THE PAINTING OF
MODERN LIFE
PARIS IN THE ART OF MANET AND HIS FOLLOWERS

Revised Edition

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"We shall define as prostitute only that woman who, publicly and without love, gives herself to the first comer for pecuniary remuneration; to which formula we shall add: and has no other means of existence besides the temporary relations she entertain with a more or less large number of individuals."

From which it follows—and it seems to me the truth—that prostitute implies first venality and second absence of choice.

Ah! I know very well that by thus restricting the scope of the word, we end up reserving all our indulgence for those women—without virtue who are the most fortunate, the privileged, the inexcusable, and at the same time we sanction the existence of a sort of proletariat of love over whom can be exercised with impunity all kinds of harshness and tyranny.

—Henri Turot

The Argument

That in depicting a prostitute in 1865, Manet dealt with modernity in one of its most poignant and familiar, but also difficult aspects: difficult because it had already become a commonplace in the 1860s that women of this kind, formerly confined to the edges of society, had more and more usurped the centre of things and seemed to be making the city over in their image. Thus the features defining "the prostitute" were losing whatever clarity they had once possessed, as the difference between the middle and the margin of the social order became blurred; and Manet's picture was suspected of revelling in that state of affairs, marked as it was by a shifting, inconsequential circuit of signs—all of them apparently clues to its subject's identity, sexual and social, but too few of them adding up. This peculiar freedom with the usual forms of representation was later held to be the essence of Olympia (Plate VI), as Manet's picture was called, and made it the founding monument of modern art; and certainly it was a painting which revealed the inconsistencies of its manufacture and breathed a kind of scepticism at the ways that likeness was normally secured. This went hand in hand, as the critical reaction at the time testifies, with a seeming displacement of the spectator from his accustomed imaginary possession.
of the work. Like any other picture, Olympia provided various places from which the viewer might appropriate its main fiction, but those places ended by being precisely too various; I shall argue they were contradictory and largely uninhabitable; and to a great extent they remained so for later viewers, so that instead of the fictive body on the bed, a more limited fiction called "the picture" was consumed and imagined—it seemed the best on offer. Yet even this fact is open to contrary interpretations, and eager discussion of "the free play of the signifier" may on the whole be premature. It is true that Olympia makes hay with our assumptions as spectators, and may lead us to doubt the existence on canvas of three dimensions, the female body, and other minds; but this very negation is pictured as something produced in the social order, happening as part of an ordinary exchange of goods and services. The painting insists on its own materiality, but does so in and through a prostitute's stare, a professional and standardized attentiveness, with the self reserved from the purchaser's looking; though the possible grimness of that reflection on the painter's task was hardly understood in 1865, let alone approved of.

Towards the end of March 1865 Manet wrote a letter to Baudelaire in Brussels, outlining his plans for the salon that year:

My dear Baudelaire, you were right, I was miserable for no reason, and just as I was writing to you my picture was accepted. From the word I'm getting it actually seems this year won't go too badly; I've done a Jesus Insulted by the Soldiers, and I think it's the last time I'll take on this kind of subject; but obviously you didn't know that Th. Gautier was on the jury. I didn't send him your letter, it's unnecessary now, and it's wrong to use up good recommendations when there's no need.

The other day I had quite a surprise. Monsieur Ernest Chesnau bought one of my pictures, two flowers in a vase, a little thing I showed at Cadart's; perhaps he'll bring me luck.

I just finished your Mystery of Marie Roget—I started from the end, I'm always so curious—and I'm amazed that imbecile Villemassant doesn't want it. It's remarkable and amusing.

Manet seems always to have worried a great deal about the salon, and there is no reason not to take at face value the writer's relief at having a picture get past the jury, and even his optimism as to how the public would react. It is rare to have the least hint of Manet's reading habits, and good to think of him reading Baudelaire's translation of Edgar Allan Poe. (What Manet was reading was a detective story, in fact: one of the early classics of the genre, whose sedentary hero, Auguste Dupin, solves the mystery in
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question—the murder of a Parisian griette—without leaving his study, on the basis of clues he gleans from reports in the newspapers.)

The optimism of Manet's March letter did not last long. The salon opened early in May, and the picture of Jesus was hung close by Manet's other entry—which he had not mentioned to Baudelaire—the painting entitled Olympia. Within a week or so Manet wrote to Baudelaire as follows:

I really would like you here, my dear Baudelaire; you are raining insults on me, I've never been led such a dance . . .

I should have liked to have your same verdict on my pictures, for all these cries have set me on edge, and it's clear that someone must be wrong; Fantin has been charming, he defends me, and that's all the more praiseworthy because his picture this year, though full of excellent things, makes less of an effect than last year's (what's more, he knows it) . . .

In London, the academy has rejected my pictures. To which Baudelaire addressed this kind and annihilating reply:

So once again I am obliged to speak to you about yourself. I must do my best to demonstrate to you your own value. What you ask for is truly stupid. People are making fun of you; pleasures set you on edge; no one does you justice, etc., etc. Do you think you're the first to be placed in this position? Have you more genius than Chateaubriand and Wagner? Did people make fun of them? They did not die of it. And so as not to make you feel too proud of yourself, I shall add that these men were exemplary, each in his own genre, and in a world which was very rich, while you, you are only the first in the decrepitude of your art. I hope you don't take offence at my treating you thus, without ceremony. You know the friendship I feel for you.

I wanted the personal impression of Monsieur Chorner, at least insofar as a Belgian can be considered a person. I must say he was kind, and what he said tallies with what I know of you, and what several intelligent men say about you: "There are faults, weaknesses, a lack of aplomb, but there is an irresistible charm." I know all that; I was one of the first to understand it. He added that the picture representing the nude woman, with the Negress and the cat (is it a cat, really?), was much superior to the religious picture.

These are almost the only traces in Manet's correspondence of the scandal surrounding Olympia in 1865. There was a scandal, and Manet does not seem to have exaggerated its violence very much. The events of 1865 lived on in the public memory, and Manet never wholly escaped from his reputation as the "painter of Olympia." Degas waxed sarcastic in the 1870s about Manet's being as famous as Garibaldi, and Jacques-Emile Blanche told the story of "Manet the hero of songs and caricatures . . . followed as soon as he showed himself by rumours and wisecracks; the passers-by on the street turning to laugh at the handsome fellow, so well dressed and correct, and him the man who 'painted such filth.'" Berthe Morisot recalled that her daughter, spending the summer at Bougival in 1861, once gave her name as Bibi Manet—she was the painter's niece—and made "two cocottes out promenading on the riverbank laugh till they cried, since they doubtless took her for the child of the celebrated Manet, put out to nurse in the land of camarières."

What happened in 1865 can be briefly stated. The two pictures, as was customary, were hung in the same room, most probably one on top of the other, with Olympia below Jésus. Manet put the simple title Jésus insulté par les soldats in the salon catalogue, but underneath Olympia he added five lines of unforgiveable verse by Zacharie Astruc:

Quand, lassé de songer, Olympia réveille,
Leprintemps entre au bras du doux messager noir;
C'est l'esclave, à la nuit amoureuse pâle,
Qui vient fleurir le jour délicieux à voir:
L'auguste jeune fille en qui la flamme veille.

From the first days of the salon, it seems that Room M was more than usually crowded. "There has been a painting," wrote Louis Auveray in La Revue Artistique et Littéraire, "excited so much laughter, mockery, and catcalls as this Olympia. On Sundays in particular the crowd was so great that one could not get close to it, or circulate at all in Room M; everyone was astonished at the jury for admitting Monsieur Manet's two pictures in the first place." The crush of spectators was variously described as terrified, shocked, disgusted, moved to a kind of pity, subject to epidemics of mad laughter, "pressing up to the picture as if to a hanged man," and on the verge of adopting the then fashionable tactics of Mr. Lynch. Once or twice the description was more detailed and pretended to extend its sympathy to all concerned, painter and public alike. Here, for example, is a journalist named Bonnin writing in the republican paper La France:

Each day [Olympia] is surrounded by a crowd of visitors, and in this constantly changing group, reflections and observations are made out loud which spare the picture no part of the truth. Some people are delighted, they think it a joke that they want to look at as if they understood; others observe the thing seriously and show their neighbour, here a well-placed tone, and there a hand which is improper, but richly painted; finally one sees painters whose work was rejected by the salon jury this year—and there is the proof that they do exist—standing in front of the picture, beside themselves with spite and indignation. Very probably everyone is right to some extent, and such diverse opinions are authorized by the incredible irregularities of Monsieur Manet's work. He has shown mere sketches. Yet we are not of the opinion, which is too widespread, that this negligence is a parti pris on his part, a sort of ironic defiance hurled at the jury and the public. The jury
would certainly have distinguished a studio jape from an unsatisfactory work of art, and would have closed the doors of the Palais des Champs-Elysées against it. From another point of view, an artist cannot treat the public lightly without compromising his reputation, which sometimes never recovers; and Monseur Manet, who appears at each exhibition, is certainly pursuing something other than the sad celebrity obtained by such perilous procedures. We prefer to think he has made a mistake. And what is his aim? His canvases are too unfinished for us possibly to tell.¹⁵

This text becomes more sober as it goes on, and ends by being almost too judicious to interest us much; but at least the writer does not seem to be producing the Olympia scandal for his readers' easy delectation. Women are not turning their heads from the picture in fright, the crowd is not united by a "unanimity of reprobation and disdainful pity." These were the commonplace criticisms of that sort to be lively in the nineteenth century, and when even this unlikewriter toys with the idea that Manet may intend to offend, he is taking up and refuting a well-established theme—one Baudelaire could afford to make fun of in his letter the previous month. The bourgeoisie was used to the fiction that great art, new art, would necessarily not conform to its expectations; it had learnt to be ironical about the claims of Realists and bohemians. This, for example, is Francis Aubert in Le Pays, discussing the typical inhabitant of the Quartier Latin:

A great drinker of beer and absinthe, a great smoker of black pipes filled from his pocket, cobbling together three or four artistic, literary, or political commonplaces, so out of date that a schoolboy would not dare use them, cursing and swearing every sentence, speaking only the argot of thieves, republican certainly, socialist probably, communist perhaps, but without knowing what any of the doctrines means . . .

His career? His past? The same as his present, which consists of going from boardinghouse to brasserie, dreaming up ways of paying neither; and as capital diversion being insolent to an honest man—which is called épuiser le bourgeois.¹⁶

Manet in 1865 was suspected of possessing opinions of this kind, and the more intelligent critics were prepared to forgive them as youthful folly. The crowd in front of Olympia "was not exclusively composed of bourgeois," wrote one;¹⁷ the painter should not offer himself that consolation. Another talked of "armed insurrection in the camp of the bourgeois," and of Manet's going down to a "popular execution,"¹⁸ but the phrases were clearly meant as conceits, or ironic rendition of the common wisdom, and the critic's entry as a whole hardly granted the picture sufficient weight—or weight of the right kind—to justify the metaphors.

But however suspicious one might be about the evidence, it still makes sense to talk of an Olympia scandal. Some critics described the scene in front of the picture with genuine distaste and could hardly be suspected of playfulness: when the grim and lornly Dubosc de Pesquidoux told the Catholic readers of L'Union that people were laughing at Christ at Room M, he was surely telling nothing but the truth. In any case, the brouhaha was enough to alarm the administration, always jealous of the salon's precarious dignity. Some time towards the end of May, they moved Olympia and Jérôme out of sight, and stood back to receive the critics' congratulations. Thus Félix Jahyer in "Etude sur les Beaux-Arts:

May I be allowed, on this subject, to thank the commission for having acceded in the four days the salon was closed to the request I made on the subject of Monseur Manet. At the moment his two canvases are so well hidden above the two doors in one of the end rooms that you need the eyes of a lynx to detect them.

At this height the August Olympia looks like an immense spider on the ceiling. She cannot even be laughed at any more, which has quite disappointed everyone.²⁰

Olympia, as Baudelaire described it in his letter, was a picture of a nude woman with a Negress and a cat. The poet pretended to doubt the latter detail—"est-ce un chat, décidément?"—which might suggest that it was added to the picture after he left for Brussels, or simply that he raised his eyebrows at the thought of such an overtly Baudelairean signature. It was also a picture of a prostitute, we can be fairly certain of that. And in this too it seems to have derived, at least partly, from Baudelaire: Olympia's hopeless, disabused nobility recalls the kind described—and recommended to the modern artist—in Le Peintre de la vie moderne:

Among these women, some, in whom an innocent yet monstrous Fatuity is only too apparent, carry in their faces and in their eyes, which fix you audaciously, the evident joy of being alive (in truth, one wonders why). Sometimes they find, without seeking them, poses both provocative and dignified, which would delight the most fastidious sculptor, if only the sculptor of today had the courage and the wit to seize hold of nobility everywhere, even in the mire; at others, they show themselves in prostrate attitudes of desperate boredom, or adopt the indelible postures of the estaminet, with a masculine cynicism, smoking cigarettes to kill time, with all the resigned fatalism of the Orient; there they lie, sprawled on sofas, skirts ballooning to front and back like two fans, or they balance themselves precariously on stools and chairs; heavy, sad, stupid, absurd, their eyes glazed with brandy, and their foreheads bulging with the force of their own obstinacy.²¹

Zacharie Astruc was a friend and admirer of Baudelaire, and his five lines in the salon livret read like an attempt to provide Manet's naked woman with some of the same connotations. Olympia was Astruc's choice
of title: it was on the face of it a dignified name, and its formality was emphasized by the phrase in his poem—the much-quoted, much-mocked description—“l’auguste jeune fille.” Part of the critics’ mockery had to do with Astruc’s talents as a poet, and part with their conviction that the appearance of dignity was deliberately flimsy. For Olympia was a pseudonym favoured by prostitutes: it figured in the classic list of names drawn up in 1836 by the trade’s first great investigator, Parent-Duchâtel; the better class of brothel was full of Floras, Aspasias, Lucretias, Delphines, Thalía, Sidonias, Azelinas, Galliopes, Lodoisinas, and—inevitably—Virginiyas by the score. For readers in 1865 the name Olympia probably also conjured up, as Gautier put it in his Salon, “the memory of that great Roman courtesan on whom the Renaissance doted,” by whom he meant La Dona Olympia, villainous heroine of a popular novel by Etienne Delécluze; sister-in-law, mistress, and manipulator of Pope Innocent X; prisoner and harlot, so avid for gold that after Innocent died she refused even to pay for his coffin. Delécluze’s romance had been reprinted as recently as 1862; the reference came easily to Gautier, and other critics seem to have echoed it; but even this reference, Gautier argues, is undeserved by the picture itself. For, after all, the great Dona Olympia had been beautiful as well as sordid; Manet’s young woman had taken nothing but her predecessor’s name, and in that she was one of many. Her title was bogus; and as for Astruc’s “auguste jeune fille”! It appeared to the critics a euphemism coined with the same cynical aplomb.

Some of the critics in 1865 were sure that Manet’s Olympia was a prostitute and said as much. There was nothing very remarkable in their doing so; it had become an established critical tactic in the 1860s to detect theƬAjaxedly modern. But the words these critics used to indicate Olympia’s profession were once or twice less ordinary, the strangeness having to do with the archaic field of reference—and specify where Olympia came from and whom she could possibly be looking at.

Of course there were writers who did no such thing. Several were happy with the single epithet courtisane, and one followed Gautier’s lead in calling Olympia “la dame de beauté de la Renaissance.” “What is this odalisque with a yellow belly [asked another], ignoble model picked up who knows where, who represents Olympia? Olympia? What Olympia? A courtesan, no doubt.” The question was easily answered, in other words. And courtisanes came from the Quartier Bréda, the area just north of the Boulevard des Italiens, not far from the railway station and felicitously close to the debtors’ prison in the Rue de Clichy. Olympia was no exception: “It was said of Pradier,” wrote one critic in 1865, “that he set out for Athens each morning and arrived each evening in the Rue de Bréda. Nowadays a certain number of artists go to the Rue de Bréda direct.” Manet was certainly one of them: he could be seen in Fantin-Latour’s ridiculous painting Le Toast paying homage to Truth “in the guise of a redhead from the Quartier Bréda.”

These references are essentially normal. Brief and highly coded, they barely interrupt the critics’ main business of aesthetic judgement. The same is true of Félix Derrège in Le Siècle, who ends his account of Olympia—we shall see later on that it was an exceedingly hostile one— with the inevitable jibe at Manet’s claim to be painting the truth: “one can be true indeed, if one is able to paint like Goya, even in representing a manola de bas étage, lying quite naked on her bed, while a Negress brings her a bouquet.” No doubt the phrase de bas étage is a sneer at Olympia’s presumed place in the social order, or at least in her chosen profession—she is clearly not a grande cocotte—but the phrase is elliptical, and the writer sees no need to spell out its unpleasant implications.

Some writers were not so reticent. Postuer, for example, writing in an eccentric journal called La Fraternité Littéraire, quoted all five of Astruc’s limping lines and proceeded to the following fraternal analysis:

What verse! What a picture! Olympia awakes, weary from . . . dreaming. She has had a bad night, that is evident. Insomnia and colic have disturbed her serenity; her colour indicates as much. There are two black messengers: a cat which has unfortunately been flattened between two railway sleepers; a Negress who has nothing about her that recalls the amorous night unless it be a bouquet bought at the florist’s on the corner, and paid for by Monsieur Arthur, which tells me a great deal about Olympia. Arthur is certainly in the ante-chamber waiting.

Monsieur Arthur’s identity is obscure now and perhaps always was, but his purpose could hardly have been made plainer. And it was dangerous to talk at all of the real circumstances of prostitution, even in this lugubrious way, since doing so could lead so quickly to the kind of fact which the stately word courtisane was intended to obscure. The courtisane was supposed not to belong at all to the world of class and money; she floated above or below it, playing with its categories, untouched by its everyday needs. It was not clear that Manet’s prostitute did any such thing. To more than one critic in 1865 she seemed to occupy a quite determinate place in the Parisian class system: she was an “Olympia from the Rue Mouffetard,” “the wife of a cabinetmaker,” a “coal lady from Batignolles.” All of these references were meant to be funny, of course, but the jokes depended
The same is true—though here the tone is more elusive and ironical—of Jean Ravenel's description of Olympia in a paper called L'Epoque. It has at its centre the following compacted, staccato sentence or two, in which the writer seems to be casting round for categories in which Olympia might begin to make sense. The list he provides is brilliant and unexpected:

Painting of the school of Baudelaire, freely executed by a pupil of Goya; the vicious strangeness of the little faubourienne, woman of the night from Paul Niquet's, from the mysteries of Paris and the nightmares of Edgar Poe. Her look has the sourness of someone prematurely aged, her face the disturbing perfume of a fleur du mal; her body fatigued, corrupted, but painted under a single transparent light. 

For the moment let us extract from the pattern of phrases the words "petite faubourienne, fille des nuits de Paul Niquet, des mystères de Paris et des cauchemars d'Edgar Poe." No doubt these descriptions are meant to evoke the painting's dreamlike, literary quality, but for the reader in 1865 they would also have suggested that Olympia belonged to Paris in quite ordinary ways. To call her a petite faubourienne was simply to say she was working-class; to have her be a character from Eugène Sue's novel Les Mystères de Paris was essentially to make the same point; to imagine her haunting the tables of Paul Niquet's was to place her in the lower depths of prostitution, among the women who catered to the porters of Les Halles. (Niquet's establishment in the Rue aux Fers stayed open all night and "was frequented by a quite special clientele of ragpickers, idlers, drunkards, and women whose sex and age were indistinguishable beneath their mass of rags." For a while the bar had been a stopping place for sightseers of the Parisian underworld, but by 1865 it had returned to its normal obscurity.)

These are descriptions of Olympia's class; and I shall end this chapter by arguing that class was the essence of Olympia's modernity and lay behind the great scandal she provoked. But it seems none of the critics in 1865—not even Jean Ravenel—would have agreed with me. There were over seventy pieces of writing on Manet's picture that year, and they contained, as I have shown, no more than a handful of references to prostitution and a grand total of six attributions of class, all fleeting and formulaic. However one looks at it, this is a strikingly poor haul, and the questions raised by the scarcity can be put as follows: If class was somehow signified in Olympia, and sometimes mentioned, what were the signs of it? And why could they not be identified in more detail, even by a critic like Ravenel, who seemed convinced that Olympia was working-class and that he should say so? The critics were certainly offended by something in Olympia: What was it, then, that they believed they saw and thought improper?

We have to do with art critics writing salon reviews in the daily press or monthly magazines. These writers would presumably have liked to discuss Manet's picture as an example of a school or a tendency in art, most probably that of Realism. Was not Manet included, along with Astruc, Whistler, the etcher Félix Bracquemond, and others, in the picture Fantin-Latour had sent to the salon entitled Le Toast or Hommage à la Vérité? Courbet had a painting in the salon of the anarchist Proudhon; Théodule-Augustin Ribot a study of Saint Sebastian, in his best Spanish manner; and Whistler his odd Princesse du pays de la porcelaine. The critics could flesh out their account of Realism in various ways: by including a kitchen scene by Antoine Vollon, for example, or a "metallic" Virgin by Albert Lambron, or by giving encouragement to two beach scenes by Claude Monet, the "young Realist who promises much." This was already a list of eccentrics and anomalies, and perhaps Manet could be added to it. He was the "self-styled Realist, pupil of Courbet"; his Jésus was "Raphael corrected by a third-rate Courbet"; master and imitator were the two "Marquis de Sade of painting." The violence of this final phrase was not necessarily a guide to the critics' overall tone: though Courbet was still condescended to in 1865, his school was an
established part of the French scene, and even its enemies wished to discriminate and recognize talent where it occurred. They tried to do so in Manet's case.

Manet was a skilful technician, they quite often conceded. His draughtsmanship had character and originality, his colour was supple and mordant, he had "temperament," "facultés," "une main d'artiste." His painting was understood to be deliberately bold and experimental, and regularly attained to "a very great truth of tone"; it had "the charm of naïveté," it had touch, vigour, and "hardiesse," it derived (a bit slavishly) from Goya, and even at its worst "one made out passages which were straightforwardly well done."

Yet on the whole the critics in 1865 could not be so charitable as this.
There was something about *Olympia* which eluded their normal frame of reference, and writers were almost fond of admitting they had no words for what they saw. *Olympia* was “informe,” “inconcevable,” “inqualifiable,” “indéchiffrable”; the picture “ne s’explique pas.” The least handsome of women has bones, muscles, skin, form, and some kind of colour,” whereas *Olympia* had none; she was “neither true nor living nor beautiful.” The negatives multiplied: “she does not have a human form,” and therefore “I can say nothing about her in truth, and do not know if the dictionary of French aesthetics contains expressions to characterize her.” “Not that I dream of examining her, describing her. God preserve me from so doing!” “Que signifie cette peinture,” finally, “and why does one find these canvases in the galleries of the Palais de l’Industrie?”

Of course these phrases are partly mechanical. A good salon review was incomplete without its quota of monstrosities, and one or two works each year were consigned to the space outside Art altogether. They were to be compared with the latest popular song or Hottentot Venus, and described as mere sign painting or “images d’Epinal.” All of these stock figures were tried out on *Olympia* in 1865; and yet in this case the critics’ sneering claim not to be able to see or describe *Olympia*—not to have the least sense of its formal logic—does seem to be close to the truth. There are ways, after all, in which *Olympia* was at pains to disclose its relationship to the great tradition of European art, and by and large the critics seem genuinely not to have noticed that it did so.

For instance, *Olympia* derived—and stated its derivation—from Titian’s *Venus of Urbino.* The pose of the nude is essentially the same, and the nude’s accessories seem to be chosen as the modern forms of their Renaissance prototypes: orchid in place of roses, cat for dog, Negro and flowers instead of servants bringing dresses from a distant cassone. The nineteenth century believed that Titian’s Venus was a courtesan. This was probably too secular a reading, but the sense of the picture’s sensuality it
stemmed from—the unchasteness of its chastity, the openness of its promise of undress and attentiveness—does not seem much mistaken. Promise, in Titian’s case, may have been the operative word: if the picture was painted to commemorate a wedding, it was most likely that of Guidobaldo II della Rovere, who was married in 1534 to a ten-year-old girl, Giulia Varano. That the body represented in the picture is older and more mature, and that the signs arranged round it seem to denote for the most part fidelity and the domestic virtues, may well have carried in the circumstances a quite pointed meaning. In any case, the picture’s domesticity is of a special kind: the woman on the bed is Venus as well as wife, and the Urbino records were surely right to name her, bluntly, “la nuda.”

For the nineteenth century this painting was the nude. Like many another student, Manet had done an oil copy of it in the Uffizi when he was in his twenties, as a normal part of learning the alphabet of art. Salon criticism was supposed in turn to be largely about that alphabet and how well young painters were using it: the writing of a Salon was organized around the critic’s ability to recognize quotations from older art and say whether they were opposite or not. But in the case of Olympia’s relation to the Venus of Urbino, for all that the critics were capable of producing the key word courtisane, the usual connections did not follow. In the mass of commentary in 1865, only two critics talked at all about Manet’s sources, and they did so in a thoroughly outlandish way. “This Olympia,” wrote one Amédée Cantaloube, for the Grand Journal,
a sort of female gorilla, a grotesque in India rubber outlined in black, apes on a bed, in a state of complete nudity, the horizontal attitude of Titian’s Venus; the right arm rests on the body in the same fashion, except for the hand, which is flexed in a sort of shameless contraction.

This should be compared with some lines by Pierrot in a fly-by-night publication called Les Tablettes de Pierrot:

... a woman on a bed, or, rather, some form or other, blown up like a grotesque in India rubber; a sort of monkey making fun of the pose and the movement of the arm in Titian’s Venus, with one hand shamelessly flexed.

Perhaps the other seventy-odd writers said nothing about Titian as a way of registering their contempt for what Manet had done to him; but I am inclined to think that they simply did not see that Manet had done anything. We might compare their silence in 1865 with what they had had to say two years earlier about Manet’s Déjeuner sur l’herbe. That painting was similarly held to be bizarre and immoral, and it had been shown in the extraordinary Salon des Refusés—to that extent, officially beyond the pale of Art. Critics certainly came to laugh at its mistakes and incoherences, and yet the very way to do so best was to point out what Manet’s picture derived from—and how incompetently. The writers whose Salons dealt with Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe were quick to connect it to the painting in the Louvre then thought to be by Giorgione, the so-called Fête champêtre; and one of them even claimed to detect that Manet had quoted—a peculiar, literal repetition it is—from a print after Raphael of river gods and attendant nymphs.

But in 1865 none of this took place. If the revisions of the Venus could be seen at all, they could not be said; and if on one or two occasions they were spoken of, it was in Cantaloube and Pierrot’s terms. Their violent fantasies of what Manet had done to Titian explain the other critics’ silence, I think, for if the old arrangement of the nude was present at all in Manet’s picture, it seemed there as a sign of everything the actual, latter-day Olympia was not. The past was travestied in Olympia: it was subjected to a kind of degenerate simian imitation, in which the nude was stripped of its last feminine qualities, its fleshiness, its very humanity, and left as “une forme quelconque”—a rubber-covered gorilla flexing its hand above its crotch.

I shall take Pierrot and Cantaloube’s descriptions as licence to say—quite crudely in the end—that the meanings Manet contrived in terms of Titian in 1865 amounted to nothing for most of his viewers. The Venus of Urbino was painted out or painted over, and seemed to the public no part of the image Manet had produced. It is as if the work of negation in

32. Titian (in the nineteenth century commonly attributed to Giorgione), La Fête champêtre, c. 1510-11.
Olympia—and some such work was surely intended, some kind of dissonant modernization of the nude, some pitting of Baudelaire against Titian—were finally done, but somewhat too well. The new Dona Olympia was too much the opposite of Titian's for the opposition to signify much, and the critics were able to overlook those features the two pictures had in common.

What the writers saw instead was some kind of indeterminacy in the image: a body on a bed, evidently sexed and sexual, but whose appearance was hard to make out in any steady way, and harder still to write about. Of course, the fact of Olympia's sexuality did appear in the critics' writing, but mostly in displaced form: they talked—not wholly facetiously, it seems—of violence done to the body, of its physical uncleanliness, and of a general air of death and decomposition. It was often quite clear—and presumably meant to be—that in talking of the one set of qualities they wished to indicate the other. Victor de Jankovitz, for example, managed the transition from fig leaf to putrefaction in fifteen words:

"The author represents for us under the name of Olympia a young girl lying on a bed, having as her only garment a knot of ribbon in her hair, and her hand in which she put a rose; the expression of her face is that of a being prematurely aged and vicious, her body, of a putrefying colour, recalls the horror of the morgue".

A critic called Ego, writing in *Le Monde Illustré*, was equally abrupt:

"The auguste jeune fille is a courtesan, with dirty hands and wrinkled feet; she is lying down, wearing one Turkish slipper and with a red cockade [sic] in her hair; her body has the livid tint of a cadaver displayed in the morgue; her outlines are drawn in charcoal and her greenish, bloodshot eyes appear to be provoking the public, protected all the while by a hideous Negress."

No, never has anything so...strange been hung on the walls of an art exhibition.

Olympia was unwashed, that was the commonest opinion. "Ce corps est sale," "cérné de noir," "avec du charbon tout autour." "The tone of its flesh is dirty, the modeling nonexistent. Shadows are indicated by stripes of blacking of various widths." Surely that was the steam of a bath in the background—from the look of things not a moment too soon! And why do the Realists, asked Louis de Laincel, "choose unclean women as their models and, having done so, reproduce even the filth which clings to their contours?" The cat was a possible culprit: perhaps it had "left its mark on the contours of this belle personne, after having rolled on a coalheap"; perhaps those were its pawprints on the sheet; and so on. Olympia was a coal lady "whose modest outlines had never been outraged by water, that banal liquid" (see p. 145). She was a skeleton, said Lorentz in his *Revue galopante au salon*, dressed in a tight-fitting tunic made of plaster, all surrounded with black like the armature of a stained glass window...and who to the horror of so much stupidity and ignorance now adds the disappearance of a finger...which cries out for examination by the public health inspectors!\(^{33}\)

Some of this sarcasm has to do with Manet's way of modelling—those brief, matter-of-fact lines of shading which trace out the edges of Olympia's hand and breast, her near shoulder, her ankle, and her heel. But the writers seize on these visual facts and immediately exceed them: the concept of uncleanliness constantly leads to others more fantastic. Olympia was dressed in rubber, said Cantaloube. She was "exposed quite naked on a bed," so Victor Fournel told his readers, "like a corpse on the counters at the morgue, this Olympia from the Rue Mouffetard, dead of yellow fever and already arrived at an advanced state of decomposition."\(^{77}\) There was more than ordinary ugliness here: there was decrepitude and outright bodily decay. It was no wonder that "the crowd presses up to the putrefied Olympia as if it were at the morgue."\(^{71}\) Olympia, wrote Félix Derière, is lying on her bed, having borrowed from art no ornament but a rose which she has put in her towlike hair. This redhead is of a perfect ugliness. Her face is...
stupid, her skin cadaverous. She does not have a human form; Monsieur Manet
has so pulled her out of joint that she could not possibly move her arms or legs.
By her side one sees a Negress who brings in a bouquet and at her feet a cat who
wakes and has a good stretch, a cat with hair on end, out of a witches’ sabbath
by Callot. White, black, red, and yellow make a frightful confusion on this canvas;
the woman, the Negress, the bouquet, the cat, all this hubbub of disparate colours
and impossible forms, seize one’s attention and leave one stupefied.

Thus says the stanza appended in the catalogue to the mention of Olympia.
The verses are worthy of the painting. 74

The catalogue of insults is now finished. The reader is entitled to be
impatient with them and find them untrustworthy, for no doubt they are
part of a journalistic game whose rules are obvious and in which hyperbole
always wins. Yet I intend to play the Dupin with them, and treat them
as evidence in which the real appearance of Olympia can be made out, in
however distorted a form. Certainly the critics’ descriptions belong to a
shifty, knowing, hypocritical game of make-believe: make-believe anger,
make-believe morality, counterfeit concern for art. But what other kind
of evidence could we expect to have, and what better kind for the questions
raised by Olympia—questions of modernity and sex? When these are the
subject, even abuse can be depended on for information: it will show the
traces of actual desire and anxiety, sometimes with comic distinctness.
Consider the case of Lorenz and his disappearing finger, for example; or
Olympia’s left hand’s appearing to Ernest Chesneau, no less, “in the form
of a toad”; or a critic called Merson entitling Olympia “l’enseigne de la
Femme à barbe”!

Confronted with classic parapraxes like these, it is tempting to move
straightway into the Freudian mode: Is that really a finger which has
disappeared? Where precisely is the lady’s beard located? “Est-ce un chat,
décidément?” The mode is certainly appropriate to the material in hand,
and I do not intend to avoid it; but I think it should figure alongside other
kinds of questioning, more literal and for the most part more plodding.
To put the point most guardedly: though there is such a thing as normal
critical discourse in the mid-nineteenth century, and within it a flourishing
discourse of scandal, this is not it. There is something else appearing in
discourse here, and leaving behind the usual signs of its passage: repetitions
and redundancies, falterings, false and real silences, misrecognitions, illogic,
unintentional comedy (especially when the subject is sex). Or, to put it
another way, we certainly have a normal critical discourse, even about
Olympia—we have it in plenty—but there is nothing much to say about
it, except that it has nothing to say about her. Normality in 1865 is largely
a matter of making embarrassed noises off.

The case is clearest, naturally, when we come to the acknowledged
experts in the field: connoisseurs like Gautier or Théophile Thoré, Paul
Manet, Gonzague Privat, Maxime Du Camp, and the sympathetic Ernest
Chesneau. Some of these writers can be seen in 1865 preparing to criticize
Olympia—going through the motions of making the picture an object of
criticism. This was usually done by erecting a frame of generalization
strong enough, so the critic hoped, to hold even this eccentricity. Paragraphs
of well-informed and mostly empty prose were put together, in which it
was clear that the critic had heard the studio gossip about Manet—his
tonal aims, his Realist connections, his technical facility. Chesneau and
Gautier were rather good at this, and their preliminary page or so was at
least informative; but when they came at last to Olympia—they did so with
obvious reluctance—they declined at once to the level of Pierrot and De-
rière. They saw no sources and found no terms; they failed to sustain
attention to the particulars of form and content, much less their relation;
the language of appreciation—the language of art—stood as futile prelimi-
inary to the language of description. So that all those coy figures of re-
fraining—the promises not to speak, the wish not to analyze “par courtoisie”75—
turned out to be accurate and serious after all.76

There was one exception to this rule, Jean Ravelen, to whom I shall
return at the end of the chapter. He too was an expert, hiding behind a
pseudonym: Alfred Sensier, friend and biographer of the painter Millet.
Sensier, we shall see, broke the codes of Olympia, and applied to the picture
the usual apparatus of art criticism: he detected sources and connotations,
he moved between meaning and style, he was capable of saying that some
things in the picture were well painted and others less so. He did the job
of criticism, up to a point; but he was one, and there were seventy others
who did not.

These were good critics, with a clear sense of the scope of their writing,
and in particular a confidence, usually, about the move between seeing and
interpretation. They savoured the painter’s manual skills, and were some-
times long-winded about them, because they believed it was touch and
handling—the ways the painter made his matter evident but showed it
becoming an image—that best offered them entry into the picture’s fictive
world. It was not that they wished simply to look through the picture’s
surface: on the contrary, their writing often kept the surface present almost
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too vividly. But it was valued at the place where the imagination could properly do its work, where the viewer was offered a rich, exaggerated play with normal identities, and reminded how much the most ordinary world was altered by being represented.

In a sense Olympia offered much the same thing. My argument will be that it altered and played with identities the culture wished to keep still, pre-eminently those of the nude and the prostitute, and that that was largely why it proved so unpopular. But the case should be inflected in the following way. It is the means of alteration which are crucial in matters of art in the nineteenth century; and even these identities, disputed and feared as they were, could have been put into a painted surface in such a way that change would have been allowed or at least comprehensible. If that did not happen in Olympia's case, it was because the identities were in the surface, or on it, in such a brutal, odd, unmediated fashion. The surface contained a nude, a Negress, a cat, and some flowers; they were done even skilfully, but the skill was like a parody of itself, and of all the normal ways in which pigment, texture, and tone declare a likeness and let it be qualified. This is perhaps what critics meant, a few years later—when they were able to produce a few words—by calling Manet's handling "cruel" or "acrid" or "abbreviated." There is a dreadful mere adequacy to the way things belong in paint when Manet is painting at his best.

We are used to thinking adequacy of this kind—the efficient production of a sign for something, so unequivocally that the mind is hardly engaged in the reconstruction—the mark of bad painting. But in Manet's case it seems to me his most complex and distinctive achievement—and an imaginative act in itself, however much it is meant to disqualify ours. For that reason a response to Olympia ought to recapitulate, at least partly, the first critics' sense of exclusion and defeat. A phrase from Baudelaire is useful here: talking of Ingres's painting and the feeling of malaise, ennui, and fear it produced in him, the poet wrote of "a population of automatons, hideous singers, braying away with their mouths wide open, are they true enough for you! And that dancer who floats by so gracefully, throwing her last smile to the audience? And the cafe-concert singer? It is nature studied on the spot, and a movement which is exact, living; transfixing in spite of its crudity." The studies in the boulevard cafes are no less comic and curious, though cruelly so." "Passably" was the word: two sentences later and the same critic, Jacques, in an opposition paper called Le Petit Parisien:

Monsieur Degas seems to have issued a challenge to the philistines, that is to say to the classics. Les Femmes devant un café, le soir are of a terrifying realism. These painted, blighted creatures, sweating vice, who recount to one another the doings and gestures of the day, you have seen them right enough, you know them, and you will come across them again in a little while on the boulevard. And those hideous singers, braying away with their mouths wide open, are they true enough for you! And that dancer who floats by so gracefully, throwing her last smile to the audience? And the café-concert singer? It is nature studied on the spot, and a movement which is exact, living; transfixing in spite of its crudity.

Degas's pastels appeared to appreciate the dark side of Paris, and this obliged the critics in 1877 to raise a verbal hand or two in horror. "The studies in the boulevard cafés are no less comic and curious, though cruel—passably so." "Passably" was the word: two sentences later and the same critic, Jacques, in an opposition paper called L'Homme Libre, was calling the pastel "an incomparable page in the book of contemporary anecdote." And that is the characteristic note: these critics evidently approved of the certainly aware that the women in question were prostitutes, sitting at a table on the sidewalk of the Boulevard Montmartre, swapping stories and picking up trade information. It was the kind of scene that cropped up quite often in worried surveys of the social question at this time, such as this, from 1869:

There are even some of these Panaches who sit at the tables in the windows in the wintertime, or in summer on the verandahs of the luxurious cafés. Laughing and provocative, they gather in certain cafés on the boulevards of Paris which become bazaars of prostitution. The police, overindulgent as they are, turn a blind eye to these exhibitions and find reason to tolerate them...
saturical edge to Degas's depiction of Paris, and did not seem to find his subjects too rebarbative. Part of their clemency had to do with the pastel's small size and its odd, modest medium, part with its lending itself to an anecdotal reading, and part with the fact that its women were fully clothed. No doubt the critics were tolerant, in other words, because they were able to trivialize Degas's achievement, but that in itself is interesting. It shows how easily prostitutes could appear in painting and be praised; as we shall see, they could even appear in the nude.

Prostitution is a sensitive subject for bourgeois society because sexuality and money are mixed up in it. There are obstacles in the way of representing either, and when the two intersect there is an uneasy feeling that something in the nature of capitalism is at stake, or at least not properly hidden. Reasoning on the subject therefore tends to become overheated, like arguments about transubstantiation; and the issues in question are similar, if secularized. It is specifically a matter of bodies turning into what they are usually not, in this case money. The sociologist Georg Simmel, for example, believed that in prostitution both women and money were degraded, and the latter abasement was hardly less serious than the former. "Money loses its dignity," he wrote, and can only regain it if the price of the sexual act is increased beyond reason, till the sheer glitter of gold obscures the woman's tarnished reputation. Thus the great courtesan redeems money and sex simultaneously, allowing them to put in an appearance arm in arm in the best society. This line of argument was the approximate opposite of that mounted by Simmel's contemporary Karl Kraus, for whom prostitution had a kind of glory, and certainly a symmetry: in it sex was given a genuine value, the only one left, and money was at last desired in the way it deserved. But for both writers prostitution was some kind of unlikely plenitude: it was the site of absolute degradation and dominance, the place where the body became at last an exchange value, a perfect and complete commodity, and thus took on the power of such things in a world where they were all-powerful. The prostitute, or so the imaginary story ran, rode roughshod over the client: she offered money's body to him, she named the price.

No doubt these arguments were far-fetched and cynical. They certainly removed the prostitute from the world in which she made her living—the world of the pimp and policeman, of drunkenness, poverty, pregnancy, and the client's straightforward bargaining power. But that, of course, was the arguments' purpose. The prostitute is a category: one that authority tries to keep in being on the edge of social space, as a kind of barrier against nature—against the body's constant threat to reappear in civilized society and assert its claims. Balzac put the matter succinctly in his Splen-
Uncontrolled prostitutes, that is to say nonregistered, form the majority of the personnel of prostitution in Paris. They are everywhere: in the cafés-concerts, the theatres, the balls. One meets them in public establishments, railway stations, and even railway carriages. They are there on all the promenades, in front of most of the cafés. Late into the night they circulate in great numbers on all the finest boulevards, to the great scandal of the public, which takes them for registered prostitutes breaking the rules, and thus is astonished at the inaction of the police in their regard.

Or this, from the *Annates d'hygiène* in 1871:

Clandestine prostitution has completely changed its outward signs; it advertises itself and becomes arrogant: just as things in the old days were kept hidden, nowadays they are put on show.

The *fille insoumise* no longer has another profession; she lives solely on the product of the street to which she has descended, on the same sidewalk alongside the *fille publique*, wearing the same kind of costume.>'

These images are no doubt overdrawn. For the learned doctors they were a way of arguing for one more campaign against syphilis and gonorrhea, and a general revival of the *police des moeurs*. For the journalists they were figures of decadence in a society which liked to believe in its own dissolution—liked it too well in the end. The rhetoric continued unabated through the 1870s. Experts debated numbers, and Maxime Du Camp excelled, with an estimate of 120,000 prostitutes in Paris alone. The fear of vice invading everything was spliced with wider fears of insurrection and general social mixing. Communard and prostitute often seemed to mean much the same thing to these writers: "Shareholding and sleeping partnerships have spread as far as love itself," said one, and "we find in the same bed, each given his day and accepting it without jealousy, the son of a good family, the draper's assistant, and the tenth-rate actor (le *fils de famille, le calicot, le cabotin)."

None of these anxieties were new. At the root of Parent-Duchâtelet's classic description of the prostitute had been the fear that if she were not analyzed, counted, and controlled she would circulate in the social body, spreading disease and confusion. They "come back into the world ... they surround us .... They penetrate our houses, our interiors"; that was the danger with courtesans and had always been so. But in the later 1860s these fears were voiced with a new kind of urgency. There was a feeling abroad that the whole effort at counting and quarantining had come to nothing.

If we are to understand the new pessimism, we should first try to establish how prostitution was meant to be organized under the law. Being a prostitute was not in fact a common-law crime, but a network of city
ordinances and police regulations had grown up supposedly to deal with
each step of the prostitute's trade, and keep it as wholesome as possible.
(If Degas's prostitutes, for example, had been sitting in their café around
1900, they would have been breaking 351 separate prohibitions on their
entering such premises; and the situation in 1877 was hardly less complica-
ted.) A prostitute was obliged to register with the police and receive a
card. She was subjected as a result to regular checks for venereal disease,
and sent to the care of the sisters of Saint Lazarus if she were found to
have it. A fille inscrite was allowed to operate in two main ways. She could
earn her living as a fille publique, an accredited member of a brothel
recognized by the police and monotonously raided; or she could earn the
uncommon status of fille en carte and begin a career as isolate—walking the
streets, taking care not to fall foul of the unwritten rules surrounding
racolage, her life a labyrinth of registrations, reports for duty, inspections,
and proprieties.

This structure was never much more than a set of excuses for haphazard
repression. There was always on the edge of it an informal war and
confusion between the police and that great mass of women who did not
collect their cards. Prostitution was many-faceted and widespread: nobody
believed that it could be wholly confined to the brothel, with the doctor
arriving each month with his speculum and chaise; but the system could
be said to work if its specifications were not too grossly exceeded by what
people saw on the streets; women might slip through the net, but the net
existed, and its mesh at least divided them into classes—they were
etres,
and so on. The system was a means of knowing the prostitute,
and keeping her "chez les cartons de la police, un chiffre en dehors des
etres sociaux."89

When there was talk of invasion in the 1860s it was a matter first of
visibility on the streets. As usual, Haussmannization was given a large part
of the blame, and to some extent deservedly. The baron's demolitions had
laid waste some famous streets of brothels near the Louvre and on the Ile
of the blame, and to some extent deservedly. The baron's demolitions had
laid waste some famous streets of brothels near the Louvre and on the Ile
de la Cité; the general rise in rents had obliged the owners of some brothels
to move them out to the periphery, and many more to convert their estab-
lishments into hôtels garnis at the disposal of the individual streetwalker.88

The city had changed shape, and the usual places in which the prostitute
sought her client—places where men danced, drank, took dinner, or were
entertained—had multiplied and become more conspicuous. Behind these
matters of fact there were other changes taking place, more pervasive and
harder to grasp at the time. The basic conditions which had determined
the demand for prostitution in the first half of the century were coming
to an end: no longer was the ordinary prostitute most often catering to
the physical need—the simple sexual deprivation—of a worker recruited
from the countryside, living in the city as a kind of stranger and suffering
from a shortage of women of his own age and class. That immigrant
proletariat was being made part of Haussmann's city, in the manner already
described. What it wanted from sex for money was changing: here, as else-
where, it began to take its cue from the behaviour of the bourgeois.89

The bourgeoisie believed in Desire. The papers and streets were supposed
to be full of it, and its force was imagined as working and changing the
whole social body—breaking down the old distinctions between urbanity,
sexual tolerance, galanterie, adultery, debauchery, and prostitution proper.
These things appeared to be becoming aspects of one another, and men
and women moved among the various states with ostentatious ease. In the
1860s there began to be visible as a consequence a new kind of demand
from the prostitute's client, one which eventually altered the whole trade—
a demand for intimacy, for the illusion of seduction. That doubtless went
hand in hand with other theatricals, of pain and degradation, dominance
and submission, Sacher-Masoch and de Sade. It made the prostitute's job
more dangerous; and Edmond de Goncourt's description in La Fille Elisa
stand—as the best description of the new regime:

D'ordinaire, à Paris, c'est la montée au hasard, par une ivresse, d'un escalier
baillant dans la nuit, le passage furieux et sans retour d'un prurit
et la derniere fois, n'a pas souci de ce que, sur le corps qui se livre, son erotisme
renait de grosset et méprisant, de ce qui se fait jour dans le décrire de la cervelle
d'un vieux civilisé, de ce qui s'échappe de féroce de certains amours d'hommes.90

Surely Goncourt did not exaggerate the grimness and risk very much;
but to his verdict should be added (it is the final irony of prostitution in
the bourgeois era) that what fueled the anger now was disappointment.
For this, after all, was what money could buy; behind the apparatus of
desire—on the other side of a great image, that of the courtesan and her
cognates—was merely this abrupt, bathetic transaction. Someone must pay
for it, and it could hardly be the drunken old man—he had paid enough
already.

The fear of invasion—to return to that cliché—thus consisted of several
different fears. It was partly a dislike of Haussmann's city and the general
ambiguity it brought in its wake. There was a feeling that clandestines
were everywhere and the policeman's mathematics more pure than applied.
The boundaries between moral laxity and prostitution seemed to be dis-
solving, and this was held to be the more dangerous because it was not just sexuality that strayed over into the public realm, but money—money in fleshly form.

Of course there were ways in which the empire took pride in making money visible. That was its special glamour as an age, and there could be something almost comforting in the comparison—it was often made—between prostitution and high finance. "Les hommes bourgeois, les femmes traficantes!" analogies of this kind could be made quite lightly. The metaphor was not unsettling so long as its terms were made part of the same spectacle—the scheming men and unscrupulous women stepping out in a dance of experts and strangers, with money calling the tune. If prostitution could be represented thus, it posed no special threat to society's self-esteem; rather the contrary, in fact. But if it escaped from the spectacle or overwhelmed it—and that seemed to be the commentators' fear—it might still prove, even as an image, an embarrassment. For it could easily be taken to show money inflecting everything now, even those corners of life the culture wished to have private and "personal." The fear of invasion amounted to this: that money was somehow remaking the world completely, that it might indeed—as Parent-Duchâtelet had feared—"come back into the world . . . penetrate our houses, our interiors." Such an image of capital could still not quite be stomached.

Like any other society, the empire needed a representation of sex—representation here meant in its two main senses. The empire had to give sexuality a certain form, and wished to make it the property of a chosen few: women who would be given power over what they possessed, but also impersonality, a quite special existence lived out on the edge of the human world. These were the women called courtisanes. And they were part of the normal order of things: they were a necessary term in the myth of the "social," one which defined, by opposition, the more difficult category femme honnête. "Prostitution," wrote the Westminster Review in 1868, "is as inseparable from our present marriage customs as the shadow from the substance. They are the two sides of the same shield." Of course the English writer wished to be understood in practical terms: he had in mind the need for guarantees of female chastity, and outlets for young men who had not yet come into money. But the truth of the argument exceeds its common sense: it can be said to apply at the level of epistemology. Courtisane and femme honnête are classifications dependent on each other for what clarity they have, in areas of conduct and perception where most things are in doubt. They are sides of the same shield, even if it is necessary for them not to perceive the fact.

Consider, for example, Parent-Duchâtelet's dream (it haunted the dis-course of the experts who followed):

We will have arrived at the limit of perfection, and of the possible, in this regard, if we arrange it so that men, and in particular those who are looking for [prostitutes], can distinguish them from honest women; but that those women, and especially their daughters, cannot make this distinction, or at least can do so only with difficulty." We might ask of this imaginary scheme of things: first, why is it desirable, and second, whom is it desirable for? The answers are clear from the text itself. The women in the case know more or less nothing about what is going on; and doubtless Parent-Duchâtelet would have said that even the streetwalker, beneath her cynicism, was ignorant of the essential distinction—between herself and honnête. Women must know nothing in order for men to know: it is striking that in Parent-Duchâtelet's best of all possible worlds it is not only the client who can tell the difference, but any man: all men possess the categories, only some men will wish to possess what they contain.

The clearest statement of the general logic here is made by Huysmans in his novel Maître. Towards the end of the story, the abominable hero, Léo, forgives his prostitute lover in a letter announcing his return to polite society. He offers her pardon because she has done a certain indispensable work: "Women like her," Léo sums up, "have this much good about them, that they make us love those they do not resemble; they serve as repoussoir to respectability." This was the essential task of the courtesan, or the joueuse, the impure, the amazone, the fille de marbre, the mangeuse d'hommes, the demi-mondaine, or the horizontale—her names were legion, but they all meant much the same thing. The courtesan was a category, that is my argument: one which depended not just on a distinction made between courtisane and femme honnête—though this was the dominant theme of the myth—but also on one between courtisane and prostitute proper. The category cour-

tisane was what could be represented of prostitution, and for this to take place at all, she had to be extracted from the swarm of mere sexual commodities that could be seen making use of the streets. These humbler tradespeople were shuffled off stage, and the world of sex was divided in two: on the one hand, the dark interior of the maison close, where the body escaped outright from the social order, and on the other the glittering, half-public palaces of the grandes cocottes on the Champs-Elysées. Money and sex were thus allowed to meet in two places: either apart from imagery altogether, in the private realm, in the brothel's illicit state of nature; or
in the open space of the spectacle, the space of representation itself, where both could appear as images pure and simple.

Of course it was possible to doubt these ideological distinctions, especially that between courtisane and fille publique. Jules de Goncourt, for example, was sceptical, coming back from an evening at La Barucci’s in 1865:

That makes several great courtisanes I have had the chance of knowing. In my opinion none of them escapes from the class of prostitutes. They offer you nothing but a woman of the brothel. Whether they emerge from it or not, it seems to me that they smell of it for ever, and by their gestures, their words, their amiability, they constantly return you to it. None of them, this far, has seemed to me of a race superior to the woman of the streets. I believe that there are no courtisanes any longer, and all that remain are filles.195

But this kind of cynicism was only the obverse of the myth; for the most part in the 1860s the distinctions Goncourt begs leave to doubt were maintained quite successfully, and the courtisane’s qualities rehearsed at length—in the press, on the stage, in songs and photographs and the stream of books and pamphlets on Parisian mesures.

The courtisane was supposed to be beautiful. Therefore her price was high and she had a choice of clients, to some degree. Her business was dominance and make-believe; she seemed the necessary and concentrated form of Woman, of Desire, of Modernity (the capital letters came thick and fast). It was part of her charm to be spurious, enigmatic, unclassifiable: a sphinx without a riddle, and a woman whose claim to classlessness was quite easily seen to be false.

The myth of the courtisane may strike us now as tedious and dispiriting, and the list of her qualities will not bear much elaboration. But there has to be a word or two about dominance and falsity, the key items in the bill of fare. They both derived, no doubt, from the courtisane’s role as representative of Desire: Desire ruled and Desire deluded, and consequently so did she. She was “the captain of industry of youth and love.”196 She was “the true, the only Clase Dirigeante.”197 Naturally these claims were not meant to be taken seriously, and it was part of the myth that the courtisane’s attempt to be one of the ruling class should eventually come to nothing.

Here, for example, is Dr. Jeanne:

Most often they try, in their pompous and crumpled costumes, to follow the latest fashions for balls and soirees! ... Their language, as gross as that of the less of the people, and which they season quite naturally with obscenities, thicken with jargon and patois, or enrich with argot; their worn-out, raucous voices with their ignoble timbre; ... their suivements and their swearwords, their falsely lascivious glances, the nicknames they give themselves—all of this makes a hideous contrast with the appearance and manners of the grand monde, which they so pretentiously and clumsily counterfeit.198

This verdict is rather too harsh to be typical: it is, after all, an expert in public hygiene speaking, with an interest in appearing above mythology. Those with no such interest were less sure that the illusion was unsuccessful:

... clothes, jargon, pursuits, pleasures, cosmetics, everything brings together the demi-monde and the monde entier; everything allows us to confuse things which should not even be aware of one another’s existence. ... The nobleman’s wife from the Faubourg Saint-Germain passes, on the staircase at Worth’s, the elegant female from the Quartier Bréda.199

These writers were sure that the courtisane’s great game was to play at being an honest woman, and she played very skilfully, though not so well as to deceive her clients; that would have spoilt the whole thing. Her purpose was to pretend to be a woman of no identity and many: her admirers knew perfectly well that she had come from the faubourgs or the Parisian lower depths, and she even took care that her speech should indicate that freedom; for what she had to offer her guests—the Goncourts were really no exception here—was the fact of her own falsity.120 It was her most lavish production: “Bored chatelaine, misunderstood bourgeoise, failed actress, corrupted peasant girl, she is all of these. ... She is the perpetually undeciphered enigma, intriguing and terrifying man.”121

Bourgeois, peasant and petite faubourienne—the courtisane was the person who moved most easily between roles in the nineteenth century, trying on the seemingly fixed distinctions of class society and discarding them at will, declaring them false like the rest of her poses. And falsity was what made her modern—in Rops’s terms or Ravenel’s, or even Flaubert’s in retrospect.

Looking back on the empire in September 1870, Flaubert penned the inevitable epitaph for the decade. “Everything was false,” he wrote, “false army, false politics, false literature, false credit, and even false courtisanes.”112 This was perhaps as close as the novelist ever came to stating programmatically what he took to be modernity’s distinctive features; and it seems that the category is finally secured for him when social practice is soaked right through with duplicity, when nothing is spared from the rule of illusion. In such a society, prostitutes are purveyors of essential goods.

The most cursory survey of the salons in the same period will show how often the courtisane was allowed to appear among the portraits and still lives. She was what could be represented of prostitution, and though the explicitness of visual art made for certain difficulties here, they were regularly circumvented. Year after year the courtisane looked down from the salon walls; usually she did so in some kind of antique or allegorical disguise, but there were notable exceptions to even this rule. In any case,
the critics were fond of disbelieving the painters' claim to show them prostitution in ideal form: one had only to attempt a courisane picture to be added immediately to the list of those who set out for Athens each morning and ended in the Rue de Breda.

In the Salon of 1861, for example, there was a painting by Félix-Joseph Barrias called *La Conjuration des courtisanes* which, from the critics' description, seems to have been taken from the history of Venice. There were two pictures by Gérôme, one of Phryne naked before the Areopagites, and the other of Socrates admiring the great courtisane Aspasia. Critics were scornful of the Parisiennes in both of them, trying to look like Greeks. In the same year, Auguste Glaize showed a large picture, nearly nine feet long, entitled *La Pourvoyeuse misère*. On a road outside a gaslit city—too modern to be Babylon or Sodom—it was suspected—a carriage full of naked and half-naked women came across Poverty in the form of a ragged and misshapen old woman. The carriage rolled on. The painter spelt out his moral in the Salon livret:

How many young girls, grown tired of work, throw themselves into all the vices that debauchery brings in its wake, in order to escape from this spectre which seems always to pursue them?

Maxime Du Camp was an expert on the subject. In his *Salon de 1861* he launched into the following explanation:

This picture should have been called the wise and foolish virgins. It is the allegorical figuration of what we see every day on our sidewalks and in our theatres, the growing invasion of women of dubious virtue who are today a new element of our society in transition and who, in the always active and intelligent hands of civilization, are perhaps no more than the instruments of equality, destined to make our inheritance prove illusory or at least to put it in forced circulation. When I look at this uninterrupted movement of *loucues* (let us call them by their name), wave after wave of them, I've often wondered if the lower classes of our society were not carrying on, without being conscious of the fact, the struggle begun at the end of the last century, and whether, in producing these beautiful women whose mission seems to be to ruin and cretinize the haute bourgeoisie and the last remnants of the nobility, they were not continuing quite peacefully the work of the most violent clubs of 1793. Marat today would not ask for the heads of two hundred thousand aristocrats, he would decree the emission of two hundred thousand new kept women, and the result would be the same.

It should be clear from this example—remember that Du Camp kept silent four years later in the face of *Olympia*—that critics knew quite well that prostitution and class struggle were connected, and that this and other dangers were part of the subject's appeal. Tony Zac sent a *Compagnes de Sappho* to the 1868 Salon which was inspired by Baudelaire's *Femmes damnées*, and known to be so. Charles Marchal showed two pictures in the same salon of women in contemporary dress, one entitled *Phryné* and the other *Pénélope*. The following year Emile de Beaumont had a painting hung called *Pourquoi pas?* in which an up-to-date young woman sat at her
dressing table amid a crowd of monstrous and suggestive old men. Gautier explained:

It is a madhouse for millionaires. The courtisane looks on at them without fear, without disgust, with that supreme indifference to beauty or ugliness which characterizes these creatures, and from her lips, with a puff of cigarette smoke, escape these words, which sum up what she is thinking: 'Why not?'

Pictures of this kind were almost commonplace, and certainly saleable. In 1864 the art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel paid Thomas Couture no less than 25,000 francs for rights to a picture under way, already called La Courtisane moderne. When it was finished—many years later—its debt to Glaize's Pourvoyeuse misère was clear; only now the half-naked courtisane was dragged in her chariot along a weed-choked road far from the city, past the reproving gaze of a herm. Under her whip were Harlequin and Silenus, and behind them one young man wearing a poet's laurel wreath and another carrying a sword. False army and false literature, no doubt, both dragged along by pleasure and make-believe, and subject to the courtisane's chastisement.

37. Charles Marchal, Phryné. Wood engraving after oil painting in L'Artiste, 1 June 1868.

38. Thomas Couture, La Courtisane moderne (known as The Thorny Path), 1873.

These pictures of prostitutes are lunatic and fascinating in their own right, and yet misleading. For this was not the normal way in which the courtisane appeared in the salon: she was present for the most part only indirectly, as a kind of inflection or interference in pictures done with a different purpose. She was discovered, and to some extent permitted, in almost any depiction of the body or Desire in this decade. She seemed to be the necessary, if regrettable, form of nakedness itself. And not just of nakedness: everywhere that flesh was visible and feminine, the courtisane materialized. Consider, for example, the young critic Camille Lemonnier writing on Henri Regnault's Salomé in the Salon of 1870:

Her cheeks, white as those of a fille d'amour, are daubed with rouge, and pucker at the corner of the mouth into a proud, triumphant smile.... Her flesh has a tired and pampered look, a fat, unhealthy mutiness, the livid colour that pleasures imprint on the skin of courtisanes.... I shall not quibble with Monsieur Regnault over the accuracy of his clothes and accessories. I am not looking for history here, I am looking for Woman.... I find his figure to be a Salome, it does not matter to me if she is not the Salome. It is enough if the artist has given us the fille d'amour in her crumpled finery, and done so picturesquely and with truth.
The odd thing here is the self-evidence of Lemonnier's similes, for himself and presumably for his readers: the way it seemed to go without saying that Salome was a courtesan (which, strictly speaking, she was not); the confidence that Regnault's subject was woman in general, which meant courtisane in particular; the sight—which may strike us still as the right one—of the prostitute beneath the fancy dress.

The courtisane was not an easy subject for visual art. If she were left as an unrecognized inflection of the nude, she might produce representations worse than herself: Paul Baudry's nudes or Alexandre Cabanel's were "less than courtisanes," Maxime Du Camp once complained. In any case, she was a dangerous fiction, a woman with a whip, impersonal and vicious, prone to Sappho's deviation, apt to corinize the bourgeoisie. But whatever the risks, it seemed she had to be represented; and so she was each year, that "chiffre en dehors des êtres sociaux," chased from the happy state of Venice; that ruler of youth, that misleader of millionaires, that Salome who "smells of rut and butchery, fierce in her indifference and lascivious without love."

It is clear that critics in 1865 suspected Olympia of being less than a courtisane, and Manet of making her so deliberately. The category courtisane, in other words, no longer quite covered or displaced those of insoumise and petite faubourienne, and the whole untidy place those words suggested of the prostitute in class society.

Yet this cannot be the whole story; or, rather, it cannot explain why the critics reacted as they did in 1865—why their prose was so vehement and strange, and why they found it so difficult to say how class figured in Olympia, even if they seemed sure that it did so. Class, after all, was regularly one of the courtisane's best performances, and critics like Du Camp could play with the idea of social danger in such cases without seeming unduly nonplussed. Olympia could have been given a place in class and still have hardly disturbed the critics' sensibilities. She could have been pitied or half admired, or consigned to the nether world of pleasure which Alfred Delvau refers to at the end of his 1867 Plaisirs de Paris:

It is important here to draw a great demarcation line on the map of galanterie. The innumerable fallen women who wander in this great desert of men we call Paris can be divided into two classes. On one side are the poor miserable, of whom Victor Hugo talks in his novel of that name, living from day to day and wandering the streets haphazardly, in search of the human animal that Diogenes tried to find, and counting on his generosity to face the expense of their rent, food, and clothes.

There are special books, books of statistics, which will recount the atrocious lives of these daughters of sadness, as Monsieur Michelet calls them. Such turpitudes should have no place in a book devoted to Parisian pleasures. There are sores one must hide and lend in secret....

Hugo ... Michelet ... no doubt there were ways in 1865 to represent even the prostitution of the faubourg. But such representations would not necessarily have challenged the myth of the courtisane; as Delvau's description suggests very well, they normally did no more than provide a glimpse of the dark and pitiable other side of her power. Olympia, on the contrary, tried to describe that power more completely; it tried to unfix the category courtisane, by contriving a different kind of relation between a prostitute's class and her nudity. The transcription of class in Manet's picture—this was its odd and indescribable force—was nothing now but an aspect of its subject's nakedness.

The challenge to the myth in this was twofold. What the myth essentially did, I have been arguing, was offer the empire a perfect figure of its own pretended social playfulness, of the perfect and fallacious power of money. "Les hommes boursicotent, les femmes traficotent"—and class, in the game, was merely another kind of masking. The courtisane put on the mask occasionally, and was appreciated for her falsity in this as in all other things. To break such a circuit, it would not have been enough to show a prostitute
possessed of the outward signs of class—costume and makeup, slippers, flowers, bracelets, servants, tokens of vulgarity or distinction—since these were all believed to be extrinsic to her real power. Her power was her body, which only money could buy.

But if class could be shown to belong to that body; if it could be seen to remake the basic categories of nudity and nakedness; if it became a matter of the body's whole address and arrangement, something read on the body, in the body, in ways the spectator could not focus discriminately—then the circuit would be broken, and the category courtesan replaced by others less absolute and comforting. The body and money would not be unmediated terms any longer, intersecting in the abstract, out there in the hinterland of images; they would take their place as determinate facts in a particular class formation.

Of course, it is not very likely that a picture on its own could do any such thing. Ideologies are not magically dismantled in single works of art; and if paintings try too hard to anticipate social process, they run the risk of ending up speaking to nobody, neither those inside the world of ideology nor those existing at its edges. It remains to be seen how successful Olympia was in redescribing the nude, and whether the price of success was too high.

It so happens that in 1865 the state employed a photographer to record the works it had bought from the salon before they went off to the provinces. Two of the photos that survive group together paintings which contain the female nude. In one there is Europe enlevée par Jupiter by Louis-Frédéric Schutzerberger, a pupil of Charles Gleyre, an established salon medallist; and next to it L'Origine du dessin by Degas's teacher, Louis Lamothe:
COLOR PLATES

in Schützenberger’s picture, or Raphael in Giacometti’s? And if this was the past, then how could the present manifest itself in painting except as some kind of ludicrous disjunction, an unintended text to be read in Europa’s profile and hairdo, or Amymone’s fierce eyebrows and mouth?

The general run of critics in the 1860s would have put these questions in a somewhat different form, but by and large they would have recognized their force. Critics agreed that the nude as a genre was in a precarious and confused state. The full extent of its disarray can be suggested best by mentioning straightaway some additions to the handful of pictures from the 1865 Salon; for Olympia’s competitors are less bizarre than many others of the decade’s favourite nudes. There is Cabanel’s Nymphé enlevée par un faune, for example, which was mightily celebrated in the Salon of 1861, or the same painter’s best-selling Naissance de Vénus. There is Bouguereau’s 1863 Bacchante, fallen down in drunken glee and playing amorously with a goat; there is Puvis’s deadly, unfortunate Autumn, and Jules-Joseph Lefebvre’s Nymphé et Bacchus, sent from Rome to the Salon of 1866 and snapped up immediately for the Musée du Luxembourg. And if we include the 1870s, there are images of outright and imperative lust to add to the canon, like Bouguereau’s Nymphes et satyre of 1873, in which the nymphs take their revenge on an all-too-human satyr, or Edouard Blanchard’s impotent and perverse Bouffon.

The confusion of the genre centered, or so the critics said, on matters of propriety and desire, and the fact that there seemed so little agreement about either. Most writers and artists knew that the nude’s appeal, in part at least, was straightforwardly erotic. There was nothing necessarily wrong in that, they insisted; it was part of the strength of their beloved “pagan ideal” that it offered a space in which woman’s body could be consumed without too much (male) prevarication. Desire was never quite absent from the nude, and the genre provided various figures in which it could be represented: as an animal demand arriving in a half-man, half-goat form; or as Eros, that infatuated guide who stood for man’s desire and woman’s desirability. But the main business of the nude was to make a distinction between these figures and nakedness itself: the body was attended and to


The painting of the nude in the 1860s could be characterized by its inability to do the things Ingres does here. In the pictures I have presented already, sexual force and nakedness are most often not disentangled. When they are, and the active proponents of desire are included, there seems to be a massive uncertainty about how much reality to grant them: satyrs, fauns, and cupids regularly take on too much of the look of goats, male models, and three-year-old children. The naked body itself, as the critics some extent threatened by its sexual identity, but in the end the body triumphed. To make the language less metaphorical: the painter’s task was to construct or negotiate a relation between the body as particular and excessive fact—that flesh, that contour, those marks of modern woman—and the body as a sign, formal and generalized, meant for a token of composure and fulfilment. Desire appeared in the nude, but it was shown displaced, personified, no longer an attribute of woman’s unclothed form.

I might make the point clearer by applying these absolute standards to a picture by Ingres, the Venus Anadyomène, completed a generation earlier, in 1848 (Plate X). It is an appropriate painting to take as exemplary, since so many of the artists and writers of the 1860s looked back to it as a recent classic of the nude, and sometimes paid homage to it directly. No critic worth his salt would have wished to deny that Ingres’s Venus was sexually enticing, and intended to be. He might even have admired Ingres’s ability to make a certain kind of sexual content legible in an unembarrassed way. Not that he necessarily would have wished, or been able, to translate the passage at the picture’s bottom right—adoring putto, penis, dolphin, foam, red eye, fishtail, snout—into the analytic terms which are established, more or less, for the twentieth-century reader. But the picture’s subject was Venus, and the putti are there to enact her power, offering her a mirror and us an arrow. The key word here, for the critic, would have been “enactment.” The unavoidable sexual force of this nakedness is transposed into various actions and attributes, and made over into a rich and conventional language. What is left behind is a body, addressed to the viewer directly and candidly, but grandly generalized in form, arranged in a complex and visible rhyming, purged of particulars, offered as a free but respectful version of the right models, the ones that articulate nature best.

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in the 1860s never tired of saying, is left curiously hybrid, marked by modernity in an incoherent way. If it is chaste, and it sometimes is, it is rigid and inanimate with its own decorum; and if it engages with sexuality, it does so in ways which verge on violence or burlesque.

Something is wrong here: a genre is disintegrating. Perhaps in a general way Castagnary was right to blame the bourgeois for the state of the nude: no doubt a culture pays a price for exaggerated concern for the proprieties, especially if such a concern sits ill with its appetite for sexual entertainment. But it does not necessarily pay it in terms of art. It would be hard to argue that Titian's Ferrara or Correggio's Mantua were notably healthier in sexual terms than Bouguereau's Paris. The nude is a matter not of sexual health but of artistic conventions, and it is these that were foundering in the 1860s. If there was a specifically bourgeois unhappiness, it centered on how to represent sexuality, not how to organize or suppress it. (Though the one unhappiness had effects. . .)

One might expect these problems—especially the way they seemed to invite a reading in terms of some general cultural doom—to produce a lot of bad criticism. One might especially predict, at the end of a genre, a squad of Cassandras inflexible for truth and purity; and, sure enough, they existed. In the face of Cabanel's Vénus and Baudry's Perle, Maxime Du Camp put paid to the salon nude in general. "Art," he wrote in 1863, "should have no more sex than mathematics." The mark of the nude in art was chastity and abstraction: "The naked body is the abstract being, and thus it must preoccupy and tempt the artist above all; but to clothe the nude in immodesty, to give the facial features all those expressions which are not spoken of, that is to dishonour the nude and do something disreputable." The nude "ceases to be honest when it is treated so as intentionally to exaggerate certain forms at the expense of others," when its poses are "provoking," its attitudes "violent," and its whole language contorted and unnatural.

The vocabulary is tortuous—trying to speak of sex and yet not to speak of it—but the message is clear. Desire is no part of the nude: the nude is human in general, abstracted from life, contact, attraction, even gender. Ingres is called in by Du Camp to attest to all these things.

Now, insofar as critics in the 1860s attempted a general theory of the nude, they found themselves drifting in Du Camp's direction. Often they did so in spite of an effort—a quite spirited one—not to be absolute and moralistic. Here, for example, is Camille Lemonnier in 1870:

... The nude is not the same as the undressed, and nothing is less nude than a woman emerging from a pair of drawers or one who has just taken off her chemise. The nude has modesty only if it is not a transitory state. It hides nothing

because there is nothing to hide. The moment it hides something it becomes prurient, for in reality it shows it all the better. In order to stay virgin the nude in art must be impersonal and must not particularize; art has no need of a beauty spot upon the neck or a mole on the hindquarters. It hides nothing and shows nothing: it makes itself seen as a whole. . . .

The nude has something of the purity of little children who play naked together without minding at all. The undressed, on the contrary, always reminds me of the woman who shows herself off for forty sous and specializes in "artistic poses." But compare Lemonnier's statement of general rules and purposes with his description, in the same Salon, of a lost picture by Alphonse Lecadre:

The pose is bizarre, I grant you; the head horrible, certainly; and let us agree that the body is hardly seductive, if you insist. But what admirable drawing! With what richness of colour the painter has rendered the shifting tones of the flesh! And the modelling, the fineness of the belly, the delicacy of the arms, the soft folds that hollow the breasts! How palpably the nude's flesh sinks into those fine red cushions! It really is the woman of the Orient, in all her softness and basality.

The examples could be multiplied. What they suggest is hardly surprising: the general rules simply did not apply when the critic was faced with particular nudes. The appeal of the nude was both simpler and more complex than theory, in an anxious time, could possibly allow. It included, as Cantaloube put it of Cabanel's Nymphé, "the idea of voluptuous beauty." And even the insistence on pudor would not make sense completely if the image did not include elements or traces of its opposite. In Jourdan's Secrets de l'amour, for example, from 1866, a naked young woman was surprised by Love in a wood. This is Félix Jahy's description of the scene that ensued:

The child is artful and insistent: as he tells his dangerous secret his little hand is placed on the adolescent's breast, and she in turn, in a movement of exquisite grace, puts her own hand in the same place, which proves she has to defend herself against some kind of sensation. The child's delicious profile is put boldly against the delicate face of his confidante, in whom modesty and pleasure are joined in an adorable combat.

We end in bathos, but it is there we are told the obvious truth. Of course
the burden of the nude was conflict, adorable or otherwise, between propriety and sexual pleasure. The genre existed to reconcile those opposites, and when the nude was working normally as a form of knowledge, both would be recognized in criticism and spelt out in paint. In the 1860s that did not happen: the nude, for the most part, was conceived to be the strict antithesis of sex; because sex had no part in the matter, it kept appearing directly in the flesh, unintended, as something which spoilt what was meant to be a pure formality.

I have argued once or twice already against the critics' readiness to see in all this a test of the empire's general sexual health. Théophile Thoré had his own reasons for making that kind of premature equation—he had fled from the empire in 1851—and dealing with the salon nude in 1865 he saw no reason to doubt that its form answered immediately to the tastes of a new ruling class.

Who is it encourages mythological and mystical art, Oedipuses and Venuses, madonnas and saints in ecstasy? Those in whose interests it is that art means nothing and fails to connect with modern aspirations. Who encourages these nymphs and scenes of courtship à la Pompadour? The Jockey Club and the Boulevard Italien. To whom are these pictures sold? To courtisanes and stock-exchange nouveaux riches, to the dissipated members of a particular aristocracy.

Thoré's questions and answers may be crude, but that does not necessarily mean they are mistaken. Clearly the break-up of the nude is at some level a social matter. The nude is a term of art and art criticism; but I have quoted enough from the writers of the 1860s to make it clear that art criticism and sexual discourse of a more general kind intersect at this point, the one providing the other with crucial representations. Or so the culture hopes: the nude is one important form—and there are very few—in which sexuality can be put on show in the nineteenth century. It is the place in which the body is revealed, given its attributes, brought into order, and made out to be unproblematic. It is the frankness of the bourgeoisie—here, after all, is what Woman looks like; she can be known in her nakedness without too much danger. That is because her body is separate from her sex. Her sex, one might say, is a matter of male desire; those various, saucy, bull, fumbling coins, coiling clouds, tritons, goats, and putti which surround her. There they all are, for the male viewer to read and accept as figures of his own feelings; and there she is, somehow set apart from her own sexuality, her nakedness not yet possessed by the creatures who whisper, stare, or hold up mirrors.

It was exactly the problem of the nude in the 1860s that this separation proved so hard to obtain. Sex was supposedly expelled outright from Woman's body, only to reappear within it as a set of uncontrolled inflections—those rolling eyes and orgasmic turns of the hip that the critics spent their time finding decent ways to denounce. The nude became embarrassing; and what Olympia did, I shall argue, is insist on that embarrassment and give it visual form. It is as if Manet's picture drew the logical conclusions from the chaos of Bouguereau and Cabanel. The nude in its degenerating state was right about sexuality: sexual identity was nowhere but in the body; and it was not there as a structure or a set of attributes, but had to be figured as interference and excess, a tissue of oddities and inconclusiveness.

Of course the picture still contained, in a cliché, almost comic fashion, the signs of separate male desire: there was the hissing tom cat and the offering of flowers from Monsieur Arthur. But these were read at the time, and surely correctly, as a kind of travesty of the old language of the nude; and Desire itself, in a form which carried any conviction, was the property now—the deliberate production—of the female subject herself. It was there in her gaze, her address to the viewer, her consciousness of being looked at for sexual reasons and paid accordingly—no doubt a good deal more than forty sous.

A nude, to repeat, is a picture for men to look at, in which Woman is constructed as an object of somebody else's desire. Nothing I go on to say about Olympia is meant to suggest that Manet's painting escapes that wider determination, or even escaped it once upon a time, in the 1865 Salon. It was meant as a nude and finally taken as one; the texts I have collected should not be read as so many indices of defeat in that project, but, rather, for signs of difficulty surmounted. The critics were obliged to take a metaphorical detour, produce their own hesitations, play with the picture's recalcitrance, before they declared it a nude of some kind—comic perhaps, or obscene, or incompletely painted. Nonetheless, the difficulties counted in 1865: the anger and uncertainty were not simply erased. The anger needs explaining, therefore; even if, in the critics' writing, it is already presented in retrospect, as a kind of fiction.

I have argued the gist of the matter already. Olympia is depicted as nude and courtesane, but also as naked and insoumise; the one identity is the form of the other, but the two are put together in such a way as to make each contingent and unfinished. The case is particularly clear when it comes to the picture's obvious main subject: Olympia's beauty, her sexual power, and how that relates to her body's being female. It is sometimes
said—it was said already in 1865—that Olympia is not female at all, or only partly so. She is masculine or "masculinized"; she is "boyish," aggressive, or androgynous. None of these words strikes me as the right one, but they all indicate quite well why the viewer is uncertain. It is because he cannot easily make Olympia a Woman that he wants to make her a man; she has to be something less or more or otherwise aberrant. This seems to me wrongheaded: surely Olympia's sexual identity is not in doubt; it is how it belongs to her that is the problem.

The achievement of Olympia, I should say, is that it gives its female subject a particular sexuality as opposed to a general one. And that particularity derives, I think, not from there being an order to the body on the bed but from there being too many, and none of them established as the dominant one. The signs of sex are present in plenty, but they fail, as it were, to add up. Sex is not something evident and all of a piece in Olympia; that a woman has a sex at all—and certainly Olympia has one—does not make her immediately one thing, for a man to appropriate visually; her sex is a construction of some kind, or perhaps the inconsistency of several.*

To show this in detail, I shall first of all point to the way the body is addressed to the viewer in Olympia, and then go on to talk of the body's "incorrectness," as a thing drawn and painted; from there I shall move to the particular marks of sex upon it, and how they are handled; and, finally, to the way the body is inscribed in paint.

A nude could hardly be said to do its work as a painting at all if it did not find a way to address the spectator and give him access to the body on display. He had to be offered a place outside the picture, and a way in; and be assured somehow that his way was the right one, leading to the knowledge he required. This was sometimes done simply by looking: by having the woman's eyes and face, and her whole body, address themselves to the viewer, in the fashion of Ingres's Venus Anadyomene or Titian's Venus of Urbino. That candour, that dreamy offering of self, that looking which was not quite looking: those were the nude's most characteristic forms of address. But the outward gaze was not essential; the spectator could be offered instead a pair of eyes within the picture space—the look of Cupid or the jester's desperate stare, the familiarity of a servant or a lover. In any case, the woman's body had to be arranged in precise and definite relation to the viewer's eye. It had to be placed at a distance, near enough for seeing, far enough for propriety. It had to be put at a determinate height, neither so high that the woman became inaccessible and merely grand, nor so low that the turned into matter for scrutiny of a clinical or prurient kind.

These were fragile achievements, and open to burlesque or refutation. But that was not what took place in Olympia, for all the critics' occasional certainty that her look was a provocation and her body laid out for inspection at the morgue. By and large the critics could not dismiss the picture in this way, because they could not so easily specify their own exclusion from it.

They were offered an outward gaze: a pair of jet-black pupils, a slight asymmetry of the lids, a mouth with a curiously smudged and broken corner, features half adhering to the plain oval of the face (Plate VII). A look was thus constructed which seemed direct and reserved, in a way which was close to the classic face of the nude. It was close, but so is parody. This is not a look which is generalized or abstract or evidently "feminine." It appears to be blatant and particular, but it is also unreadable, perhaps deliberately so. It is candid but guarded, poised between address and resistance—so precisely, so deliberately, that it comes to be read as a production of the depicted person herself; there is an inevitable conflation of the qualities of precision and contrivance in the way the image is painted and those qualities as belonging to the fictive subject; it is her look, her action upon us, her composition of herself.

It is not just looking; that is the point: it is not the simple, embodied gaze of the nude. Aggression is not the word for it; that quality is displaced to the cat and given comic form. Compliance is inaccurate; that is the Negress's character, and what makes her inert and formulaic, a mere painted sign for Woman in one of her states. Olympia, on the other hand, looks out at the viewer in a way which obliges him to imagine a whole fabric of sociality in which this look might make sense and include him—a fabric of offers, places, payments, particular powers, and status which is still open to negotiation. If all of that could be held in the mind, the viewer might have access to Olympia; but clearly it would no longer be access to a nude.

* The books sometimes say that Olympia's depiction of a prostitute is "realistic," and that that, quite simply, was why it offended in 1865. But the word "realistic" is as usual puzzling here—for instance, as it might apply to the picture's representation of sexuality. Insofar as it dispenses of ordinary signs of that quality—the cat, the Negress, the orchid, the claustrophobic room—they are far from being "realistic" in any obvious sense of the word. Are they even self-evidently "contemporary"? (Several critics were certain in 1865 that the flowers were being brought in last month's newspaper; but the paint itself is grandly noncommittal on this subject, as far as I can see. The "contemporary" reference was made by the viewer out of something deliberately guarded and generalized.) Even if we wish to say that reality is figured here, it still leaves us with the question why it was offensive, if its figures are so hard to pin down.
Yet in a rough-and-ready way the viewer puts an end to this stalemate, at least temporarily, and tries to see Olympia’s body as one thing. We have noticed already the signs of the critics’ disappointment even here. The body was not one thing; it was pulled out of shape, its knees dislocated and arms broken; it was cadaverous and decomposing; falling apart or held together by an abstract, rigid armature of lead or plaster or India rubber; it was simply incorrect. These are the signs of panic and incomprehension in the critics, but they have some basis in the way Olympia’s body is actually drawn. One aspect of that drawing is emphatically linear: it is the side seized on by some writers in 1865 and described in such phrases as “circled in black,” “drawn in charcoal,” and “stripes of blackening.” These were ways of objecting to Manet’s disregard of good modelling and the abruptness of his lights and darks. But this use of shadow—these lines of darkness put round heel or breast or hand—is also part of Manet’s drawing, in the limited sense I want that word to have here. Olympia’s whole body is matter of smooth hard edges and deliberate intersections; the lines of her shoulders are a good example, singular and sharp; or the way the far nipple breaks the bounding line of the arm with a neatness nothing short of ostentation; or the flat, declarative edge of the thigh and the kneecap, or the hand staked out on its grey surroundings. This kind of drawing is presumably what was meant by the journalist Gille when he talked of Olympia’s being full of “jarring lines which made one’s eyes ache.”40 But it was just as common in 1865, and just as appropriate, for the critics to accuse the picture of lacking definition. It was “unfinished,” after all, and drawing “does not exist” in it: it was described as “impossible” or “informe.”41 One critic called it disarticulated, another inarticulate, and both were right.42 The latter was responding to a second kind of graphic mode in the picture, which we might describe as painterly—meaning by that a grand and free suppression of demarcations, a use of paint to indicate the indefiniteness of parts. One aspect of this is again the picture’s suppression of halftones: it lies behind the lack of detail in Olympia’s right breast, and the faded head of her nipple; it is what makes the transition from breast to rib cage to stomach to thigh so indistinct, so hard to follow. But the body contains quite other kinds of ambiguity, harder and sharper and more directly tied to line: the direction of Olympia’s forearm, for example, as it crosses her belly—perhaps touching it, perhaps not—is just as much a matter of high visual uncertainty.

There is a lack of articulation here. On its own it is not too disconcerting, and in a sense it tallies well with the conventions of the nude, where the body is offered—if the trick is done—as just this kind of infinite territory, uncorrected and full, on which the spectator is free to impose his imaginary definitions. But the old thing in Olympia’s case is the way this uncertainty is bounded, or interrupted, by the hard edges and the curvate grey. The body is in part tied down by drawing, held in place quite harshly—by the hand, the black bootlace round the neck, the lines of charcoal shadow. The way this kind of drawing qualifies or relates to the other is not clear; it does not qualify the other because it does not relate; the two systems coexist; they describe aspects of the body, and point to aspects of that body’s sexuality, but they do not bring them together into a single economy of form. It is as if the painter welcomes disparity and makes a system of it; as if the picture proposes inconsistencies, of a curiously unrelieved kind—left without excuse or mediation—as the best sort of truth when the subject is nakedness.

This leads to the way the picture treats the particular marks of sex upon the body. The nude has to indicate somehow the false facts of sexual life, and pre-eminently that woman lacks a phallus. This is the issue that lies behind Lemonnier’s talk of showing and not showing what woman is. The nude, he says, “hides nothing because there is nothing to hide.” That is no doubt what most male viewers wish to believe, but it regularly turns out that no thing is what has to be hidden, and indicated by other conventions. The Venus Anadyomene shows us one of them, the most perfect: the illusion of simple absence and equally simple completeness, the fiction of a lack which is no lack and does not therefore need to be concealed or shown. Another is the hand placed over the genitals in Titian’s Venus or Giorgione’s: the hand seemingly coinciding with the body, enacting the lack of the phallus and disguising it. In that sense—in that particular and atrocious detail—Olympia was certainly scandalous (Plate VIII). Her hand enraged and exalted the critics as nothing else did, because it failed to enact the lack of the phallus (which is not to say it quite signified the opposite). When the critics said it was shameless, hexed, in a state of contraction, dirty, and shaped like a toad, they toyed with various meanings, none of them obscure. The genitals are in the hand, toadlike; and the hand is teased, hard-edged and definite; not an absence, not a thing which yields or includes and need not be noticed. “When a little boy first catches sight of a girl’s genital region, he begins by showing irresolution and lack of interest; he sees nothing or disavows what he has seen, he softens it down or looks about for expedients for bringing it into line with his expectations.”43 Freud’s account of origins is not necessarily to be taken as the whole truth, but it states quite well the ordinary form of male inattention in art. And Olympia’s hand demands to be looked at; it cannot be disavowed or
brought in line with anyone's expectations—anyone, that is, brought up
on Ingres or Titian.

The hand is Olympia's whole body, disobeying the rules of the nude.
We might even say that it stands too strongly for that disobedience, for,
after all, the body on the bed is not simply scandalous; the hand is a detail,
and the critics were wrong to focus upon it, as they sometimes did, as if
there were nothing else there to be seen.

Its effect is qualified, for instance, by the picture's employment of a
second sign—a strong one—for much the same thing: the body's hair and
hairlessness. Hair, so the textbooks say, is a secondary sexual characteristic.
In the nude, however, it is a prime signifier of sex: plenty of it in the right
places is delightful and feminine; pubic hair, need it be said, may hide the
lack of the phallus but is somehow too close to being that lack, which is
why it cannot be shown; and hair is disallowed for some reason in all
manner of other places, armpit (usually), nipple, stomach, legs—the list is
still current. The right kind of hair more than makes up for the wrong
kind, however, in pictures like Cabanel's Vénus: the painter is encouraged
to provide a miserable profusion of tresses, overtaking the body and weighing
it down, acting in this case as a second (equally spermatorrhoeaic)
foam. This kind of hirsuteness is a strong sign and a safe one, for hair let
down is decent and excessive at the same time; it is allowed disorder,
simple luxuriance, slight wantonness; and none of these qualities need be
alarming, since hair on the head can be combed out and pinned up again
in due course.

How nearly Olympia obeys the rules—to the point, we might think, of
uneasy parody again. She has no pubic hair, of course; that would have
been unthinkable; there is honestly nothing beneath her open hand but
shadow; and yet the painting lays on a whole series of substitutes for what
it is forced to omit. The armpit carries a trace of hair (this was permitted
in any case: even Giacomotti did it). The line which runs from Olympia's
navel to her ribs is seemingly marked by something—it may be a shadow,
but that would be odd on a body which is missing so many others. And
there is an equivalent, a metaphor, in the frothing yellow fringe which
hangs down the fold between pillow and sheet: it is the one great accent
in all that cool surface of different off-whites.

These are all displacements of one kind or another: they put hair on
the body, but do so with discretion; and on the head, above the choker,
there is an odd, fastidious inversion of much the same terms. Olympia's
face is framed, mostly, by the brown of a Japanese screen, and the neutrality
of that background (what is shown is the back of the screen, the unpictured
part) is one of the things that make the address and conciseness of the face
the sharper. But the blankness is illusory: to the right of Olympia's head
is a shock of red-brown hair, just sufficiently different from the screen's
dull colour to be visible with effort. Once it is seen, it changes the whole
disposition of the woman's head and shoulders: the flat, cut-out face is
suddenly surrounded and rounded by the falling hair; the flower converts
from a plain silhouette into an object which rests in the hair beneath; the
head is softened, the hair is unpinned; this body has abundance after all,
it has a familiar sex. And yet my first qualifying phrase is essential here:
once it is seen, this happens, but in 1865 it was not seen, or not seen to
do the things I have just described. (The caricaturists were in that sense
determined to leave it out altogether from their versions of Olympia; it is the
absence of hair which is this nude's distinctive, comic feature.)

The hair may be noticed eventually, and maybe it was meant as a test of
looking and a small reward. But I doubt if even now it can be kept in vision
very easily and made part of the face it belongs to. Face and hair are incom-
patible, precisely so; and in that they are a better pair of signs for
what is done to the body in Olympia than the singular scandal of the hand.

There are two faces, one produced by the hardness of the face's edge
and the closed look of its mouth and eyes; the other less clearly demarcated,
opening out into hair let down. Neither face is ever quite suppressed by
the other, nor can they be made into aspects of the same image, the same
imaginary whole. The difficulty is visual, partly: a matter of brown against
brown. But it is more basic than that, and more pervasive: the face and
hair cannot be made into one thing because they fail to obey the usual set
of equations for sexual consistency—equations which tell us what bodies
are like and how the world is divided, into male and female, hairy and
smooth, resistant and yielding, closed and open, phallus and lack, aggressive
and vulnerable, repressed and libidinous. These are equations the nude
ought to prove or provide.

Olympia's rules could be stated as follows. The signifiers of sex are there
in plenty, on the body and its companions, but they are drawn up in contra-
dictory order; one that is unfinished, or, rather, more than one; orders in-
terfering with one another, signs which indicate quite different places for
Olympia in the taxonomy of woman—and none of which she occupies.*

A text by Georges Bataille is sometimes enlisted in the argument that Olympia "has no
subject" (is purely pictorial, visual, or whatever). In Manet: Essai biographique et critique,
Bataille takes issue with Valéry, who described Olympia as a "public power and presence
of a miserable arcanum of Society," "the Impure par excellence, the whose position obliges
a candid ignorance of any kind of shame. Batalian eroticism, given over to absolute nudity, the
makes one think of all the remnants of primary barbarism and ritual animality which lurk
beneath the routine of prostitution in great cities." Bataille comments (pp. 66-67):
"It is possible (though questionable) that in a sense this was initially the text of Olympia,
Olympia, finally, is painted in a disconcerting way. The painter seems to have put his stress deliberately on the physical substance of his materials, and the way they only half obey his efforts to make them stand for things in the world. It is this which was subsequently held to be the essence of Olympia, and the basis of its claim to be modern in artistic terms. Critics came to admire the picture’s peculiar transitions—or the lack of them—from passages of open, complex brushwork to areas where line and colour had been quite brutally simplified. The picture, they said, was overt about its means and their limitations; it admitted and relished the marquetry of paint; it spelt out the disparities involved in making an image of anything, not only the nude. One sign of that, for example, is the way the tangible hand at the centre of things is played against its painted neighbours, one holding the shawl and the other the flowers. These two hands are shadows of the one which hides Olympia’s genitals: they appear as a double antithesis to that hand’s efficient illusionism, its hard, convincing light and shade. One of them, the maid’s hand inside the newspaper, is plain black, a clipped and abstract silhouette; and the other, as the critics said, is incomplete; perhaps it does not literally lack a finger, but it barely does its work of holding the cashmere shawl, and seems purposely left without substance, an approximate instance of hand, a sketched-in schema. We might compare the pillow which props up Olympia’s shoulders, all pickers and shadows and softness, with the shoulders themselves, as sharp as a knife; or the flowers with the newspaper, or the shawl with the cartoon cat.

To call these disparities “flatness” or “flattening” does not seem to me quite right. The passages I have pointed to insist on something more complex than a physical state, or at any rate the state of a medium. They put in question how the world might appear in a picture if its constituents were conceived—it seems they may be—as nothing but material; and how paint might appear as part of that world, the ultimate dry sign of it. To call the picture “modern” is perhaps more sensible, if we mean by that word desperate, ironic, and grim beneath the fiction of technique. But however we describe it, this manner of putting on paint should surely be seen as part of a complex attempt at meaning, whose elements I have tried to outline. For instance, the facticity of paint in Olympia is not something given or discovered simply “seen.” It is a kind of fiction; it is part of making this particular fictive world, this body. Olympia, that has been my argument, is not an enigma, not a courtisane; and her final, factual existence on the bed is the key to that of paint. We could put it another way: in order that the painted surface appear as it does in Olympia, the self-evidence of seeing—seeing the world, seeing Woman—had to be dismantled, and a circuit of signs put in its place. The places where that was likely to be done in the 1860s were few and special: a courtesan’s nakedness was one of them, for the reasons I have proposed.

These are remarks about Manet’s practice, not his own theory of it; and they are not meant as an argument that Manet did not look hard at his model Victorine Meurend.

It is best to end with the one critic who managed criticism of Olympia in 1865. Jean Ravenel, writing in L’Epoque on 7 June, described Manet’s two pictures in the following terms:

Monseur Manet—Olympia—The scapegoat of the salon, the victim of Parisian Lynch law. Each passer-by takes a stone and throws it at her face. Olympia is a very crazy piece of Spanish madness, which is a thousand times better than the platitude and inertia of so many canvases on show in the exhibition.

Armed insurrection in the camp of the bourgeoisie: it is a glass of iced water which each visitor gets full in the face when he sees the BEAUTIFUL faubourienne, a woman of the night from Paul body, the fact of being nothing—another sacred horror, that of possession unmediated that it has no sign. Clearly Bataille sees this as reducing Olympia to what a man sees, but vision for Bataille is always wrapped up in some such complex act against meaning ("it is the hard resolution with which Manet destroyed that was scandalous": as before, Bataille’s italic); seeing is making the world into nothing.

These are themes which figure endlessly in Bataille’s fiction and philosophical prose: presence as absence, the body as essentially intimate, death as its purest and most desirable state, representation as collapsing in this putting to death. Bataille’s untranslatable last words on Olympia—"Aux yeux mêmes de Manet la fabrication s’effaçait. L’Olympia tout entière se distingue mal d’un crime ou d’un spectacle de la mort..."—should therefore be read in at least two ways: as a reproduction of the cadaver fantasies of the critics in 1865, and as final, overt recuperation of Olympia into the terms of Bataille’s own eroticism. Whatever else one might wish to say of this criticism, it has little to do with the simpler narratives of modernist art history.
Niquet's, from the mysteries of Paris and the nightmares of Edgar Poe. Her look has the sourness of someone prematurely aged, her face the disturbing perfume of a fleur du mal; her body fatigued, corrupted, but painted under a single, transparent light, with the shadows light and fine, the bed and pillows put down in a velvet, modulated grey. Negress and flowers insufficient in execution, but with a real harmony to them, the shoulder and arm solidly established in a clean and pure light. —The cat arching its back makes the visitor laugh and relax; it is what saves M. Manet from a popular execution.

De sa fourrure noire et brute
Sort un parfum si doux, qu'un soir
J'en fus ébouffé pour l'asvoir
Caresse une fois... rien qu'une.
C'est l'esprit familier du lieu;
Il juge, il préside, il inspire
Toutes choses dans son empire;
Peut-être est-il fée, est-il diable?

Monsieur Manet, instead of Monsieur Astruc's verses, would perhaps have done well to take as epigraph the quatrains devoted to Goya by the most advanced painter of our epoch:

GOYA—Cauchemar plein de choses inconnues
De fœtus qu'on fait cuire au milieu des sabbats,
De vieilles au miroir et d'enfants toutes nues
Pour tendre les démons ajustant bien leurs bas.

Perhaps this alla podrida de todas las Castilles is not flattering for Monsieur Manet, but all the same it is something. One does not make an Olympia simply by wanting to.—The Christ would call for a certain technical analysis which we do not have time to give. —To summarize, it is hideous, but all the same it is something. A painter is in evidence, and the strange group is bathed in light. 141

This is an extraordinary piece of writing. It is the only salon entry in 1865 to say anything much—or anything reasonable—about form and content in Olympia, and the way one might possibly inflect the other. It seems to accept or produce a measure of complexity in its object, and the points of reference it proposes for Manet's picture are not only well chosen but really explored in the text. This does not mean that Ravenel approves of Olympia, or thinks its allusions coherent. Rather the contrary, in fact: the more points of reference he proposes, the more certain he seems that they are ill-assorted, and the better prepared is his final, crushing verdict on the whole thing.

And yet the text provides material for other verdicts; that is its strength. Let us take, for example, the way it deals with Manet's relation to Goya and Baudelaire. 145 The two names appear together first as generalities,
altered once again. These plates in Los Caprichos are after all among the sparsest and most restrained of the series; they do not fall into either of its main modes—the satirical, burlesque depiction of the social scene or the narrative of outright fantasy. They belong to the former category, but lack its flavour of exasperated masque; and the lines from Baudelaire have something of their ceremonious, generalising air. The word “demon,” by the time we encounter it, is hardly enough to pull back the procession of figures—naked children, old women in front of a glass—from the realm of allegory or something like it.

That last proviso is the important one: it points to the special character of these few plates and the ground of Baudelaire’s enthusiasm for them. Plate 31 of Los Caprichos may be something like allegory, but it is evidently not allegory pure and simple. There is a measure of grand simplification in it, even of decorum; but an equal portion of the grotesque or everyday or simply outrageous (that vessel on the floor, what is it?). And does that not read like a description of Olympia in turn? She is likewise not quite creature of fantasy and not quite social fact; neither metaphor nor violation of one, neither real nor allegorical. She is balanced between incompatible modes; and no doubt it was this Manet learnt from Goya, as opposed to undiluted Spanish wildness.

This leads us finally to two aspects of Ravenel’s text which are hardly less perplexing: where it appeared, and by whom it was written. It appeared in a paper of the Left opposition called L’Epoque, one associated closely with the republicanism, even socialism, of Jules Vallès. Ravenel, we know already, was a pseudonym, and behind it was hidden a civil servant, Alfred Sensier. He was a critic whose main allegiance was to the painter Jean-François Millet; he was already Millet’s friend in 1865, and later in life he became his biographer. His Salon spelt out his commitments, to the painting of nature and plein air and sens rustique: it began with an epigraph from Rabelais, went on to enlist Euripides in praise of Corot, and started its discussion of landscape painting with Hesiod and Virgil. Millet was absent from the Salon of 1865 and Sensier bemoaned the fact; he contented himself with a long panegyric of Millet’s Daphnis et Chloé s’amusant à donner la bécque à des petites merles qu’ils viennent de déracher, a decorative panel just completed for a house in Colmar.56

In no sense is Sensier’s entry on Olympia a betrayal of these, his basic and ordinary aesthetic beliefs. The entry, one should realize, is not important in Sensier’s Salon. It comes at the end of the eleventh long article in the series of twelve he did for L’Epoque, and it figures there as part of the alphabetical listing of pictures left out of account so far—items that had not found a place in the extended narrative of the main text. Insofar as the entry produces an author’s voice at all—and it does so only incompletely, I feel—it is doubtless meant to be ironic, only half impressed by Manet’s peculiar tour de force. The tone had been set already in Sensier’s second article, on 4 May, when he dealt with Manet as follows:

Monseur Manet, a nude Olympia lying on a bed, and near her a Negress presenting some flowers; picture capable of exciting sedition if its neighbour, a Christ, by the same author, did not disarm the furious with a Homeric laugh, These two canvases are the two victims of the salon; nothing can convey the spectators’ initial astonishment, then their anger or fear, These two excellent jokes do not merit this excess of rage; they are a trifle daring in their poses—Olympia especially—but too visibly the natural offspring of Goya for anyone to be disturbed by their misdeeds.57

It is as if in the later entry Sensier tried to reproduce this tone and failed, and in doing so happened upon some kind of knowledge.

This is not meant to detract from the commentary Sensier in fact produced. It is a brilliant piece of criticism; but its success seems bound up, first, with the author’s anonymity, his detachment from his normal aesthetic stance;58 and second, with the way the offhand, compressed, notelike form of the
alphabetical listing allowed the text to leap from aspect to aspect, reference to reference, in a movement which did not need to be construed as judgment. There is a quality of inadvertence to Ravenel's writing; and by now it should not seem inappropriate that the only real criticism of Olympia in 1865 was done in these circumstances—by a critic leaving off his artistic self, and coming upon the picture in the most perfunctory of critical settings.

Or almost the most perfunctory, one should say: there was, after all, the page in the paper allotted to caricature. On one or two occasions, that mode allowed Olympia's story to be told more or less in full. Bertall, for example, could offer the reader of L'Illustration his own solution to the absent phallus: he put the black cat, with its tail erect, in place of the hand which covered the genitals. He put a chamber pot under the bed, a pipe under the pillow, called Olympia a coal lady from Batignolles and added to her bouquet a commandement—an order from the bailiffs to pay up or prepare for the consequences. Aside from Ravenel, no critic scanned the picture to better purpose, or found a more economic way to denote its main effects.

It had once been possible for painters to show prostitution in a straightforward light, with actual coinage changing hands in an atmosphere of lechery, alcohol, and good cheer. Johannes Vermeer's Procuress is the best example. No doubt Vermeer's viewers were meant to take the figures in this scene as signs of the vanity of earthly things, but they were ordinary signs, easily read, and meant to be laughed at as well. Comedy has disappeared from Olympia's world, unless we agree with Ravenel about the cat, and with it has gone the rest of Vermeer's openness. Money cannot be shown as part of prostitution now, nor can the client, and least of all a definite and matter-of-fact relation between the buyer and seller of sex. The picture is about the absence of such things.

We might sum it up by saying that in Olympia prostitution has become more extravagant and threatening; and that seems to have been an accurate reflection of the state of the trade in the later nineteenth century. Relations between prostitute and client involved, among other things, matters of social class; they often meant a transgression of normal class divisions—a curious exposure of the self to someone inferior, someone lamentable. That doubtless lent spice to the transaction, but only if it were made part of a set of sexual theatricals which became more cumbersome as the years went on. For prostitution to work in this society, the disproportion Simmel talked of between commodity and price had to be fought for and maintained in the sexual exchange itself. The client wished to be assured he
had access to some mystery there, probably of Woman; hence the prostitute
was obliged to make herself desirable—to run through the identities in
which desire was first encountered by the child. It was a game in which
the woman most often collaborated and to an extent was trapped; but
there were other forces—market forces, essentially—which threatened to
dislodge her from belief in the parts she played. She could be returned
quite abruptly to the simple assessment of herself as seller of her own
labour power, someone who put physical complaisance on the market and
could never be sure what it would fetch. In this sense she belonged to the
proletariat as undramatically as Vermeer’s loose women.

I have given my reasons for believing that the ultimate cause of the
critics’ difficulty with Olympia in 1865 was the degree to which she did
not take part in the game of prostitution, and the extent to which she
indicated the place of that game in class. She came from the lower depths.
The images of sickness, death, depravity, and dirt all carried that conno-
tation, but they stayed as passing figures of speech precisely because the
critics could not identify what in the picture told them where Olympia
belonged.

Reduced to its most simple form, this chapter’s argument amounts to
saying that the sign of class in *Olympia* was nakedness. That may still seem
a cryptic formula, so I shall redefine its terms for the last time. Class is a
name, I take it, for that complex and determinate place we are given in
the social body; it is the name for everything which signifies that a certain
history lives us, lends us our individuality. By nakedness I mean those
signs—that broken, interminable circuit—which say that we are nowhere
but in a body, constructed by it, by the way it incorporates the signs of
other people. (Nudity, on the contrary, is a set of signs for the belief that
the body is ours, a great generality which we make our own, or leave in
art in the abstract.)

It follows that nakedness is a strong sign of class, a dangerous instance
of it. And thus the critics’ reaction in 1865 becomes more comprehensible.
They were perplexed by the fact that Olympia’s class was nowhere but in
her body: the cat, the Negress, the orchid, the bunch of flowers, the slippers,
the pearl earrings, the choker, the screen, the shawl—they were all lures,
they all meant nothing, or nothing in particular. The naked body did
without them in the end and did its own narrating. If it could have been
seen what signs were used in the process—if they could have been kept
apart from the body’s whole effect—they might still have been made the
critics’ property. They would have been turned into objects of play, met-
aphor, irony, and finally tolerance. Art criticism might have begun.