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Artists and After-Lives

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Article abstract

Dans sa notice nécrologique sur Delacroix, Baudelaire se réfère à celui-ci comme à l'incarnation même du génie romantique, passionné et original. Dans cet essai, Heather Dawkins examine comment Baudelaire, en 1863, définit la créativité de Delacroix et en compare les caractérisations à celles de Degas, artiste dont la vie et l'oeuvre se sont révélées incompatibles avec le paradigme du génie romantique. Le mythe de Degas nie certains aspects du génie romantique et se construit au contraire autour d'un paradigme scientifique moderne de recherche pure. Malgré leurs différences, les mythologies de ces deux artistes intensifient la complexité technique de la gestation de l'image et subsument une autre culture dans l'identité créatrice de l'artiste. Le mythe de Delacroix le situe dans un rapport particulier aux cultures exotiques ou archaïques; le mythe de Degas le situe dans un rapport particulier à la féminité. Heather Dawkins montre que cette compréhension de la féminité est « dé-historicisée » et que l'on peut la considérer comme une abstraction si l'on accorde suffisamment d'attention à l'article d'Alice Michel, « Degas et son modèle », écrit en 1919. Cet article est intéressant pour sa caractérisation de Degas et pour la façon dont il exprime le rapport de la pratique artistique de Degas à la féminité. L'artiste y est dépeint comme autoritaire et exigent. Son rapport à la féminité s'exprime avant tout dans le conflit et la colère. « Degas et son modèle » se démarque des mythes bourgeois de l'artiste – romantique ou scientifique – et présente au contraire Degas, sa pratique artistique et son atelier du point de vue d'une femme de la classe ouvrière.

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Artists and After-Lives

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Résumé

Dans sa notice nécrologique sur Delacroix, Baudelaire se réfère à celui-ci comme à l'incarnation même du génie romantique, passionné et original. Dans cet essai, Heather Dawkins examine comment Baudelaire, en 1863, définit la créativité de Delacroix et en compare les caractérisations à celles de Degas, artiste dont la vie et l'oeuvre se sont révélées incompatibles avec le paradigme du génie romantique. Le mythe de Degas nie certains aspects du génie romantique et se construit au contraire autour d'un paradigme scientifique moderne de recherche pure. Malgré leurs différences, les mythologies de ces deux artistes intensifient la complexité technique de la gestation de l'image et subsument une autre culture dans l'identité créatrice de l'artiste. Le mythe de Delacroix le situe dans un rapport particulier aux cultures exotiques ou archaïques; le mythe de Degas le situe dans un rapport particulier à la féminité. Heather Dawkins montre que cette compréhension de la féminité est « dé-historicisée » et que l'on peut la considérer comme une abstraction si l'on accorde suffisamment d'attention à l'article d'Alice Michel, « Degas et son modèle », écrit en 1919. Cet article est intéressant pour sa caractérisation de Degas et pour la façon dont il exprime le rapport de la pratique artistique de Degas à la féminité. L'artiste y est dépeint comme autoritaire et exigent. Son rapport à la féminité s'exprime avant tout dans le conflit et la colère. « Degas et son modèle » se démarque des mythes bourgeois de l'artiste – romantique ou scientifique – et présente au contraire Degas, sa pratique artistique et son atelier du point de vue d'une femme de la classe ouvrière.

Myths of the Artist

The credibility of the artist as a visionary or genius has been under considerable duress of late. Historians of art have demonstrated how, over several centuries, the representation of the artist as a creative genius had the purpose of distinguishing certain kinds of people from the broad range of those who produced visual culture. Artists and critics repeatedly made ambitious claims that certain art was more complex, intellectual, inspired, innovative or creative than art made by artisans, amateurs, women or non-Europeans. In the eighteenth century, for example, intellectual aspirations distinguished the Academy and its artists from those who made visual art in contiguous social locations: artisans of the guilds and women amateurs of the bourgeoisie.[1] This was followed by the early nineteenth-century consolidation of the concept of the inspired artist-genius. From the nineteenth century on, the romantic mythification of the artist's personality added to the aesthetic and monetary value of art. The concept of the artist as genius and the embellishment of an artistic personality became cornerstones in the promotion and marketing of art. The myth of the artist continues to have a crucial role in the contemporary international art market, helping to secure record prices for art as well as for preparatory studies for that art. Well aware of both the contemporary effects and the history of constructing the artist as a transcendent creative genius, theoretically informed social historians of art avoid ascribing creative genius to the artists they study. Neither do they use this concept as a way of understanding a particular artist's oeuvre. Rather, the myth of the artist has become an object of study in itself.

This focus is evident in a groundbreaking publication on Edgar Degas. Carol Armstrong's book, *Odd Man Out: Readings of the Work and Reputation of Edgar Degas*, closely examines the myths generated from memories of or art by this artist.[2] As Armstrong points out, certain features of Degas's life and work are difficult to assimilate to other widely held myths of the artist. The romantic paradigm of the artist as embodying a sublime creative depth and the fascination with personality that results from this is frustrated in the case of Degas. Historically, Degas has been perceived by peers and critics alike as a closed and opaque human being, and most attempts to write about him must confront the fragmented and mostly unfathomable remembrances of his peers. While many representations of Degas assume a romantic ferment, this has little to do with what we know about him and more to do with the necessity of trotting out a generic creative consciousness, one ascribed to all artists after romanticism. In Degas's case, the myth is frustrated because there is little confidence in what can be proposed as occurring profoundly, creatively within Degas.

In the final chapter of *Odd Man Out*, Armstrong describes the differences between the myths of Degas and the romantic myth of the artist in general. She analyses the myth of Degas closely, demonstrating its defining features as well as its rather unusual, because neither fully romantic nor fully modernist, position on this artist and his art. Armstrong delineates the distinguishing features in the myth of Degas, that is the characteristics that usually define the critics' understanding of this artist and his oeuvre. Supporting her observations with meticulous attention to biographical accounts of Degas and interpretive writing on his art, Armstrong finds he is an opaque and unknowable figure, an enigma marked only by "privacy and privation, blindness and barrenness."[3] These themes are taken to a higher level of abstraction in Armstrong's discussion, and she uses Paul Valéry's writing as both a precedent and a foundation for her elaboration of this abstraction. In her analysis, Degas's life and work exemplify "occlusion and self-negation."[4] These features of Degas's life thwart the romantic embellishment of the artist's life because they are impenetrable and self-

negating. If one looks to Degas's art for illumination on his life, one finds a repetitive, opaque, and reflexive oeuvre, and these qualities are not conducive to the romantic intensification of the personality of the artist. Art by Degas frustrates the clichéd romantic mythification of the artist's personality. Thus, both the work and the myth of Degas subvert the romantic myth of the artist.

Valéry, who shared Degas's refusal of the "romantic obsession with personality," is identified by Armstrong as a writer who accepted the restrictions on what could be known of Degas as a man or as an artist.[5] Rejecting an artistic persona in Degas, Valéry represented him as a practitioner of pure research in art. Degas was thus not understood by him as a creative genius but as a methodical artist, the embodiment of systematic research into visual art, and as Valéry proposes, a modern Leonardo da Vinci.[6]

Armstrong argues, moreover, that Valéry's myth of Degas refuses more than the romantic obsession with the personality of the artist. She sees this myth of Degas as incompatible with the paradigm of the early-modernist avant-garde artist as a creative hero and an exemplar of freedom and virility. Because Degas's artistic practice is understood by Valéry as rigorous, studied, methodical and constraining, it is the antithesis of immediate, unique and liberatory self-expression, qualities ascribed to early modernist artistic practice.[7] Armstrong instead argues that sublimation is the core of Degas's art making.[8] Like Valéry, she sees in Degas's nudes and in his methods of making art a "willful but unpossessive draughtsmanship that is nothing but itself – it does not claim to caress or manipulate the female body, but only to master its own system."[9] This myth of Degas would seem to be, then, a myth dislocated from prevailing beliefs about the romantic or modern artist. It distances early modernist avant-garde creativity, freedom and virility; it obstructs the romantic mythification of the artistic persona.

Nevertheless, if one compares the myth of Degas with an earlier text in the romantic definition of the visual artist, that is, Baudelaire's obituary tribute to Delacroix, one can mark certain similarities in the representation of Degas and the romantic paradigm of the visual artist.[10] The socially polished but passionate Delacroix, according to Baudelaire a volcano concealed by a bouquet of flowers, is like Degas preoccupied by the method of art.[11] Delacroix has diligently stockpiled his visual skills in readiness for the lightning-quick translation of inspiration into a picture:

> Delacroix était passionnément amoureux de la passion, et froidement déterminé à chercher les moyens d'exprimer la passion de la manière la plus visible. ... Il est évident qu'à ses yeux l'imagination était le don le plus précieux, la faculté la plus importante, mais que cette faculté restait impuissante et stérile, si elle n'avait pas à son service une habileté rapide, qui pût suivre la grande faculté despotique dans ses caprices impatients. Il n'avait pas besoin, certes, d'activer le feu de son imagination, toujours incandescente; mais il trouvait toujours la journée trop courte pour étudier les moyens d'expression.
>
> C'est à cette préoccupation incessante qu'il faut attribuer ses recherches perpétuelles relatives à la couleur, à la qualité des couleurs, sa curiosité des choses de la chimie et ses conversations avec les fabricants de couleurs. Par là il se raproche de Léonard de Vinci, qui, lui aussi, fut envahi par les mêmes obsessions.[12]

Artistic skills are here obsessively researched and held in reserve for an impulsive, passionate and tyrannical imagination. In comparison, the representation of Degas by Valéry and Armstrong emphasize that this acquisition of skill, methodically exploring the technical means and representational limits of art, is for Degas an end in itself. Valéry's account was published in the 1920s, an era of pure (rather than applied) research in the sciences. The artistic equivalent of pure research privileges artistic method as both the means and end of art. Technical obsession is no longer in service to a volatile imagination or the passionate rages of the heart; Degas's art is instead dedicated to the systematic exploration of itself. Despite Valéry's disappointment with the visible results for Degas's art, he modernizes the artist as a pure researcher, echoing the preoccupations and methodologies of an increasingly scientific culture and updating earlier conceptions of dedication to the intricate and difficult craft of image making.

Artistic skill, in Baudelaire's tribute to Delacroix, serves a particular kind of imaginative ferment. This volatile creative intensity stands in stark contrast to Delacroix's studio. According to Baudelaire, the painter's studio is a work space, a place for measured self-discipline. It is noted, even praised, for its lack of a certain kind of clutter. In Delacroix's studio were found no rusty panoplies, Malayan *kris*, Gothic scrap-iron, jewelry or old clothes.[13] In short, none of the hackneyed props of romantic studios. Nevertheless, exotic reaches are central to Baudelaire's definition of Delacroix, just as they were central to Delacroix's paintings. In this description of Delacroix, his paintings are projected onto his very appearance:

> Je vous ai dit que c'était surtout la partie naturelle de l'âme de Delacroix qui, malgré le voile amortissant d'une civilisation raffinée, frappait l'observateur attentif. Tout en lui était énergie, mais énergie dérivant des nerfs et de la volonté; car, physiquement, il était frêle et délicat. Le tigre, attentif à sa proie, a moins de lumière dans les yeux et de frémissements impatients dans les muscles que n'en laissait voir notre grand

> peintre, quand toute son âme était dardée sur une idée ou voulait s'emparer d'un rêve. Le caractère physique même de sa physionomie, son teint de Péruvien ou de Malais, ses yeux grands et noirs, mais rapetissés par les clignotements de l'attention, et qui semblaient déguster la lumière, ses cheveux abondants et lustrés, son front entêté, ses lèvres serrées, auxquelles une tension perpétuelle de volonté communiquait une expression cruelle, toute sa personne enfin suggérait l'idée d'une origine exotique. Il m'est arrivé plus d'une fois, en le regardant, de rêver des anciens souverains du Mexique, de ce Montézuma dont la main habile aux sacrifices pouvait immoler en un seul jour trois mille créatures humaines sur l'autel pyramidal du Soleil, ou bien de quelqu'un de ces princes hindous qui, dans les splendeurs des plus glorieuses fêtes, portent au fond de leurs yeux une sorte d'avidité insatisfaite et une nostalgie inexplicable, quelque chose comme le souvenir et le regret de choses non connues.[14]

Delacroix, in this romantic vision, scarcely needs the stock paraphernalia of otherness in the studio, since he embodies it. In Baudelaire's account Delacroix is savage: fierce, predatory, passionate and cruel. Disguised under sophistication and nuance, this man of society is an archaic ruler capable of monumental destruction as much as longing reverie. Baudelaire's description of Delacroix distills the painter's oeuvre into the painter himself. He personifies, just as he once painted, dramatic massacres and devastations, tigers or Arabs locked in deadly combat. The exotic ferment of the French romantic imagination – and romanticism was at one point the epitome of the modern for Baudelaire – originates far beyond French culture. As Christopher Miller, citing Baudelaire, has pointed out, this French form of romantic creativity consisted of creative mercantilism on a global scale in which the raw materials of the imagination were shipped to France in order to be made into art: "La France, il est vrai, par sa situation centrale dans le monde civilisé, semble être appelée à recueillir toutes les notions et toutes les poésies environnantes, et à les rendre aux autres peuples merveilleusement ouvrées et façonnées."[15]

Baudelaire's account of Delacroix parallels Baudelaire's theory of creative mercantilism. He collapses Delacroix's art into his being and subsumes world cultures in a personification of French creativity through Delacroix. In Delacroix, the core of French romantic creativity is an archaic savagery that inspires an imaginative vision unadulterated by either gentlemanly polish or European painting traditions. Baudelaire bestows on Delacroix a multi-layered personality whose exotic creative depth is concealed by a polite and versatile social veneer.

Delacroix's creative otherness points beyond France; Degas's points beyond masculinity. As Armstrong concludes that the myth of Degas is incompatible with modernism, she pinpoints an aspect of the myths of Degas that, especially since the 1970s, has been given greater emphasis in defining his outsiderness and otherness:

> Degas was not free, but bound within a structure of representation; his persona was not predicated on a myth of authentic presence, but on personal disappearance; and he was not the virile possessor of the world and its women through his painting and his sexuality. Instead he hovered indeterminately within the very domain that he, as a "misogynist," was said to despise: that of femininity. Sublimated, structural, and antilibidinal, deconstructed and disappearing, Degas's self also made him an "odd man out" for mythic modernism, whose preferred self is a free, a virile, and "authentic" one.[16]

Like Delacroix, Degas is found to have an essential creative link with something beyond the periphery of French artistic genius. Degas's outsider element, the equivalent of Delacroix's archaic savagery, is femininity. In the myths of Delacroix and Degas, separated as they are by time and cultural flux, there are divergent emphases in the relationships posed between artists and bourgeois society, as well as between technique and creativity. The characteristics of creativity are distinct to each myth. None the less, both myths of creative genius absorb the culture and identity of an "other" beyond the hegemonic definitions of artistic exceptionality. In Delacroix's myth, as we have seen, the soul of modern French creativity is archaic and global; what is specifically French is the ability to transform this raw creative material into art. In Degas's myth, creativity draws its strangeness from femininity, or rather from Degas's unusual incorporation within the domain of femininity. Writing on Degas that argues for this understanding often points to the interpretation of Degas's work as misogynist as proof of the unfamiliarity and strangeness of Degas's affinity with femininity.[17] In this thinking, critics who saw Degas's art as misogynist have either misunderstood Degas's complex imagery or have displaced their own vision onto Degas.[18]

Obviously, Degas was a very different artist from Delacroix. Degas is rarely described as impassioned and was better known for his abruptness than his charm. Degas's fragmented aphorisms, his celibate status and his brusqueness appear to have been indigestible in bourgeois society; he lacked Delacroix's thousand artful kindnesses. The myth of Degas, which by definition is restricted to the surface of his personality, cannot plumb the depths of the enigma for something passionately creative and coherently outside of bourgeois culture; he lacks the signs of Delacroix's impassioned depth. Nevertheless, there is continuity in bourgeois culture's structuring of artistic creativity. Through both Delacroix and Degas, an aesthetically

marginalized, "low" culture is absorbed and transcoded, becoming a foundation for the quality of strangeness that is essential to exceptional creativity in bourgeois culture.[19]

While there is little doubt that Degas's work is entangled with femininity, the claim that Degas hovered indeterminately within femininity depends on a vacuous definition of it. Femininity is here defined as a relational position in a structure. It is, at best, "not man." While this definition has been found useful in many forms of structuralist and deconstructive scholarship, it is not necessarily compatible with a reading of femininity as it has been historically configured. Femininity is historically variable, defined and experienced in relation to a multitude of other historical phenomena. Femininity is lived as well as represented. It impinges on the lives of women. It can only be claimed that Degas hovered indeterminately within the domain of femininity if one accepts femininity as a conceptual abstraction and if one ignores a central text on Degas's artistic practice. For that text makes it clear, at least, that Degas did not hover indeterminately among women.

Alice Michel's "Degas et son modèle"

In 1919 the *Mercure de France* published an article by Alice Michel called "Degas et son modèle."[20] This essay predates other better known essays on Degas; it was published in a prominent literary journal a decade and a half before Valéry's *Degas, danse, dessin* and four decades before Daniel Halévy's memoir of Degas was published as *Degas Parle*.[21] "Degas et son modèle" has not enjoyed the legitimation of those admiring representations of Degas. From 1919 when the article was published to 1987 when parts of it were translated into English, the article was virtually ignored.[22] I have previously written about Alice Michel's article as a disruption to a chain of mute female bodies which is axiomatic in Degas's artistic practice and oeuvre.[23] I want to consider the text in more detail here, gleaning from it the characteristics of the relationship between Degas and femininity. Since this lengthy article has been all but ignored in the literature on Degas, I will also explore how it first came to be published by a leading French literary journal.

Alice Michel modelled for Degas over a period of about ten years, and her narrative is composed from the point of view of a working-class woman model named Pauline. The article's class and gender orientation is distinctive, even radical, within the literature on Degas, which more typically comes from and inscribes an upper-class masculine milieu and subjectivity. In comparison with that literature, "Degas et son modèle" portrays the artist in such a way as to make him unrecognizable. Indeed, when I first read "Degas et son modèle," I found it bewildering. I had been reading accounts of Degas that portrayed him as an anti-social but brilliant artist, an artist whose artistic vision and genius compensated for his intractable unpleasantness. I could find no such combination in "Degas et son modèle." Here he is portrayed as abrupt, even mean, but brilliance is not one of his traits. As I recovered from the initial disorientation, I realized that in the clash of cultures between a working-class woman model and her bourgeois artist employer, the romanticization of the artist as a genius, a visionary, a forerunner or an outsider had no part. I then began to see the article as a denunciation of the artist's exercise of class and gender dominance in the studio, thus constituting an extraordinary rupture in the politics of representation in early twentieth-century visual art practices. Degas is, in this account, a domineering, old, depressed and awkward artist whose artistic practice fulfils a need for geriatric care and embodies bourgeois masculine dominance rather than constituting an inspired or even credible artistic endeavour.

Michel's essay does not rely on romantic or modernist avant-garde beliefs in the artist as an outsider who flouts artistic, social and sexual conventions in transgressive freedom or whose personality, freely expressed in art, must be held in awe. Neither is he an isolated and eccentric bohemian, suffering poverty and privation for his art. By entirely side-stepping these conventions of representing the artist, the narrative exposes the limits of representation of Degas in the literature and implicitly undermines the myth of the artist. In the literature on Degas, as Armstrong has observed, Degas's inaccessibility and elderliness have been mythologized. Valéry and Armstrong elaborate Degas as a model of sublimation in which he is solely concerned with the systematic exploration of the methods of art. It is this element that Armstrong confirms as being most pertinent to Degas's art and visible as a logic in his self-portraits. When Michel's article is considered in relation to the elements of the myth of Degas, she confirms certain aspects of the artist as a misogynist and octogenarian. The article, however, has a different take on Degas's relationship with women and his experience of old age. Predating the myth of Degas as an enigma, the article reveals what was historically effaced in order for Degas to be figured in this way or as hovering within femininity. Consequently, Michel implicitly but strongly refutes the idea that Degas was an enigma. She also reveals that Degas's practice was not one of isolated creative work. Degas's studio practice is revealed as a social practice, profoundly reliant on working-class women not just for modelling but for the management of depression and melancholy.[24] Degas's studio practice is represented as a conflictual and angry interaction, in which the artist is entirely known and even predictable.

"Degas et son modèle" is important, however, beyond its deflation of the predominant myths of the artist or of Degas in particular. Representations by working-class women in the arts are a rare occurrence and may have much to tell us. In examining excerpts of the narrative by Michel, I will quote it at length

for several reasons. Since this article has had very little currency since its publication in 1919, or has been misconstrued in what exists, it still awaits a fair hearing and a close analysis. Just as the many paintings and sculptures that represent Degas's perspective on his model, Michel's essay returns the gaze and represents the artist, his artistic practice and his studio. Her perspective has, however, been largely ignored and in this way suppressed. Because the representation of the artist as a transcendent creative genius and as an exotic personality has come under considerable scrutiny in recent years and because feminism has transformed the way we look at art, a readership for Michel's text might finally be realized.

"Degas et son modèle" poses certain difficulties to a contemporary, theoretically informed readership, however. Michel's writing is not, in any obvious way, reflexive. Nor does it highlight the opacity of language. These qualities have been privileged in many contemporary critical readings of historical texts; they are prized, even quintessential, in modern writing. The author's class and gender origin is obvious in its point of view and in the article's reliance on functional or transparent language. Indeed, Degas's opacity of language, his incoherent monologues (see below) and repetitive, laborious, self-referential sculptures are not highly regarded in Michel's article.

Michel's writing is an astute and devastating critique of the mythology of the artist, but it is written as a narrative which has permitted it to be dismissed as exaggerated anecdote. I would instead argue that it functions as ficto-criticism. The pragmatic look at Degas and his studio practice and the protagonist's prosaic farewell to Degas powerfully refuse the hagiography of the artist. As ficto-criticism it instead offers an identification that is rare in historical writings about art. Believing the narrative, however temporarily, results in an identification with a working-class woman rather than a supposedly classless masculine genius. As a result, Michel's writing leaves traces across my own text of what may seem a theoretically questionable sense of agency and transparency of language. To object that language is not transparent, that it is arbitrary and has no essential connection to its referent tells us little about how various groups mobilize language, opaquely or transparently, as a cultural tool. I speak of Degas or the model, without being able to suspend agency or transparency. All this means is that I have let the text be effective, let an identification happen in order to analyse it – and thus realized a political moment of women's authorship. I know I am pursuing a fiction in order to get at a moment of a woman's agency – Michel's writing. That moment of agency is founded on conflict. In this conflict the reader is invited to identify with the gaze of the model in the studio, rather than with, as in most art historical literature, the artist and masculinity. The text constructs an "identifiction" which invites the reader to identify with another's experience and thereby consolidate and stabilize an inter-subjective moment. And, in this case, such an identifiction ruptures a suppression that has been maintained historically. In the end, the identifiction I am drawing from this text is not solely an identification with the protagonist's view. It is, as well, an identification with a historical moment of working-class agency and representation. In other words, one can identify with a fusion of the author and the protagonist: Alice Michel and Pauline. In doing so, one identifies with a woman who was the mute object of the masculine gaze and a cipher in the artist's fascination, as well as the author who returned the gaze and gave us an entirely unexpected view of Degas.

The narrative opens at the end of 1910, beginning:

> – Nom de Dieu! que vous posez mal aujourd'hui! cria Degas à son modèle, en accompagnant ses paroles d'un furieux coup de poing sur la selle. Si vous êtes fatiguée, dites-le.
> – Oui, je suis fatiguée, avoua Pauline qui, depuis un moment, faisait un dernier effort pour rester en équilibre sur sa jambe gauche, tandis que sa main droite retenait avec peine son pied droit soulevé en arrière.
> – Eh bien, reposez-vous. Vous tâcherez ensuite de mieux donner le mouvement.
>
> La mine renfrognée, la jeune fille glissa ses pieds nus dans les savates placées à côté d'elle et descendit sans mot dire de la table à modèle pour aller auprès du poêle. Elle frotta sa jambe engourdie par la pose difficile et jeta de temps à autre un regard irrité vers le vieil artiste qui continuait à modeler sa statuette.
>
> Qu'avait-il donc à ronchonner après elle toute la matinée? 'Tenez-vous mieux que ça!' 'Relevez le pied!' 'Le torse plus droit!' 'Ne vous avachissez pas!' Ne faisait-elle pas de son mieux pour bien donner la pose? ... Et pourquoi ne parlait-il pas, lui, d'habitude si bavard? Chaque fois qu'elle essayait d'entamer la conversation, il ne répondait que par monosyllabes ... Et sa pauvre vieille bonne qu'il avait rabrouée ce matin de façon si grossière qu'elle en avait pleuré, sous prétexte que le feu n'était pas bien allumé ...
>
> Elle continua à observer Degas qui examinait sa figurine de si près que ses longs cheveux blancs la touchaient. Comme il avait l'air méchant avec son front bombé et son nez aux larges narines retroussées qui semblait respirer la fureur! Sa grande bouche était fermée obstinément et sous sa courte barbe blanche peu fournie on apercevait un menton volontaire.
>
> D'un mouvement brusque qui lui était habituel, il se leva subitement, renversant presque la chaise sur laquelle il était

> assis et, le corps raide, la tête rejetée en arrière, il se dirigea à pas rapides, les pans de sa longue blouse grise flottants, vers la petite pièce d'à côté. Pauline mit son absence à profit pour courir consulter sa montre posée sur un chevalet, là-bas, derrière le paravent. Elle ne marquait que onze heures et demie: encore une longue demi-heure à passer avec ce vieillard maussade![25]

The exchange featured here, between an exasperated artist and an equally frustrated model, is typical of the interaction between Degas and his model, Pauline. In "Degas et son modèle," Degas is a demanding and difficult employer. Occasionally he is cheerful, even entertaining, but he is more often grouchy, miserly, depressed and tyrannical.[26] He offers, however, uniquely stable morning employment to the working-class woman who, without this work, would only have seasonal earnings. However trying, working for Degas means she can avoid the boom and bust cycle of modelling in Paris, a cycle of work and unemployment that coincided with the annual Salon. For four or five mornings a week, at five francs for a three-hour session, she strains to fulfill her job of standing on one foot while twisting around to examine the sole of her other foot, lifted up behind her:

> Debout sur le pied gauche, le genou légèrement fléchi, elle releva d'un mouvement vigoureux son autre pied en arrière, en attrapa de sa main droite la pointe, puis tourna la tête de façon à regarder la plante du pied, tandis que son coude gauche se levait très haut pour rétablir l'équilibre. L'espace d'une minute, elle resta presque immobile, tous les muscles raidis; mais tout à coup sa jambe gauche oscilla et, pour ne pas tomber, elle dut lâcher la pose. Une main appuyée sur le paravent, elle reposa quelques instants pour donner à nouveau le mouvement jusqu'à ne plus pouvoir se maintenir.
>
> Tant qu'elle posait, Degas, les yeux presque fermés derrière ses binocles, suivait les contours du corps nu pour les comparer à ceux de sa statuette. Mais quoiqu'il fût assis très près de Pauline, il ne distinguait que vaguement ses formes et se levait à tout instant pour suivre de la main la ligne de la hanche ou l'insertion d'un muscle que son pouce modelait ensuite dans la pâte plastique.
>
> Le modèle posait, se reprenait sans plus entendre d'observations. Elle croyait l'humeur du vieil artiste radoucie, lorsqu'il lui décocha un coup de poing dans le dos qui la fit presque tomber. La voix sifflante, il dit:
>
> – Vous posez si mal que vous me ferez mourir de colère!
> – Il n'y a que vous, monsieur Degas, qui trouviez que je ne pose pas bien!
>
> Pendant un moment, le regard furibond de Pauline croisa le regard non moins irrité que Degas leva vers elle.[27]

Pauline not only strains to keep the arduous poses required by Degas's artistic practice, but she also strains to conform to Degas's beliefs about how working-class women should be. These beliefs require that she keep most of her thoughts and her interests to herself or risk being fired.[28] Doubly constrained, the modelling sessions are toilsome. The young woman in the narrative, Pauline, is presented first as the model for Degas's anatomical and artistic research, and second as a model of working-class womanhood tolerable to him. The strictures on her created boredom and frustration. The tediousness and repetition of modelling and the often futile hope that Degas will be in a good enough mood to help time pass as quickly as possible are the hallmarks of Michel's representation of modelling.

I have said that this narrative dispenses with the myth of Degas as an enigma. Nevertheless, there are certain contradictions in Degas's artistic practice that do not make sense to Pauline. Degas has the habit of embedding cork disks in the torsos of his sculptures in order to save a little money on plasticine, and these disks inevitably come to the surface, damaging the entire sculpture. Pauline has learned from Degas's anger not to point out the problem to him, but his habit, so obviously self-defeating, puzzles her.[29] That Degas exclaimed at the beauty of his models but invariably represented them as coarse and ugly is also frustrating and inexplicable to her.[30] In Michel's text, far from being an enigma, Degas is simply a difficult, contradictory and demanding employer. For example, Degas, who made hundreds of pictures of women bathing, refused his models clean working conditions. Accepting a cold, dark and dirty changing area was the price to be paid for having regular employment:

> Vite, elle courut derrière le paravent. Ses vêtements qu'elle trouva glacés la firent ronchonner après ce vieux maniaque qui obligeait ses modèles à s'habiller dans un coin noir, froid et sale, au lieu de les laisser venir auprès du poêle, comme cela se pratiquait dans tous les ateliers. Sa mauvaise humeur augmenta quand elle vit que sa jupe, tombée derrière la banquette, était pleine de poussière.
>
> Il ne fallait pas songer à demander la brosse; Degas ne voulait pas convenir que l'on pût se salir dans son atelier. Un jour qu'elle demandait à laver ses mains toutes noires, il l'avait rabrouée de belle façon, disant que c'était une manie ridicule de toujours barboter dans l'eau.
>
> A l'idée que demain et encore le lendemain il lui faudrait recommencer une matinée aussi fatigante et interminable,

> en compagnie de ce vieillard exigeant, bougon, Pauline eut presque envie de pleurer. Elle aurait bien voulu lâcher Degas et sa statuette, mais on ne remplace pas du jour au lendemain un artiste qui vous retient quatre ou cinq séances par semaine.[31]

Degas specialized in pictures of women bathing but his studio environment rigorously avoided the "ridiculous mania" of cleanliness. The point of these anecdotes, beyond highlighting the irony of the contrasts between Degas's art and his artistic practice, is to emphasize the working conditions and power relations of the studio. Huysmans's proposal that Degas and his work were about dirt and symbolic dirt rather than bathing and cleanliness is corroborated by Michel, although with a crucial difference. The filth understood by Huysmans to be about sexuality or lower-class women's promiscuity is understood by Michel as an element in a battle between domesticity and creativity, weighted in Degas's favour.[32] Thus, even as models ritually staged bathing as a subject for Degas's art, control and authority were exercised over a domestic servant and working-class woman through dirt:

> Sans se presser, la jeune fille revint auprès du petit poêle. Avec un ennui profond, ses yeux parcoururent l'atelier. Quoique très vaste, il était sombre, car les hautes vitres orientées au nord et qui tenaient tout un côté se trouvaient presque complètement obstruées par un rideau de toile, descendu très bas; il n'y filtrait qu'un jour terne qui pénétrait difficilement jusqu'au fond de l'atelier. Cette faible clarté était interceptée de toutes parts par des armoires, de nombreux chevalets enchevêtrés les uns dans les autres, des selles de sculpteur, des tables, des fauteuils, des tabourets, plusieurs paravents et jusqu'à une baignoire qui servait à faire poser les modèles pour quelque baigneuse.
>
> Les coins n'étaient pas moins encombrés; une quantité de cadres y étaient rangés à côté de châssis vides, de rouleaux de toile, de rouleaux de papier. Pour travailler, il ne restait à Degas qu'un espace fort restreint, sur le devant de l'atelier, juste sous les vitres. C'est là, entre la table à modèle entourée du paravent, entre la selle de sculpteur et le poêle, que l'on passait les matinées.
>
> Mais la chose la plus déplaisante, aux yeux de Pauline, c'était la poussière qui couvrait tous les meubles. La vieille Zoé avait juste la permission d'allumer le feu, de donner un coup de balai autour de la selle, du poêle et le long du passage qui conduisait à la porte de sortie, placée au milieu de l'atelier. Pour tout le reste, défense absolue d'enlever la saleté qui s'y accumulait depuis des années. Degas, qui craignait peut-être aussi quelque maladresse, prétendait que le balayage ne faisait que déplacer la poussière, qu'il abîmait les cadres et encore plus les toiles. Les modèles avaient beau prier Zoé de nettoyer au moins la banquette qui se trouvait derrière le paravent et sur laquelle ils déposaient leurs vêtements, elle leur opposait toujours la défense de Monsieur.
>
> Rien, pas le moindre bibelot ou tenture ne venait égayer cet intérieur sombre. Les portes et les hauts murs couleur marron étaient nus, sans aucun dessin ou peinture. Degas rangeait toutes ses oeuvres dans des cartons et des armoires ou bien les empilait dans la petite pièce au fond de l'atelier.
>
> Exception unique, sur un chevalet placé près de la banquette des modèles, se trouvait une grande toile d'environ deux mètres de long sur un et demi de haut qui représentait un groupe de danseuses évoluant sur la scène sous l'éclairage cru des lampes électriques. Le grand foyer lumineux, les costumes aux couleurs éclatantes, les visages violemment maquillés des danseuses faisaient des taches blanches, rouges, vertes, violettes que l'on apercevait dès la porte, malgré la pénombre qui entourait la toile. De tout temps, Pauline l'avait vue à cet endroit et s'était toujours étonnée qu'elle fit exception à la règle.
>
> Lasse de contempler ces meubles, ces murs, ce parquet sale, le modèle ne songea plus qu'à se chauffer. Pour attirer l'attention du vieil artiste sur le feu qui commençait à baisser, elle ouvrit et ferma la porte du poêle. Il lui cria de laisser ça tranquille.[33]

The studio is here dusty, cluttered, gloomy and cold. It is a difficult place to work, and Degas's unrelenting control over his model and her working environment eliminates the possibility that improvements might be made. For Degas, women's personal cleanliness was a subject for art; for the model, cleanliness was an issue in a conflict over working conditions.

Cleanliness is also a theme in Michel's description of another of Degas's ultraconservative traits: his anti-Semitism. It has long been acknowledged that Degas was an anti-Semite who during the Dreyfus affair rejected friends of long standing.[34] In Michel's narrative, reading the anti-Semitic journal, *La Libre Parole*, is part of Degas's daily routine. Because Degas does not see well enough to read, however, Zoé is asked to read to him, and she appears to have read poorly with some regularity:

> – Tatatata, cria soudain Degas, furibond. Mon Dieu, Zoé, que vous lisez mal! Arrêtez-vous, on ne comprend pas un mot!

Accoutumée à être ainsi interrompue, la vieille gouvernante s'arrêta net, sans achever la phrase commencée, puis ôta ses lunettes. Après un petit silence général, elle dit de sa voix ordinaire, en articulant chaque syllabe:

– Monsieur, je vous ai arrangé votre veston.[35]

In the context of the article, it is tempting to propose that Zoé's mumbling was a form of resistance. Her reading voice may have been a ruse, but the narrative makes Degas's anti-Semitism perfectly clear. Michel's account includes a tirade in which Degas becomes increasingly agitated, even infuriated. His complaints about Jews are largely stereotypical and fanatical, but one is also ironic. Degas accuses Jews of mistaking physical cleanliness with moral purity, and the latter is an impossibility for Jewish people according to him. Throughout the narrative, however, both Degas and his studio are described in detail as unkempt and unclean; his character is, in addition, miserly and self-serving. Clearly, the reader is to understand the hypocrisy of Degas's position. No other historic writing about Degas represents his anti-Semitism so explicitly.

Pauline compromises Degas's anti-Semitism and challenges the imposition of his prejudice on his employees. Pauline, knowing that she could be fired for working for a Jewish artist at the same time that she works for Degas, continues to model for one Monsieur Blondin. When asked, she simply denies knowing that he is Jewish:

– Alors, vous posez cette après-midi chez M. Blondin, qui n'est pas blond du tout, n'est-ce pas?
– Pas le moins du monde, il a les cheveux et la barbe tout noirs et frisés.
– Est-ce un juif?
– Je ne pense pas, monsieur Degas.

D'un ton violent, Degas dit:

– Je les déteste, ces juifs! C'est une race abominable qu'on devrait enfermer dans des ghettos ou détruire tout à fait. Pendant les guerres, ces misérables rôdent sur les champs de bataille pour détrousser les cadavres et achever les blessés, comme des hyènes qu'ils sont ... Ces gens, qui n'ont pas de patrie, ont envahi toute la France; ils se sont faufilés partout, ont pris toutes les bonnes places.

Il haussa les épaules et continua:

– Ils s'imaginent qu'ils sont propres, parce qu'ils prennent des bains, se parfument, s'habillent à la dernière mode, comme si la proprieté consistait à se laver les mains et non à être propre de caractère et de moeurs.

S'animant de plus en plus, il saisit le poignet de Pauline et le serra de toutes ses forces:

– Jamais je ne vais dans un magasin que je sais tenu par un juif. Et si Zoé m'apportait des objets achetés par exemple aux ....., je les jetterais immédiatement par la fenêtre!

Avec rage, il secoua le bras du modèle, comme si elle eût été un de ces israélites détestés, puis il allait et venait dans l'atelier, le visage enflammé. Pauline se taisait, n'ayant aucune envie d'avouer qu'en effet M. Blondin était juif. Degas était capable de la renvoyer pour avoir consenti à poser chez cet homme.

Redevenu calme, le vieil artiste interrogea:

– Est-il convenable avec vous, ce monsieur Blondin?
– Mais oui, il est comme tous les artistes. Dame, il ne se gêne pas pour dire de grosses blagues. Mais c'est tout.
– Ah! il est comme tous les artistes, répéta Degas.[36]

Pauline registers her disagreement with Degas's anti-Semitism but does not confront the conflict. She avoids his attempt to control her, modelling for a Jewish artist but keeping it to herself. As Degas acquiesces that M. Blondin is like any other artist, essentially respectable despite the odd coarse joke, the text evades the distinction which Degas seeks in order to discriminate.

Unmistakably, Michel's text takes a form of dispute and revenge, for she represents her employer as a decidedly unattractive and irritating character to say the very least. In so doing, she breaks with the constraints of politeness on other writers. But the question is larger than that, for theirs was a severely limited experience of Degas, belonging as they did to the same cultural elite. It is worth repeating that Degas is represented as domineering, crude, miserly, impolite, dirty, unkind, fussy, abusive, anti-Semitic and against the democratization of culture or society. These qualities contrast vividly with the usual respect accorded Degas by his contemporaries; for even if they disliked his barbed personality, they did not find themselves dependent on such a person for a living, unlike the model and author of "Degas et son modèle." They were willing to overlook his difficult personality in order to celebrate his art and value his creativity.

Knowledge of that creativity is based in part on the aphorisms attributed to Degas, enigmatic sayings that are a foundation in the myth of Degas. For example, "To colour is to pursue drawing into greater depth."[37] Or "Art is vice, you don't marry it legitimately, you ravish it."[38] These pithy statements are seen as Degas's homage to Ingres and as indications of his

approach to art. They are generally accorded respectful attention in the literature on Degas. In "Degas et son modèle," however, the sayings are parodied, made involuntary, ridiculous and incoherent:

> Mais, ce matin, le travail l'absorba bientôt. Ainsi que cela arrivait souvent, il se mit à prononcer des phrases incohérentes qui amusèrent d'autant plus le modèle qu'il les proféra d'un ton grave, doctrinal, en scandant chaque mot.
>
> Il parla d'une princesse verte et tendre, dévorée d'amour et de puces, qui se promenait dans les ruines de l'art; puis d'un tigre, orné d'un suspensoir, qui pissait le long des remparts de l'art; d'un serpent rouge, voluptueux, amateur d'épicerie et d'art, qui dévorait ses enfants; et ainsi de suite. Ça se terminait toujours par: Ah le chameau d'art!
>
> Après avoir récité toutes les phrases que la jeune fille connaissait déjà, il assembla tout à coup des mots si grossiers et d'une crudité si excessive que Pauline, que le métier n'avait cependant point rendue bégueule, poussa un oh scandalisé.
>
> Il s'arrêta surpris.
>
> – Qu'est-ce que vous avez?
>
> Elle ne voulut pas répéter les gros mots et dit:
>
> – Vous en avez raconté des choses, monsieur Degas, de quoi faire rougir un troupier!
> – Pauvre fille! fit-il, railleur. J'ai offusqué vos chastes oreilles? Vous n'aviez qu'à ne pas m'écouter. Je parle sans savoir ce que je dis, tellement je suis absorbé par le travail ... Allons, donnez-moi la pose.[39]

These monologues form a mocking counterpoint to the witticisms and adages elsewhere attributed to Degas. For Michel, these witticisms were not clever, recondite or precious. They were involuntary and entertaining nonsense, habitual rather than profound.

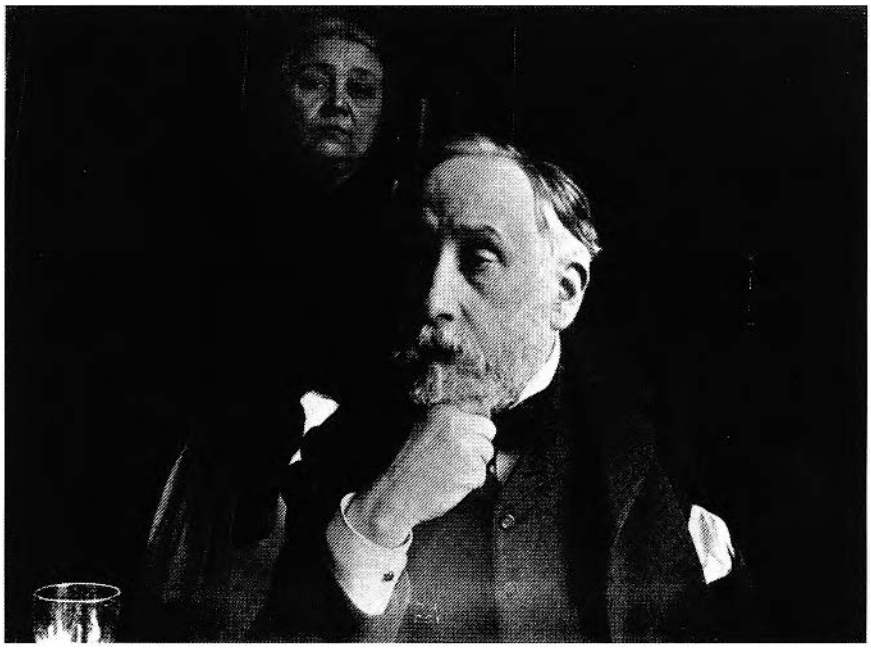
The artist as represented by "Degas et son modèle" is, then, ridiculous as well as forceful and overbearing. Michel is either oblivious to the culture mourning and commemorating Degas's creative genius or is daringly irreverent – using her experience in the studio to offer an intimate view of Degas's creative practice while countering the very processes of commemoration. The core of Michel's text is conflict, rather than loss. Conflict as cultures, genders, classes and identities confront each other across the need of a woman to earn a living and the needs of heterosexual masculinity to work its psychic and social forms of conflicted attraction to women. In that conflict, working-class women are constrained:

> Pourtant, elle connaissait de longue date les idées du vieil artiste et savait que de même qu'il était interdit à Zoé de balayer d'autre coin de l'atelier que la petite zone permise, de même il était défendu aux modèles d'empiéter sur le terrain artistique. Déjà plusieurs fois, elle s'était vu rabrouer de belle façon pour quelque réflexion échappée, ou même pour n'avoir pas caché le livre ou le journal qu'elle portait avec elle.[40]

"Degas et son modèle" is a belated challenge to Degas's authority and the model's silence. The mute object of the artist's look becomes a speaking subject, representing Degas's artistic practice from another perspective, and giving another form to the conflicts of gender and class through which his work was made. Finally, a model, the mute object of the look, could encroach upon the artistic terrain as a speaking subject free from Degas's class and gender-bound interests and their consequences for employment. Degas, she makes it clear, did not hover indeterminately within femininity. Neither was he an enigma. But hers is a profoundly historical point of view, shaped in and through an historically and socially grounded consciousness. Erasures of conflict in class, gender or race were not in her interest. Her audience was not Degas, who by 1919 had been dead two years, but the cultured readers of the *Mercure de France*. The journal had about one thousand copies in circulation in 1919, of which seven or eight hundred were bought by subscription.[41] How did this journal come to publish "Degas et son modèle?"

Given the article's cultural politics, its appearance as a two-part article in this well-established Parisian literary magazine is intriguing. The archives of the *Mercure de France* are now closed to the public, and its history is controlled by the major Parisian publishing house it became. Nevertheless, there is disagreement over certain aspects of its operation during the early twentieth century. The Director, Alfred Vallette, lost interest in the journal after 1900 and withdrew from its day-to-day operations. The official history of the journal states that main editorial power was then given to Monsieur Dumur, but Paul Léautaud, appointed in 1907 as a sub-editor, emphatically claims that he was the editor, although his position was not defined as such. This dispute over power and responsibility is further complicated by the existence of a *comité de lecture* in 1919, said to be non-functioning, and the uncertain role taken by the director's wife, Madame Valette, in the running of the journal.[42] Better known as the prolific author Rachilde, she was permanently employed by the journal and paid a symbolic fifty francs for reviewing about forty books a month for it. According to her

Figure 1. Edgar Degas, *Self-Portrait with Zoé Closier.* Photograph, 1890-1900. (Photo: Cliché: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris).



biographers, she took increasing responsibility for the *Mercure de France* after the turn of the century.[43] After Léautaud's appointment, she seems to have been in perpetual conflict with him. He saw her, contemptuously, as a bluestocking.[44] Léautaud's animosity towards Rachilde suggests a rivalry in the running of the journal, more than is acknowledged by the official history of the *Mercure de France.* Indeed, Rachilde's participation in women's political organizing at this time strongly suggests that she was either responsible for or influential in the publication of Michel's text.

Writing nine years after the publication of Michel's text, Rachilde explained that she had been a feminist despite herself, supporting women and their causes without a self-proclaimed identity as a feminist.[45] Her distance from the feminist label was not the result of a carefully maintained bourgeois feminine decorum. Rachilde was no stranger to controversy, since she had gained notoriety for writing sexually provocative novels in the nineteenth century. In 1917, Rachilde began to participate in pacifist meetings held at Natalie Barney's, which was also the home of one of the lesbian subcultures of Paris. There she met Caroline Rémy, known as Séverine, a journalist who had long been active in political organizing. Rachilde became a regular at both Barney's and Séverine's meetings, the former group oriented to feminist pacifism, the latter to the working class.[46]

Séverine was a socialist journalist of considerable repute and had a long history of writing about class conflict. She began writing for social justice with the *Communard,* Jules Vallès. In 1883 she financed the reappearance of the socialist paper *Le Cri du Peuple*, and by 1886 she was both publisher and editor of that paper. Although she initially published her own writing wherever she could be paid, thinking there was little real distinction between various non-socialist ideologies, the intense anti-Semitism of the Dreyfus affair convinced her to be more selective.[47] In 1897 she co-founded and wrote a regular column for *La Fronde*, a journal that was feminist, anti-nationalist and pro-Dreyfusard.[48] This publicly marked the integration of her support for the working class with her feminist and anti-racist campaigns. Later, she denounced the exploitation of domestic servants in *La Revue philanthropique.*[49] These concerns with domestic labour, class conflict, working-class literacy, democracy and anti-Semitism are all apparent in "Degas et son modèle."

In the absence of further information, it seems reasonable to suggest that the article's inception and publication may be linked to women's progressive organizations in Paris during World War I and to interests shared by Rachilde and Séverine in particular. Encouraging a former model to write, or ghostwriting the article themselves, seems quite within their province. For it so far seems that no other trace of Michel exists. No other articles or books by her have been found, and no descendants have ever claimed copyright on her article.[50]

Despite the location of the article in a literary journal, the very existence of Michel's "Degas et son modèle" also points to a local culture of working-class women. The article's understated brilliance testifies to the sifting through of shared work experiences, just as its publication seems to depend on women's political communities in Paris. It owes its complexity, in part, to conversations and collective reasoning. Despite those conditions of existence, it has nevertheless been both incomprehensible and structurally threatening to its ultimate readership. In an uncharacteristic reluctance to expand the literature on Degas, connoisseurs and conservative art historians have found little to reference and nothing worthy of amplification in "Degas et son modèle." Consequently, the article has not been allowed to rupture the politics of representation in the Degas literature. In that literature, an endless supply of women's bodies are assumed as mute objects of the look. This effectively represses the possibility of reading feminine textual enunciations, should they exist, and represses understanding femininity independent of Degas's fantasy. An analysis like Michel's is forced below the threshold of visibility and meaning.

Background to Foreground: Zoé Closier

The portrait of the working-class model is important in Michel's article, but the information she conveys about the role of the housekeeper, Zoé Closier, is also important because of the belief that Degas had an affinity for the intimate world of women or, more recently, that he hovered within femininity.[51] I noted above that the concern with domestic servants in Michel's article is also evidenced in a publication by Séverine. The references to domestic work in "Degas et son modèle" centre on Zoé Closier. According to the narrative, by 1910 she had been working for Degas for about twenty years. Her niece had joined her, working for Degas and living in his household. The narrative represents Degas as having firm beliefs in the class stratification of French society and culture. Just as Pauline acquiesces to Degas's insistence that models be ignorant of art or culture, Zoé is represented as having forbearance in the face of Degas's retrograde ideas:

> Le lendemain matin, Pauline trouva Degas dans la salle à manger en conversation avec un monsieur d'une cinquantaine d'années, aux cheveux et à la barbe trop noirs. Ils parlèrent politique, pestèrent contre ce "misérable gouvernement", et Degas conclut:
>
> – La société ne peut exister qu'aussi longtemps qu'il y aura des préjugés. L'idée que tous les hommes sont égaux est une infamie.
> – Oui, c'est une abomination, appuya le visiteur avec un regard de mépris sur la vieille bonne qui, assise à sa place, près de la fenêtre, et vêtue de son éternel caraco, assistait, silencieuse, à la conversation.[52]

Zoé Closier's more mundane conflicts with Degas include frustrations over the routine tasks of domestic work. Degas is especially irritated by Zoé's attempt to maintain or replace his worn clothing and by the way she reads *La Libre Parole*.[53] They also have a running disagreement over the cost of the household provisions:

> – Avez-vous vu comme il m'a traitée ce matin parce que le feu ne marchait pas bien?
> – Vrai! fit Pauline, il n'était pas gentil. Surtout avec une personne comme vous qui êtes depuis si longtemps à son service.
> – Depuis près de vingt ans, mademoiselle. Et je fais tout ce que je peux pour le contenter, ce qui n'est pas toujours facile ... Tenez, ce matin, il ne voulait même pas me donner mes cinq francs pour la journée. Je crois vous avoir déjà dit qu'il me donne tous les jours cinq francs pour la nourriture de nous trois: lui, moi et ma nièce. Vous qui connaissez le prix des vivres, vous devez vous rendre compte combien c'est juste, même s'il paye le vin, le charbon, et le pétrole à part: Eh bien, ce matin, il ne voulait rien me donner, sous prétexte que le poulet que nous allons manger à midi lui a été envoyé par un de ses amis.
> – Oh! s'exclama la jeune fille, qu'il est pingre!
> – Oui, quand il s'agit de manger. Mais pour acheter des tableaux ou des dessins, il en trouve de l'argent, allez! Mais il me faut préparer le déjeuner. Voilà vos cinq francs, mademoiselle.
> – Merci, madame Zoé, à demain.[54]

Pauline suggests that Zoé Closier deserves more respect, given her long service to Degas. In fact, Zoé Closier's length of service is the one detail of "Degas et son modèle" that is conspicuously inaccurate. It was 1882 when Zoé started working for Degas: she replaced a servant named Sabine Neyt who had died.[55] By 1910 Zoé Closier would have been about sixty, having worked twenty-eight years in Degas's household.

In addition to being represented by Michel, a photograph of Zoé Closier has survived (fig. 1). It was taken by Degas, and since he is also in it, Armstrong examines it in her study of Degas's self-portraits. She finds that the later photographic self-portraits manifest self-negation in the very process of representing the self. She writes of this photograph in particular:

> Degas's photographs of himself make paradoxes out of the notion of the "origin" or the authorship of the image. There Degas is, in *Self-Portrait with Zoé Closier*, in front of the apparatus, so he cannot also be behind it, directing its "vision" – or can he? Within the photograph he looks away from the camera, refusing to confront, and thus seeming to exclude his other directorial self – he is there, but not here. As a source for his own image, he seems to be, not only elsewhere, but nowhere. Degas was known to have been an autocratic, extremely demanding director of photographic poses, but here his authority is evaded – that he commands his own pose is a fact that is unacknowledged.[56]

The difficulty of combining the roles of photographer and sitter is registered in the photograph's depth of field: the slightly blurred portrayal of Degas's face contrasts with the clarity of the buttons on his jacket, just inches further back from the camera. Degas may, in this photograph, evade his own directorial self in looking away from the camera, but since he is not the only person in the photograph, one could test this interpretation

against the second figure in it. There in the background, in noticeably sharper focus than Degas, is Zoé Closier. Her look is resigned and impassive, perhaps even tired. Is this where Degas's directorial self is registered? In the privilege to command a working-class woman to pose, with little apparent enthusiasm on her part?

Zoé Closier worked for Degas from 1882 until 1917 when Degas died. In 1915 Degas's brother wrote about Degas's life as it was coming to an end:

> He is admirably looked after by the incomparable Zoé. His friends rarely come to see him because he hardly recognizes them and does not talk with them. Sad, sad end! Still, he is going gradually without suffering, without being beset by anxieties, indeed surrounded by devoted care. That is the main thing, is it not![57]

The incomparable Zoé must herself have been about seventy at this time. In many upper-class households a domestic servant who had been with her employer for thirty-five years would be included in a will, left a modest amount or monthly income on which to retire. This was not to be the case in Degas's household. Neither of Degas's two surviving wills make any provision for his housekeeper. Considering this, Pierre Cabanne concludes that Degas intentionally took his will to a notary public who did not know him.[58] Not knowing Degas – not knowing of Zoé Closier's existence – meant that no questions would be asked, and Degas would be spared the discomfort of explaining his callousness or cruelty.

Alice Michel asserts the value and the subjectivity of working-class women against this employer's disrespect. With understated brilliance she represents a woman's historical moment, articulates a conflict of gender, class and culture, and challenges the bourgeois hagiography of the artist. The myths of Degas that subsequently interpreted him as a sublimated artist doing pure research while hovering within femininity or as having a special affinity with it are, I would suggest, more structurally compatible with and dependent on the bourgeois myth of the artist than may first appear. Prior to the formulation of these myths of Degas, Alice Michel and the *Mercure de France* told a different story. In that story, Degas's relationship to women who facilitated his artistic practice is overwhelmingly one of hierarchy and domination.[59]

Notes

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27 Michel, "Degas et son modèle," 459–60.
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42 Silve, *Paul Léautaud*, 54.
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44 Silve, *Paul Léautaud,* 52–54.
45 Rachilde, *Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe* (Paris, 1928).
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47 Her work appeared in the royalist *Gaulois*, the mondaine, *Gil Blas*, the reactionary *L'Éclair* and *L'Écho de Paris*, and the anti-semitic *La Libre Parole*. See Evelyne Le Garrec, *Séverine, Choix de papiers* (Paris, 1982), 10.
48 Evelyne Le Garrec, *Séverine, une rebelle, 1855–1929* (Paris, 1982), 185.
49 Michèle Causse, *Berthe, Ou un demi-siècle auprès de l'Amazone* (Paris, 1980), 246.
50 Letter from Nicole Boyer at the *Mercure de France*, 11 December 1990.
51 See Eunice Lipton, "Degas's Bathers: The Case for Realism," *Arts Magazine*, 54 (1980) 93–97, and *idem, Looking into Degas: Uneasy Images of Women and Modern Life* (Berkeley, 1986); Snow, *A Study of Vermeer*; and Lesser, *His Other Half.*
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53 Michel, "Degas et son modèle," 465.
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55 Jean Sutherland Boggs, ed., *Degas* (Ottawa, 1988), 376.
56 Armstrong, *Odd Man Out*, 237.
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58 Pierre Cabanne, *Monsieur Degas* (Paris, 1989), 357.
59 See Anthea Callen, *The Spectacular Body: Science, Method, and Meaning in the Work of Degas* (New Haven, 1995) for an historically specific contextualization of Degas's artistic methods and art in a scientific and hierarchical culture.