's psychoanalysed, or phantasized as castrated and *morcelé*.

A similar kind of double vision is induced by the asymmetrical Lacanian accounts given by Collins and Carrier. For Collins, Manet's discrepant treatment of the barmaid's frontal and reflected appearances runs counter to the convention wherein Woman is normally the (significant) Other whose desire mirrors the desire that arises from 'lack-of-Being'. Instead the refusal of Manet's 'real' woman to mirror desire or "recognize" us as her counterpart mirrors Manet's alienated self, which nevertheless finds its recognition in the displaced narcissism of authorship. Carrier's explanation of the picture is in terms of the need of the self for its (small object) 'other' and the related idea that '[when] I am looked at I am a picture'. The consequence of this – that the 'I' lies at the intersection of the cones of vision corresponding to the outward gaze of the subject and the mirroring gaze of the 'picture' – leads Carrier to the intriguing proposition that the anomalous reflection of the *flâneur* is the object of the barmaid's gaze projected on to the picture 'screen'. The ambiguous space of the *Bar* thus reflects ideologies of bourgeois subjectivity, and not Manet; who/which remains elusive.

This is despite the fact that Carrier poses the question of the artist's relevance as a criterion of interpretation in pointing out that there is consensus over the intentional character of the *Bar*'s ambiguities. It might have been interesting to pursue Boime's account here, because it has the virtue of attempting to meet intentional criteria by treating the *Bar* as systematically organized. The resulting account – that Manet projects himself into the *flâneur*, who is revealed by the discrepancy between his mirror reflection and the spectator's frontal position to be moving covetously past the barmaid, whose expression shows her complicity with this world of spectacular erotic fantasy – is at least plausible. In this respect, it serves to show the advantages of gathering the *Bar* deductively into a coherent intentional and phenomenological whole, and the shortcomings of analyses which isolate or miscategorize bits of the picture in order to force it into a theoretical enclosure.

A rich concept of artistic intention(ality) looms large, however, in Fried's appropriately delightful, erudite and litigious *Manet*. One component of this is the phenomenological argument that the painter 'prolongs' himself bodily into the picture through figures turned inwards, into the picture space, whose actions sometimes mimic those of the painter before the picture (holding a palette in his left hand and manipulating the brush with his right). This corporeal intention is most easily discernible in *The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian*, where the figure of the officer about to deliver the

coup de grace stands for the painter–beholder ‘indifferently’ regarding his own ‘execution’ and withholding the finishing touch.

Fried holds that discourses affect Manet’s work because the central artistic problem for ‘the generation of 1863’ is defined in Diderotian terms. It consists in avoiding theatricality (an outwardness which insincerely, or too overtly, acknowledges the spectator) without losing psychological intensity, but without forcing the effect of absorption (an inwardness which has no explicit place for the spectator), as does Millet. The dilemma plays out in Legros, Fantin and Whistler in a ‘double’ or ‘divided’ structure in which (predominantly) figures remain absorbed and objects within the picture (mostly) face out (although these artists employ other devices that Manet used). This solution still entailed a lack of coherence or completeness which critics widely identified by calling the new kind of works *morceaux* (as distinct from *tableaux*). *Maximilian* demonstrates Manet’s synthetic response to these defining problems. It combats excessive absorption in that the introverted officer is not the focus of the composition, and retains perceptual coherence in working to be perceived with the speed of a portrait (rather than the slowness, but unity, of the *tableau*) and in displaying an overall (*quasi*-corporeal?) ‘facingness’, ‘strikingness’ and ‘instantaneousness’, all of which characteristics Fried sees, poetically, as thematized in the picture.

Fried draws together the different strands of his argument about the conflict between the painting and the spectator into a deconstructive account of how Manet’s painting works to produce aporetic effects. Put crudely: Manet renews the situation wherein the painting and the spectator are separate, facing entities, but avoids theatricality by recourse to a ‘presentational’, rather than an actional, narrative mode and by making facingness a property of the whole picture and not merely of its sitter(s). All this is reinforced by a counter-theatrical ‘frozen’ quality to the model, who seems neither quite to be posing before the painter nor yet present before the spectator, resulting in the effect of ‘the model’s nonpresence and . . . the painting’s presence to the beholder’. The peculiarity of the picture is heightened further by the anomalous coexistence of the speed of Manet’s execution with the model’s frozen quality (and by the incongruity of Manet’s borrowings from Old Master sources). In *Maximilian*, the conflict between the spectator and the painter is thematized in the opposition between the firing squad and its victims. Here too, Manet’s mobile viewpoint and chilling presence in the picture as its exclusive ‘painter–beholder’ render the spectator absent. Finally, only Manet *manet*.

II.

There are plainly real problems preventing any consensus about what Manet is, or what is worth saying about this. Oddly, there is little or no sympathetic reference in this literature to Richard Wollheim’s account of Manet, within a theory of the painting as an intentional object, which provides some clarification of these issues.

Wollheim’s general premise is that a rich guiding intentionality, deeply rooted in the psyche and body of the artist, gives the painting its particular character. Thus to see it as something else is to get an altogether reductive and impoverished picture of what the painting is (ontologically).³ An embryonic version of this theory can be found in Manet’s and Baudelaire’s (Baconian) definition of art in terms of *homo additus naturae*,⁴ in Baudelaire’s and Zola’s idea that ‘temperament’ is what distinguishes a work of art from ‘nature’,⁵ and even in Paulet-Malassis’s motto. That is, the name of the artist in these formulations is not simply that of a fictional author which gives a spurious ontological (or legalistic) unity to a corpus of work it constructs as such; instead, it is a mislocution that would, if corrected, identify the intentional character of a real body of work whose unity

is given in its manufacture by the embodied, sentient painter. Hence the intentional theory, while being generally applicable, is also part of Manet's own guiding theory.

Fried tacitly concurs with this theory in its view of agency; but he differs from its view of how the artist arbitrates the intentional character of his work in his role as spectator of the painting. For one thing, the deconstructive logic of incorporation is that, ideally, the painter does not see the picture at all, because he is propelled inside it. For Fried, the contradiction between 'ocular realism' and corpo-realism finds an even more poignant expression in the self-portrait where the artist faces the 'double-bind' that he cannot paint what he sees (his body reversed in the conjectural mirror) and what is there (his body unreversed). The incompatibility disrupts merger, resulting in Courbet in shifts of the sitter's position and hands or in anomalous gestures, and in Fantin, in signs indexing corporeality (such as darkness and marks or objects standing for the impact of his body on the depicting surface) that conflict with ocular presence. Either way, the artist is never transcendently present in work.

Put in analytical terms, Fried's claim is that the artist's intention to prolong himself into the picture is at odds with his intention to paint what he sees. However, the intentional theory can counter this claim in respect of simple incorporation with the idea that what occurs here is that the painter projectively identifies with (or centrally imagines himself in) the bodies that the medium defines as it comes along under his regard.⁶ Fried's 'incorporation' is therefore empirical and self-arresting, rather than ideal and teleological, since it is continuously dependent upon the regulation of the painter-spectator's eye. To an extent then, figures seen from the back are visual projections of the artist-spectator into the picture which, in partially blocking the external spectator's view, promote access to its space from their viewpoint in the manner of *ciceroni* or *Rückenfiguren*. However, some of the incorporated figures in Courbet, and the officer in *Maximilian*, occupy a shallow picture space which they ignore visually, and instead simply inhabit. Therefore it seems that projective identification changes from a predominantly visual to a more corporeal mode at some threshold where the painter feels himself inside the body of the character he paints. But this explanation is not catastrophic for a theory of the painter as spectator, as even the more corporeal form of identification is premised upon the reciprocal involvement of body and eye in the activity of perception – as phenomenology insists it must be.

The situation regarding reversal seems less tractable. Fried's intentional paradox seems, for instance, to account for the compromises in Manet's *Self-Portrait with a Palette* where the artist attempts to inscribe his partially incorporated body 'under the sign of [visual] speed' by representing his painting hand as if rapidly moving, and by rendering the brushstrokes that represent his brushes, but which index the movement of his painting hand, as if 'volatilized'. However, to see the picture as an anomalous marriage of bodily and ocular realism is to misconceive the pictorial process. The artist's mirror image is not a metaphysical absolute whose (mimetic) presence he may never conjure; rather, the emerging look of the painting arbitrates how the painter sees and deals with the mirror image, just as it governs how incorporation proceeds, and so can show the competent artist how he may consistently pursue one aim in concert with the other in a single intention.

Fried explicitly rejects the intentional theory as Wollheim applies it to Manet in developing his theory of 'the spectator in the picture': the notion that the artist designs the picture to be seen by a real spectator who centrally imagines him- or herself as the invisible spectator (with the repertoire of a particular type) who is implicitly present in the scene depicted.⁷ Fried claims that the painter-beholder's incorporation into the picture calls into question any distinction between internal and external spectators; but this only works when the metaphor is taken literally. Fried also disagrees with the idea (which he

attributes to Wollheim) that the spectator must identify with the spectator in the picture, arguing that it is the picture, and not the model who is present to the spectator. For those paintings in which the depicted figure is absorbed in him- or herself, in a state of *absence*, it is very difficult to see why the effect Fried describes should occur. Simply to suggest that Manet adopts a 'systematic rejection of absorption' does not fit the facts; and to argue that contemporary 'critical literature' is correct in analysing the problem at the level of the whole picture and not its figures, is credulous. It should also be noted that Wollheim actually argues that the spectator in the picture experiences 'bafflement' and failure in his attempt to engage the absent figure, and that this 'trickles back' to the real spectator – hence 'identification' here is far from straightforward. As regards those Manets that do not employ *absence*, Wollheim also insists that the 'twofoldness' of the painting (or its manner of presenting the depicted scene in an assertive medium) 'recalls' the real spectator from the 'lure' of the spectator in the picture by reminding him that what this character sees exists only within a depiction.⁸ It is possible, none the less, that the spectator who has not gone through the process of making any identification with the spectator in the picture, or the spectator *after* recall, may experience the effect Fried describes; but this still means s/he has not seen the picture as it is intended, or that s/he has ceased to see it.

Wollheim's account can also be extrapolated to make sense of the 'indifference' in *Maximilian*. The point is not that Manet or the real spectator is indifferent; rather the painting invites the external spectator to take on the psychology of the spectator in the picture and feel as indifferent to the scene depicted as he does, in order to induce revulsion towards this assumed attitude. And extrapolating the notion of 'twofoldness', Manet reinforces this effect by using an insistent facture that reminds the spectator that the artist (sceptically) watches his or her pictorial counterpart as he paints him into the picture.

The idea that the artist contrives to disidentify the real spectator from the spectator in the picture also yields a highly coherent explanation of the *Bar's* spatial incongruities, whilst Fried's explanation of them as means to conjure the painter's absence is less persuasive. Essentially, Manet's strategy is to invite the real spectator to identify with the spectator in the picture, but to make this impossible by depriving this character of any logically consistent, embodied position within the picture space. Thus Manet contrives a frontal viewpoint by showing the barmaid as if seen head-on, a situation confirmed by the spatial relation between barmaid and *flâneur* established in the mirror reflection. But the artist undermines this viewpoint by setting this reflection anomalously at the right of the picture (and, as x-rays have shown, by moving the barmaid's reflection here from its original, more central position). While a view from the right gives coherence to some of the painting's reflections (particularly the contents of the counter), Manet further undermines the veracity of this (already anomalous) view by establishing a discrepancy between the introverted mien of the barmaid seen head-on and the pert, attentive posture she assumes in the mirror. The cumulative effect of these anomalies is to render the spectator in the picture disembodied. This status is also indicated by the absence from the reflection of the parapet on the edge of the balcony where the spectator in the picture supposedly stands, and is further confirmed by the floating legs of the trapeze artist which cue the realization that he does not have a leg to stand on. Hence the real spectator's sole option for an embodied mode of being and seeing (although now of a very attenuated kind) is given in the barmaid's refusal of the world of spectacle in favour of inwardness and *absence* – if s/he can make the appropriate leap of identification.⁹

In many respects, Manet's technique is a development of the strategy Baudelaire deploys in his prose poems, wherein he initially asks the reader to identify with a perceptually and morally bankrupt narrator, only to expose this character for what he is in a poetic voice that curtails any identification.¹⁰ By this account, the *Bar* is a 'real allegory' of the intractability of the social aporia generated by the class and gender

relations it represents, and is comparable in its fatalistic questioning of subjectivity and intersubjectivity to Baudelaire's profoundly ironic (and *not* straightforward) paeans to the 'heroism of modern life'. Thus, the painting is no more simply concerned with (Fried's) 'specifically painterly' problems than it is a merely superstructural reflection of the base: it is a relatively autonomous, *mediated*, *reflexive*, and potentially dialectical response to the historical conditions of its production.¹¹

III.

The intentional theory, as applied in this case, supplies a non-arbitrary criterion of interpretation: coherence within the work. This makes it possible to see the Manet in Manet's work as the painter who ensures that his work is capable of producing the same effect on his imaginary public as he *sees* it does upon himself (which clarifies Zola's clumsy assertion that Manet was a 'sincere artist').¹² Respecting the intentional coherence of the painting also shows how making the work illustrate an *a priori* theoretical scheme does it violence. Instead, this view suggests that the interpreter's job is to come up with a satisfactory, or open and testable, description of what the work is, and of how it works.

The same account would, of course, insist that no theory is ever complete. It would also accept that the interests of wider communities strongly determine the job of theory, its metaphysics and operative criteria. 'Manet' thus remains to be seen.

Paul Smith
University of Bristol

Notes

I am grateful to Ed Lilley for his help with this article.

- 1 See A. Tabarant, *Manet et ses oeuvres* (Paris, 1947), pp. 260 and 281.
- 2 See E. Zola, *Mon Salon; Manet; Ecrits sur l'art* (Paris, 1970), pp. 91, 93, 75 and 89; A. Proust, *Edouard Manet: souvenirs* (Paris, 1913) p. 29 and 'L'Art d'Edouard Manet' (1901) as cited in Fried, pp. 433–4.
- 3 See R. Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (London, 1987), pp. 13–41.
- 4 See Proust as cited in Fried, p.425 and C. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1976), vol. 2, p.627.
- 5 See Baudelaire *passim* and Zola *passim*, especially p.77.
- 6 On projective identification and central imagining, see R. Wollheim, 'Imagination and Identification', *On Art and the Mind* (London, 1973), pp. 54–83, and Wollheim (1987) pp. 103–110 and 129.
- 7 See Wollheim (1987), pp. 101–185 and Fried, pp.344–5.
- 8 See Wollheim (1987), pp. 20–1 and 168–76. Wollheim's (stronger) claim is actually that the spectator in the picture is within the picture space and thus can not see the *facture*.
- 9 Cf. the analysis of Clark's idea that 'we' as the spectator attempt to, but cannot identify with the *flâneur*, and of Wollheim's answer to this, in D. Carrier, 'Manet and His Interpreters', *Art History*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1985, pp. 324–5.
- 10 Cf. P. Smith, *Impressionism: Beneath the Surface* (London, 1995), pp. 53–5.
- 11 Cf. Wollheim (1987), pp. 163–4 and 175–6 for a psychoanalytical account of the meanings of Manet's spectator in the picture compositions.
- 12 See Zola, p.67. Cf. Shiff in Collins (ed.), p. 10.