

## Vision and Vengeance in Paris and London: Balzac, Clausen, Manet

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Synergies Royaume-Uni et Irlande n° 3 - 2010  
pp. 187-196

**Summary:** *This article considers the depiction of social invisibility in two painters and a writer at both ends of the nineteenth century. It argues that the circumstances of the city of capital and bourgeois adventure discernable in both Paris and London give rise to narratives of visibility, invisibility and revenge in both the novel and urban painting. Drawing on the work of Franco Moretti and others, the discussion explores these themes in Balzac and in the work of the British painter George Clausen, which is compared to a famous piece by Manet.*

**Keywords:** Balzac, Clausen, City Painting

**Résumé :** *Cet article porte sur la représentation de l'invisibilité sociale chez deux peintres et un écrivain au début et à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Nous verrons que les circonstances des capitaux et de l'aventure bourgeoise de la ville, aussi bien à Paris qu'à Londres, suscite les thèmes de visibilité, d'invisibilité et de vengeance dans le roman comme dans la peinture urbaine. En prenant appui sur les travaux de Franco Moretti entre autres, notre investigation explore ces thèmes chez Balzac et chez le peintre britannique George Clausen, comparé à une œuvre célèbre de Monet.*

**Mots-clés :** Balzac, Clausen, peinture urbaine

In Balzac's short story, 'Le Colonel Chabert' (1832-39), the eponymous central character is a Napoleonic soldier, 'a count of the Empire', who is believed to have died on the battlefield of Eylau, but who in fact has survived, after many vicissitudes, to return to Paris. There he hopes to be received by his wife - who is now remarried to a leading aristocrat of the restoration - and to resume his old life, his income, and his status, and to relish his glory. However, as so often in Balzac, things do not work out as envisaged, and this authoritative and naïve old soldier is crushed by the discovery that he is now a non-person.

His wife, who has ignored his attempts to contact her by letter, refuses to see him, the lawyers who he approaches burst into laughter at his claims, and, finally and most tellingly, he seems gradually to have become invisible, changed as he is by the appalling experiences he has undergone. The significant moment is an

exchange of looks, on the one side vainly seeking satisfaction and on the other dissembled or perhaps unconscious:

Eh! Bien, dit le colonel avec un mouvement de rage concentrée .... Pour voir la comtesse rentrant du bal ou du spectacle, au matin, je suis resté pendant des nuits entières collé contre la borne de sa porte cochère. Mon regard plongeait dans cette voiture qui passait devant mes yeux avec la rapidité de l'éclair, et où j'entrevois à peine cette femme qui est mienne et qui n'est plus a moi! (Balzac, 1974:57)

The colonel's reaction to this moment, in which his questing look is rebuffed or rather simply ignored, is immediate: 'Oh! Dès ce jour j'ai vécu pour la vengeance' (Balzac, 1974:57). And that vengeance is prompted by the countess's consignment of her importuning husband to invisibility and her frustration of his desire. 'Elle sait que j'existe .... Elle ne m'aime plus ! Moi, j'ignore si je l'aime ou si je la déteste ! je la désire et la maudis tour à tour. Elle me doit sa fortune, son bonheur ; eh ! bien, elle ne m'a pas seulement fait parvenir le plus léger secours !' (Balzac, 1974:57).

The combination here of vision - frustrated vision, specifically - rejection, and the desire for vengeance in revenge for that enforced invisibility and blocking of desire, is the core of what I want to discuss in this essay. Love turns swiftly towards hatred in this brief and economical exchange, emotion lurking in an uncertain middle ground between these two poles; and the pain of becoming unseen, especially when it is a social and not a physical invisibility, is penetrating enough to provoke dreams of vengeful annihilation.

This is not an unusual situation in Balzac. Consider this much better known incident from *Illusions perdues* (1839), which comes early in the section called 'Un grand homme de province à Paris'. Lucien Chardon de Rubempré, after dining 'à quarante sous', has been told by the disdainful maid Albertine, that Louise de Bargeton 'ne reçoit pas encore', and has been given a letter - 'et pas de signature!' - cancelling their arrangement to meet on the grounds that she has to be with Madame d'Espard, who - like Louise herself - is unwell (Balzac, 1972:158). Lucien, who has begun to consider himself someone since arriving in Paris, finds suddenly that, after all, he is not. Albertine delivers 'ce froid billet' 'd'un air fort impertinent' (Balzac, 1972:159). Finding himself in the Tuileries, 'sans croire avoir marché', Lucien begins to take notice of his surroundings:

Il faisait beau. De belles voitures passaient incessamment sous ses yeux en se dirigeant vers la grande avenue des Champs-Élysées. Il suivit la foule des promeneurs ... étourdi par le luxe des chevaux, des toilettes et des livrées.... Quand, en revenant, il vit venir à lui madame d'Espard et madame de Bargeton dans une calèche admirablement attelée, et derrière laquelle ondulaient les plumes du chasseur dont l'habit vert brodé d'or les lui fit reconnaître. La file s'arrêta par suite d'un encombrement. Lucien put voir Louise dans sa transformation, elle n'était pas reconnaissable : les couleurs de sa toilette étaient choisies de manière à faire valoir son teint : sa robe était délicieuse : ses cheveux arrangés gracieusement lui seyaient bien, et son chapeau d'un goût exquis était remarquable à côté de celui de madame d'Espard, qui commandait à la mode.... Elle était la digne cousine de la marquise, qui paraissait être fière de son élève'. (Balzac, 1972:159)

An astonishing number of people acknowledge the two, glowing with health and well being and seated in 'la brillante voiture' displaying the arms of d'Espard and Blamont-Chauvry. Among these are de Marsay and Rastignac ('ces fats', thinks Lucien), who join the women and conduct them towards the Bois. Lucien's reaction is as savage as the violence he feels done to him:

Le poète furieux s'approcha de la calèche, alla lentement, et, quand il fut en vue des deux femmes, il les salua : madame de Bargeton ne voulut pas le voir, la marquise le lorgna et ne répondit pas à son salut.... En s'efforçant de blesser Lucien, les hobereaux [d'Angoulême] admettaient son pouvoir et le tenaient pour un homme ; tandis que, pour madame d'Espard, il n'existait même pas.... Un froid mortel saisit le pauvre poète quand de Marsay le lorgna ; le lion parisien laissa retomber son lorgnon si singulièrement qu'il semblait à Lucien que ce fût le couteau de la guillotine. (Balzac, 1972:160)

Seized with horror and mortification, Lucien's response is as acidulous as Chabert's. 'Le désir de la vengeance s'emparèrent de cet homme dédaigné: s'il avait tenu madame de Bargeton, il l'aurait égorgée'; he lusts to be the executioner of the Terror, 'pour se donner la jouissance d'envoyer madame d'Espard à l'échafaud'. As for de Marsay, he would like to make him suffer 'un de ces supplices raffinés qu'ont inventés les sauvages' (Balzac, 1972:160-161).

The similarity between the scenes in 'Le Colonel Chabert' and in *Illusions perdues* is striking, and the fuller delineation of what appears to be a primal trauma in the latter helps to clarify the more laconic account given in the nouvelle. The primal quality of this repeated scene is further explained when Lucien swiftly learns that it has come about because Rastignac has told the women that Lucien is Monsieur Chardon and not Monsieur de Rubempré, that his mother is a midwife and his father a chemist in the provinces, and that his sister is going to marry a printer. 'Mon Dieu!', thinks Lucien, 'de l'or à tout prix! ... L'or est la seule puissance devant laquelle ce monde s'agenouille' (Balzac, 1972:161).

Revenge and annihilation, then, the scaffold and the brutal despatch of those who disdain to see or acknowledge them, these are the fantasies that pass through the overheated brains of Chabert and Lucien de Rubempré. The visualization of desire, the moment which distils what is longed for, provokes, when it is frustrated, a powerful reaction, a response that imagines the obliteration of what has given offence, coupled with an emotional movement between opposite poles of desire and hatred. It is the experience of social invisibility that serves as the mechanism of this brutal emotional shuttle; and that invisibility is the consequence of disdain for the marginal. The slighted selves of Lucien and Chabert are bruised to the core by this dwindling into non-being, and the whole articulation of the society that sustains such a repudiation of the self on the basis of circumstance and appearance begins to unfold and dwindle as well, into its constituent components and the engines of its vitality: 'money' and appearance.

Those two aspects of nineteenth-century capitalism have featured largely in the literature on Balzac and the novel, and I do not want to rehearse them at any length here. Instead, I want to try to use this repeated scene in Balzac to think about the city (itself hardly neglected in the scholarship on nineteenth-

century culture), and particularly the place of the visual within the city. Since I am an art historian, I want to offer the results of this up to some paintings of the urban scene, both Paris and London, and consider the parts played by visibility, invisibility and revenge in them.

I

Consider, in apparent and startling contrast to these concerns, the Franco-British painter James Tissot's *London Visitors* of c. 1873-74 (plate 1), now in Ohio. Tissot's elegant and stylish composition shows a fashionably dressed couple - the opulent ginger whiskers of the male partner are meant as visual signs unambiguously indicating that these are characteristically English types. The pair are pausing after a visit to the National Gallery in London - a rather brisk visit, as the clock of St Martin-in-the-Fields in Trafalgar Square behind them reveals: it is only 10.35 am - pausing for the man to hunt through his guidebook, while his companion looks directly out at us, indifferent to the tour. The boys, like their elders oddly placed within the composition, are pupils at the school called Christ's Hospital, who acted as guides to this part of the city.<sup>1</sup>

In *Signs Taken for Wonders*, the literary critic Franco Moretti says of the urban in nineteenth-century culture that the description of the city 'as a physical place ... becomes the mere backdrop to the city as a network of developing social relationships' (Moretti 2005:112). For Moretti, it is 'the dazzling rapidity of success and ruin' in emergent capitalism that provides the engine for 'the great theme of the nineteenth-century novel from Balzac to Maupassant' (Moretti, 2005:111). Confronted with such a subject, the novel puts aside one of its longest lasting structures, the enduring motif of the journey, or rather reworks it: 'with Balzac the "prose of the world" ceases to be boring' for Moretti. 'It is precisely the very prosaic social relationships of incipient capitalism that constitute his plots and confer on them their gripping ... features. To arouse the protagonist and the reader it is no longer necessary to embark on a journey: much better to stay in town', where 'life can transform itself into adventure' (Moretti, 2005:115-16).

Moretti seems to overstate his case; the journey continues to be necessary in Balzac, if only to provide the mechanism whereby his protagonists arrive in Paris, which must still be shown. It is true that later in the century, in the Goncourts or Maupassant, journey is implicit but suppressed: the protagonist of *Bel-Ami* (1885), for example, is in the city from the start; or think of the opening scene of *Manette Salomon* (1867), where 'du monde allait dans le Jardin des plantes ... un monde composé de toutes les sortes de gens de Paris, de la province et de l'étranger'; but for Balzac the provincial origins of his figures, or the sense of an originary scene - as very notably in the figure of Colonel Chabert, who must be reborn from the ditch where the dead have been thrown after Eylau before he can return to Paris to live through another kind of agony - are deeply necessary (Goncourt, 1996:79). It is also the case that Balzac has to make use of the highly coloured images of death and annihilation - the garrotte and the scaffold - in order to offset the inherent banality of the scenes he describes. The snubbing of another could be an episode of no more than crushing insignificance.

The savage horrors inflicted on Chabert on the field of Eylau, the possibilities of brutal revenge, are all devices in part developed to exaggerate the everyday into the class of what Moretti calls 'adventure'. Boredom is a principle emotion in Tissot, languor, social embarrassment, all the moods and emotions of a civilised bourgeois life, into which Balzac infuses the vivid horrors of the Terror and the battlefield, and the melodrama of insanity and exclusion.

Nonetheless, that sense Moretti which posits of the exceptional quality immanent within prosaic urban experience, a quality capable of transforming the banalities of life and character into vivid immediacy and matters of life and death, is accurate. In particular, Moretti is useful in showing us that 'description' of the physical scene is less important than the 'shock, surprise, suspense' - those motors of plot - that can be derived from the exigencies of everyday life. Much that is central, and in fact crucial, to the realities of urban experience, is invisible on the streets, is psychological, or depends on the ebb and flow of fortune, the tortuous and convoluted byways of fate, lived out by individuals and visible - when it is visible - only within the network of social relations and the shifting signs of the individual's unstable position, potentially mobile but as often frustrated as fulfilled.

In such a setting, as Moretti tells us, signs become of central importance, not only those signs - of fashion, dress or deportment - that have been so extensively discussed in the context of the nineteenth-century city, but also the signs of social status and position that are exchanged between selves, that individuals pass between them in any urban exchange, the signs of status and the lack of it, of power and its absence, of humanity - as Chabert and even Lucien come to feel - and its denial. It is signs such as these that emanate from the carriages of the rich and powerful and envelop the dispossessed, the marginal and the powerless, as they stand outside and look in. Chabert, who attempts to mobilise the authority of the law to assert his existence and is frustrated by his own humanity, is the really exemplary instance: within the carriage, passing like lightning before him, he reads the whole history of his fall from the social heights into the depths of annihilation, stuck for nights on end outside the carriage entrance of the house where his wife is established, only to find he can no longer be seen.

It is small wonder that the response to this situation is the lust for destruction, the desire to make oneself visible and elicit acknowledgement, and to do so through the expunging of the Other, the crushing of life force set in opposition to one's own ambitions and needs. It is the circuit between the visible and the invisible here that structures the most dramatic of the transformations of everyday life into adventure. In this sense, the city at its most intense and characteristic is not made up from the detail of architecture or the street, but the psychological tension of the visibility of the self within it and the networks of recognition and power which structure and articulate its meanings. Tissot's tourist couple in *London Visions*, set within their assertive, looming, even dream-like, architectural context, are examples of this type of visibility. Their vision - mocked, if rather gently, by the artist's hints at the rapidity and indifference of their London tour - is fixed on the fashionable, the wealthy, and the high-status. Even the features given by Tissot to the foreground boy are, according to

the art historian Malcolm Warner, ‘the classic attributes of the juvenile British snob’ (Warner, 1997:151). There is even great play with visibility-as-status here, the élan and confidence of the composition, the insistence of the famous architectural setting, the stylishness of the woman’s dress, and her direct and frank exchange of glances with her audience. Set against the vertiginous and disturbing perspective of their background, this conventional and sign-ridden pair, beaming out the emphatic semiotics of the urban stereotype, may after all be something other than they so insistently seem.

Other observers of the contemporary scene were more concerned with bringing into visibility the meanings which appearance discounts. When Mr and Mrs Lammle discover their mutual deception in Dickens’s novel *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), and swear revenge on the Veneerings, those defining representatives of the new capitalism as depthless surface, they are engaged in a process of making visible - as is Dickens - what is invisible in the social fabric, rather than concealing it. “‘When I look back, I wonder how I can have been such a fool as to take you to so great an extent upon trust’”, says Lammel to his new wife (Dickens, 1997:130). But taking on trust is exactly what has happened; both the Lammles have presented themselves in dress, action, and deportment, as wealthier, which is to say of superior status, than they really are. Mrs Lammle, with ‘an annuity of a hundred and fifteen pounds’ and ‘some odd shillings and pence, if you are particular’ (Dickens, 1997:128), has been inflating herself and enhancing her visibility by a characteristic deception, one also perpetrated by her husband, whose ‘gingerous whiskers’ might make us think of the couple in Tissot’s painting, whose blatant appearance may perhaps be deceiving us. Malcolm Warner suggests of the woman that ‘her gesture with the umbrella may be an invitation to meet her later, secretly, in the square’, which if so would further signal the uncertainty of the outward show (Warner, 1997:151).

However, in Dickens’s novel, there is also a reciprocal element in the Lammles relationship, a contrast to Chabert’s experience of the destruction of the self isolated from the social status it lusts for: “‘A mutual understanding follows’, says Mr Lammel, reflecting on their now acknowledged situation. ‘We agree to keep our own secret, and to work together in the furtherance of our own schemes’” (Dickens, 1997:130). Mr and Mrs Lammel may have a ‘secret’ to perpetrate on their society - and revenge to wreak - but Dickens has made sure that it is made visible and revealed to us; ‘as he escorts her in the light of the setting sun to their abode of bliss’, we are aware of both their secret and their partnership (Dickens, 1997:131).

## II

To conclude, I want to look at how this interest in making visible appears in some paintings made towards the end of the nineteenth century. George Clausen’s *Spring Morning, Haverstock Hill* (c. 1880/1885, plate 2) at first seems to offer a deceptively serene, if gloomy, view of the urban environment in Hampstead, where Clausen had taken a studio in 1877. Only at second glance does it become evident that there is an intense network of connections at play between the conspectus of social types depicted, one also visible in the related canvas,

*Schoolgirls: Haverstock Hill* (1880, plate 3), where the antagonistic look of the milkmaid and the carefully neutral expressions of the schoolgirls become evident only through close attention. The atmosphere is full of interrelationships that are dissembled, or are not acknowledged by the indirection of almost all the glances. Only the flower-seller in the middle distance of *Spring Morning* reacts directly to her recent customers, the carefully impassive middle-class woman and her daughter in the foreground, as does her milkmaid equivalent in the *Schoolgirls* picture.<sup>2</sup> Like Balzac's primal scene of social non-being, Clausen's paintings give themselves away by repetition.

Whereas the *Spring Morning* allows us a reading that would understand the fixed, even fixated, look of the flower-seller by reference to the mourning dress of the mother - extremely stylish, incidentally - and that would let us read the gesture of the foremost labourer as equally sympathetic, more interesting in the context of the ideas I am offering here is the transformation in *Schoolgirls*. Here the description of class relationships in *Spring Morning*, which, despite its apparent evocation of sympathetic emotion, nonetheless seems to me most interested in the continuing tension and distance between the classes, becomes aggressive and pointed. In the New Haven picture, the milkmaid - although her sunken cheeks and cavernous face suggest a life quite a long way beyond the maiden stage, in experience if not perhaps in duration - stares aggressively at the schoolgirls, who are well aware of the glance, as a social fact, we might think, as well as an individual response. The milkmaid's eyes are fixated on the circuit between the girls' evident, indeed cultivated and self-consciously poised, visibility, and her own social invisibility. Just in case we are in danger of missing the point, Clausen places another flower-seller to the right of the file of walking girls, and rings the changes on the possible responses to her of genteel embarrassment and diffuse, ineffective good will.

Clausen has been seen as 'a key figure in the development of early modernism in Britain', and British Impressionism of this variety was already tackling themes of modern life in the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Warner, 1997:180). Here he seems to have developed ideas given a more ambiguous expression in *Spring Morning* to produce the brutal and pitiless description of contemporary social interaction in *Schoolgirls*, although the latter was probably painted first. In particular it is the delineation of visibility and invisibility that is striking in Clausen's two images. Both position the socially marginal, however necessary their labour, in positions where the central, middle-class actors, secure in their sanctioned fashionable display, behave as if these others were invisible. This is true whether the emotions displayed by the working-class protagonists are positive or otherwise. Clausen's painting is a rather brilliant analysis of social interaction in the late-nineteenth century city, its circuits of glances, awareness and denial of that awareness, are wonderfully evocative of the embarrassment and banality of English social relations. Clausen, working of course fifty years after Balzac at a time when the boundaries of class had hardened in certain ways, becomes the poet of the apparently tepid and decorous surface of bourgeois life, under which, famously, strange emotions swell and pulse.

The distance between the Balzac of 'Le Colonel Chabert' and the Manet of the 1881-2 *Bar at the Folies-Bergères* perhaps describes a similar arc of development (plate 4). A great deal of art-historical ink has been spilt over the question of this barmaid's expression. Is it dulled - that is anaesthetized - with boredom? Opaque because of her uncertain and unreadable class position? Or withdrawn in self-defence as she presents her surface appearance only to the world of rapacious male customers?<sup>3</sup> Lurking here - under the surface of a glance that looks back from a marginalised class position of necessary but conventionally invisible labour - is the rancorous response that powers the lust for destruction in 'Chabert', the desire to make oneself visible and elicit acknowledgement. It is 'the transformation of everyday life into adventure' that Moretti speaks of, but now frustrated and prevented from taking action, the circuit between the visible and the invisible is reversed. We are allowed to see the glance of the marginal and the dispossessed, but that glance means nothing; it becomes simply the blank and unresponsive look of the economically exploited.<sup>4</sup>

Nobody in Manet's great picture is therefore quite on the point of envisaging bloody revolution as the response to this situation, violence to the body, or utter annihilation, as Chabert or Lucien seem to be. But Balzac, of course, is describing those marginalised after tasting the fruits of recognition, which Manet and Clausen are not. It is an important distinction, but one that does not diminish the power of Balzac's primal scene to aid us in exploring these paintings of class and the languages of the glance as they play themselves out in late-nineteenth century Paris and London.

## Illustrations



Plate 1: James Tissot (French, 1836-1902), *London Visitors*, 1874, Oil on canvas, 34 1/4 x 24 3/4 in. Milwaukee Art Museum, Layton Art Collection, Gift of Frederick Layton, L1888.14





Plate 2: George Clausen, *Spring Morning*, Haverstock Hill, c. 1880/ 1885, Oil on canvas, Bury Art Gallery and Museum



Plate 3: George Clausen, *Schoolgirls*, Haverstock Hill, 1880 Oil on canvas, 20 1/2 x 30 3/8 inches, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1985. 10. 1



Plate 4: Edouard Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergères*, 1882, Oil on canvas, 37.8 x 51.2 inches, The Samuel Courtauld Trust, Courtauld Gallery, London

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Malcolm Warner who makes a number of these observations (1997:151). See also Nancy Marshall and Malcolm Warner (1999) *James Tissot: Victorian Life/ Modern Love*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Katherine Lochnan, (ed) (1999) *Seductive Surfaces: The Art of Tissot*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

<sup>2</sup> There is an excellent analysis of this painting, to which I am indebted, in Warner (1997:180).

<sup>3</sup> See T. J. Clark (1990) *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers*. London: Thames & Hudson: chapter 4; Robert L. Herbert (1988) *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society*. New Haven: Yale University Press: 79-81. See also, for a representative collection of the extensive scholarship on this painting, Bradford R. Collins (ed) (1996) *Twelve Views of Manet's Bar*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. See also Peter Brooks (2005) *Realist Vision*. New Haven: Yale University Press: chapter 9. Brooks comments on the 'illegibility' of the barmaid's face as an aspect of the painting's status as 'about the difficulty of interpretation from visual evidence' (p. 178); he also has a tart observation on the 'unending critical babble' which the illegibility of the painting's meaning elicits (p. 179).

<sup>4</sup> In saying this, I am siding with Clark's interpretation rather than Herbert's. Clark comments on the barmaid that 'she is *detached*. ... She looks out steadily at something or somebody, the various things which constrain and determine her, and finds they all float by "with the same specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money"', T. J. Clark (1990) *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers*. London: 254.

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