MANET AND GEORGE MOORE

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“Because I was always wax within, and the body being subject to the mind,” George Moore wrote in Avowals, the latest of his full autobiographies, “my English appearance began to wane and to shape itself afresh, as can be seen in Manet’s portrait.” The Confessions of a Young Man, written in his early thirties, tells with warmth and nostalgia of those very significant years that the novelist spent in Paris from 1873 until the end of 1879. But the passage in Avowals is especially interesting because it shows that when he was sixty-seven years old, Moore was still reflecting with satisfaction on the deep and permanent impression that France had made on him. And a few months before his death in 1933 at the age of eighty-one, during a short stay in Oxford with Mrs. Belloc Lowndes, his conversations about his life dwelt especially on his days in Paris.

The Manet portrait in which Moore fancied his Englishness was beginning to wane is undoubtedly the pastel illustrated on the cover of this Bulletin. Although there are two other portraits of him by the French artist, whom he admired unstintingly throughout his life, they both have the character of sketches, and the pastel is generally regarded as the definitive work. It is also the one that Moore himself published as the frontispiece to his Modern Painting, in spite of the fact that in the opinion of many people, according to the extremely sensitive and self-conscious writer, Manet had made him look in it “a figure of fun.”

George Moore’s vanity about his personal appearance is perfectly in keeping with the description of himself to be gleaned from his own numerous revealing accounts given in the Confessions, in the Memoirs of My Dead Life, in Vale, the third volume of the autobiographical trilogy, and in Avowals. Manet has characteristically missed nothing of the complex character of the young Irishman in Paris, who wrote of this period in his life that he was now “launched on Parisian literary and artistic society” and proudly repeated the painter’s tribute to his new position, “There is no Frenchman in England who occupies the position you do in Paris.” But it is interesting to check Moore’s verbal self-portraits, as well as Manet’s three studies, against the objective description of a young Englishwoman who knew Moore about this time:

“He was not handsome, there was something even vaguely comic in his appearance. Was it the long neck, the shoulders too sloping for a man of his height and strength? Or was it his chin, too small for the forehead and nose? . . .

“What was really ‘amusing’ in the sense that painters use the word, was the colour of his hair. It called to mind the wild jonquil, being pale yellow without the least tint of red. . . . This fine hair fell on an absolutely white forehead, high and bulging. The grey blue eyes, a little too prominent, often wore the vague spiritless expression common to the very observant, but sometimes they lit up and became strangely perspicacious, adventurous, or just derisory.”

His tawny coloring, which is indeed so striking in the Manet pastel, is offered by Moore as the main reason why the great Impressionist painter, almost immediately after their first meeting, asked him to sit. In one account he writes that Mallarmé had effected the introduction because he thought that the “golden hair and pink and white complexion were especially suitable to Manet’s art,” and elsewhere too he describes himself as a “fresh-complexioned, fair-haired young man, the type most suitable to Manet’s palette.” He tells us that the painter’s first intention had been to paint him in a café, since that was where they first met. The sketch on canvas illustrated on the next page is sometimes called At the Café and is presumably one of Manet’s first approaches to the problem of portraying Moore, who by this time had become a habitué of the Nouvelles Athènes, the meeting place of the Impressionist painters on the Place Pigalle. The rapid, masterly drawing that shows Moore
seated at a table, resting his head upon one hand, presents a very different personality from the pastel, where only the poet's intractable hair belies the general impression of the cultivated toff. The hat makes much of the difference, too small as it is for the escaping locks, and the too large cuffs and notched lapel suggest the self-consciousness about dress to which Moore's memoirs freely confess.

The third attempt by Manet to capture the qualities of this difficult sitter is a small canvas on loan to the Museum, in which Moore is shown seated astride a folding chair in the little garden that adjoined Manet's new studio in the Rue d'Amsterdam. It was apparently never carried through, but it is entertaining to notice how in it the painter had already decided on the wayward slant of the blonde hair that gives so much spirit and character to the subsequent pastel.

At the period when Manet was struggling to arrive at a satisfactory portrait of his young admirer, Moore had already abandoned the ambition to become a painter that had first brought him to Paris. At home in Ireland and afterward in London he had stiffly resisted all attempts to endow him with a formal education, and as the son of a landlord who raised race horses, had even dreamed of becoming a great rider. But a distant cousin of the family, Jim Browne, also from County Mayo, was a painter. Although his gifts scarcely equaled his own estimate of his work, he once proclaimed that a painting of his had all the beauties of Raphael and other beauties besides. It was this same colorful egotist who informed his bewitched young relative George that if he wanted to learn painting, as he certainly did, he must go to France. The sudden death of his father, not long before his twenty-first birthday, unexpectedly freed Moore to do as he liked, and overriding his mother's protests, he set out, assuring her that his education could be better conducted in a café than in a university. There are several amusing descriptions of his arrival at the Gare du Nord, accompanied by a valet, who soon, however, was sent back to England.

In Paris Moore installed himself at the famous old Hôtel du Quai Voltaire and enrolled in the École des Beaux-Arts, where he was the pupil of Cabanel. When he abandoned the Beaux-Arts after a short period it was not because his tastes rejected academicism, for at this time he greatly
admired the smooth, well-constructed nudes of Cabanel, Lefebvre, and Bouguereau, but largely because the classes began too early in the morning. He moved to the Hôtel de Russie and enrolled in Jullian’s studio, a veritable factory for Salon pictures. It was here that he met the dash- ing young bounder whom he has described so entertainingly both in the Confessions and in Vale under the name of Lewis Marshall. For many months Moore and Marshall shared a studio, its lavish la-di-da décor planned and arranged by Marshall and all its bills footed by Moore.

A vivid and rather bizarre picture of their life can be fitted together from Moore’s various accounts, which tell how he kept as pets a Persian cat and a python, who dined once a month on guinea pigs, and how they went on a Sunday picnic by boat to Bas Meudon or spent the day painting at Ville d’Avray. In the evening they danced and spent a great deal of Moore’s money on the entertainment of their many demi-monde friends. One day while Moore was at work, he was suddenly horrified at the drawing he was making—a “black thing,” he called it—and laid down his pencil resolving never to take up pencil or brush again. All that night he lay weeping, or so he remembered it years later when telling the tale in Vale, grieving that his life was ended and done. Such, as we know, was not the case.

The partnership with Marshall continued for a long time after this, with Marshall wearing Moore’s hats and neckties and borrowing small sums of money. What is of importance to us is that Moore began to write. Poetry came first, a little volume, inspired by Baudelaire, called Flowers of Passion, which was published in London in 1878 and filled the English critics with righteous Victorian horror. The book was bound in black, Moore tells us, with a death’s head, crossbones, and a lyre stamped in gold upon it! The poetry was followed by an enthusiasm for the drama, and many months passed in work on a play about Martin Luther, in which Moore was to collaborate with his friend Bernard de Lopez. The real importance of Lopez to this narrative is not the play, which came to nothing, nor even Moore’s assertion that Lopez introduced him to French poetry and literature. Of major interest here is the fact that Lopez was the first link in a chain of acquaintance that led George Moore, through Villiers de l’Isle Adam, to Mallarmé, who finally put him in touch with Manet, thus establishing a relationship that resulted in our three portraits and in a lifelong admiration for the French painter that Moore expressed in numerous laudatory and illuminating passages.

In at least four places he has described the exact moment when, one evening, after frequenting the Nouvelles Athènes for some time, “the glass door of the café grated upon the sanded floor, and Manet entered.” In the Confessions and elsewhere this episode is followed by a description of Manet in Moore’s best lucid and per- spicious prose. The degree of his admiration for Manet can be judged by the fact that in one place he imputes to him an attitude that he elsewhere formulates as his own—“always to be ashamed of nothing but to be ashamed.”

Floyd Dell’s introduction to the Confessions suggests that Moore’s principle of never sparing himself, of honestly telling the truth, and of not being ashamed, which makes for the greatness of his thinking and writing, was learned in Paris and was indeed what he had gone to Paris to learn. Moore himself wrote a wonderful summary of what France has to teach in his Reminiscences of the Impressionist Painters:

“Everyone must go to France. It is the source of all the arts. Let the truth be told. We go there, every one of us, like rag-pickers with baskets on our backs, to pick up the things that come in our way, and out of unconsidered trifles fortunes have often been made. We learn in France to appreciate life, to look upon life as an incomparable gift. In some café, in some Nouvelles Athènes, named though it be not in any Baedeker or marked on any traveler’s chart, the young man’s soul will be exalted to praise life. Art is but praise of life, and it is only through the arts that we can praise life.”