

The Inscription in Manet's *The Dead Christ, with Angels*

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IN RECENT STUDIES of Manet's *The Dead Christ, with Angels*, the biblical reference which appears on the stone in the lower right section of the painting has been inaccurately transcribed (Figures 1, 2).¹ The error in all cases concerns the *v* of the second line, which has been read as the Roman numeral *V*. In fact, it is a lowercase *v*: the style of the letter is comparable to that of the *v* in *évang.* of the first line and not to the more rigid strokes of the Roman numerals *XX* and *XII* in the second; there is also a period following the letter, indicating that it is an abbreviation, as is each of the words in the inscription except the name of the evangelist. The letter, therefore, must stand for *vers*, corresponding to *chap.* which stands for *chapitre*, and the inscription reads *évang. sel. S: Jean / chap.XX v.XII*, referring us not to verses 5 and 12, or to verses 5 to 12, but simply to verse 12: "And [Mary Magdalen] seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain."

The correct reading of the inscription (noted but not commented upon by George Heard Hamilton²) makes it possible to relate Manet's painting quite closely to Ernest Renan's book *La Vie de Jésus*, which was published in 1863, the year before the painting was submitted to the Salon.³ The main idea that the book propounds is that there are no such things as miracles. Consequently Renan argues that Christ did not rise from the dead. Anne Coffin Hanson has already pointed out that the presence of the dead body of Christ in the painting conflicts with the biblical source it cites and thus seems to reflect points made by Renan.⁴ But all four Gospels carry an account of

the empty tomb. The particular significance of John 20:12 is that among these accounts it is the only one to report Mary Magdalen as *alone* at the tomb and to describe what she saw there. Renan draws attention to this feature of the fourth Gospel⁵ as support for his explanation of what he calls the legend of Christ's Resurrection, namely that it was in large part due to the overactive imagination of the highly suggestible and emotional Mary Magdalen, who was once possessed by devils.⁶ So firmly had she convinced herself

1. Denis Rouart and Daniel Wildenstein, *Edouard Manet: Catalogue raisonné* (Lausanne/Paris, 1975) I, p. 82; George Mauer, *Manet, Peintre-Philosophe: A Study of the Painter's Themes* (University Park/London, 1975) p. 111; Anne Coffin Hanson, *Manet and the Modern Tradition* (New Haven/London, 1977) p. 106.

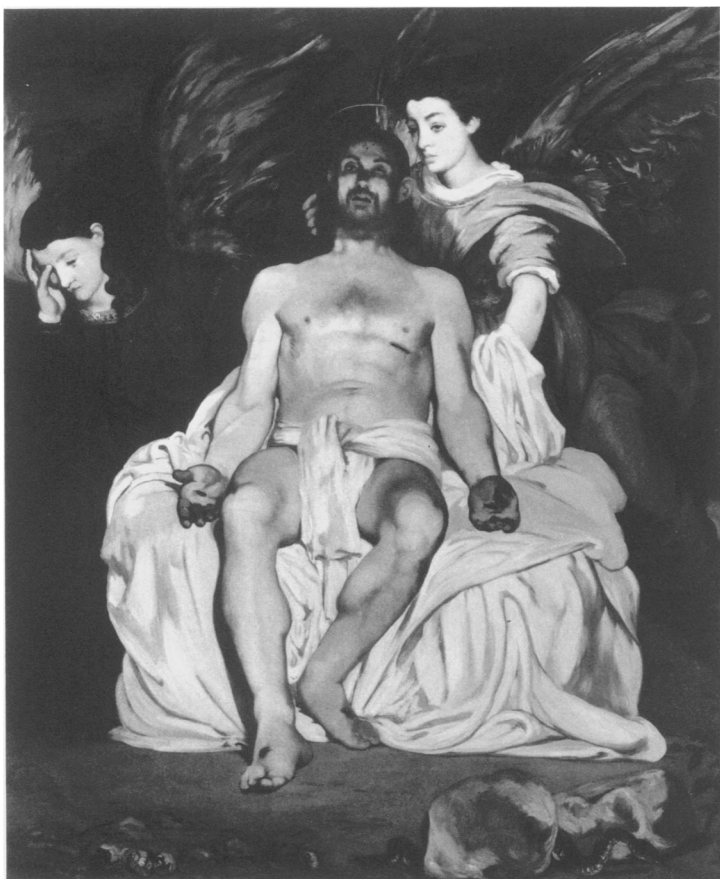
2. George Heard Hamilton, *Manet and His Critics* (New Haven, 1954) p. 56.

3. Renan's name was linked with the painting by an anonymous critic in *La Vie Parisienne* on May 1, 1864, a fact first reported by Adolphe Tabarant, *Manet et ses oeuvres* (Paris, 1947) p. 83, and first discussed by Hanson, *Manet and the Modern Tradition*, pp. 105ff.

4. Hanson, *Manet and the Modern Tradition*, pp. 106–107.

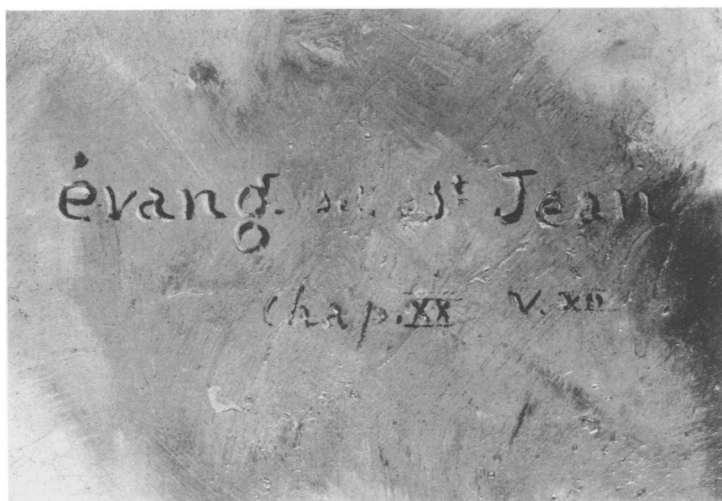
5. Ernest Renan, *La Vie de Jésus* (Paris, 1863) p. 434 n. 3: "Dans le quatrième évangile (XX, 1–2, 11 et suiv., 18), Marie de Magdala est aussi le seul témoin primitif de la résurrection."

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 151–152: "L'une d'elles, Marie de Magdala, . . . paraît avoir été une personne fort exaltée. Selon le langage du temps, elle avait été possédée de sept démons, c'est-à-dire qu'elle avait été affectée de maladies nerveuses et en apparence inexplicables. Jésus, par sa beauté pure et douce, calma cette organisation troublée. La Magdaléenne lui fut fidèle jusqu'au Golgotha, et joua le surlendemain de sa mort un rôle de premier ordre; car elle fut l'organe principal par lequel s'établit la foi à la résurrection."



1. Edouard Manet (1832–83), *The Dead Christ, with Angels*, 1863–64. Oil on canvas, 70⁵/₈ × 59 in. (179.4 × 149.9 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929, H. O. Havemeyer Collection, 29.100.51

that Christ would rise on the third day that when she looked into the tomb she saw not what was there, but what she wanted to see. John 20:12 is thus one of the most significant items in Renan's evidence, and in conjunction with Manet's representation of the tortured, lifeless, human body of Christ as described by Renan,⁷ it is a crystallization of Renan's major thesis. It is therefore appropriate that Manet's angels do not triumphantly announce the Resurrection, but grieving and distraught, mourn the death of the man whose decomposing body they display in the tradition of the image of the Man of Sorrows.



2. Detail of Figure 1 showing the inscription on the stone in the right foreground

7. Ibid., p. 425: "L'atrocité particulière du supplice de la croix était qu'on pouvait vivre trois et quatre jours dans cet horrible état sur l'escabeau de douleur. L'hémorrhagie des mains s'arrêtait vite et n'était pas mortelle. La vraie cause de la mort était la position contre nature du corps, laquelle entraînait un trouble affreux dans la circulation, de terribles maux de tête et de cœur, et enfin la rigidité des membres. Les crucifiés de forte complexion ne mouraient que de faim. . . L'organisation délicate de Jésus le préserva de cette lente agonie. Toute porte à croire que la rupture instantanée d'un vaisseau au cœur amena pour lui, . . . une morte subite."