V. R. Main

The architecture of a novel



'It was assumed that Victorine Meurent, because she posed naked, and for such scandalous pictures, must have been a prostitute'

In the internal world of the novel, the writer makes all the decisions. The starting point may be a story, an image, an opening sentence, or an idea. In my case, it was a painting: *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. I cannot remember when I first saw it; the image of the naked woman staring out of the picture has haunted me for many years. Although she is in the company of fully dressed men, she doesn't appear vulnerable. Her body language, and her eyes in particular, unmistakably reveal a powerful, self-confident and intelligent woman.

Knowing nothing about her, I wrote a short story in which Manet wants her to spend a night with him. In return, she asks him to paint a picture based on an idea she has. The subsequent painting causes a scandal and becomes the talk of the town.

Years later, I was still intrigued by the woman. Manet's biographers assumed that Victorine Meurent, because she posed naked, and for such scandalous pictures, must have been a prostitute. While some hinted at her artistic ambitions, they presented her as an alcoholic who died young. None suggested that, while posing for nine of his canvases, she might have influenced Manet's work in any significant way. But, in 1992 the art historian Eunice Lipton discovered Meurent's death certificate, and learned that the model lived to be 83 (unlike Manet, who died of syphilis at the age of 51). Most importantly, Meurent had become a painter with some professional success. Struck by the discrepancy between these facts and the way Meurent was represented by Manet's biographers, I was spurred to write the novel.

I wanted to write a book that would show an exceptional woman struggling against poverty, relying on her wits and hard work, not only to survive but also to learn to paint, while at the same time coping with male predatory instincts in a society where a woman was either attached to a man or for sale.

I read about everyday life in 1860s Paris, the transport, the Haussmannisation, the cost of living. I wrote the plot: a chronological sequence of events. Each of these was like a room in a house, or a space in a labyrinth, with more than one entrance and exit. As a writer, I had to negotiate a way through in order to structure the narrative. And the entrance hall, immediately behind the front door, had to be sufficiently interesting to encourage the visitor to explore the rest of the house.

While most of my story follows a chronological order, the first chapter is like a forecourt, a space that doesn't belong to the interior of the main house: it concerns events a hundred years later, in 1967, when radiologists have just developed techniques for X-raying paintings. In this first room the reader encounters a mystery. Rather like a detective story, there is a victim – a painting – and the urge to discover the 'murderer'. For that, the reader has to enter the house proper and meet the main protagonists.

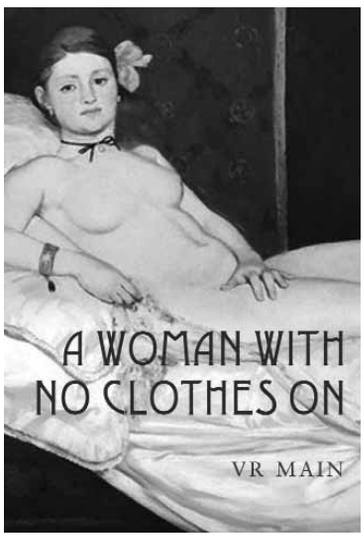
I wanted Meurent to tell her own story – after all, Manet's biographers had silenced her and I was writing the novel to give her a voice. But the first person narrator, by its nature, has a limited vision. To counter that, Manet also tells his story, offering a view of the world of

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painters and artists about which Meurent knows very little. Except for a couple of crucial episodes, the two characters describe different events. They speak in the present tense, a feature that deliberately breaks the conventions of a novel set in the past.

Looking for an agent, I was asked what my novel was about. When I described it as a story of artists, set in 1860s Paris, the agent classified it as historical fiction. That wasn't how I thought of my novel but I soon learned that agents and publishers have their own categories, very different from those of academics and literary theoreticians. Any story that is set in the past sufficiently distant to be beyond the memory of anyone alive is historical fiction. Consequently, agents complained that I had broken the rules of historical fiction by writing in the present tense and using two first-person narrators.

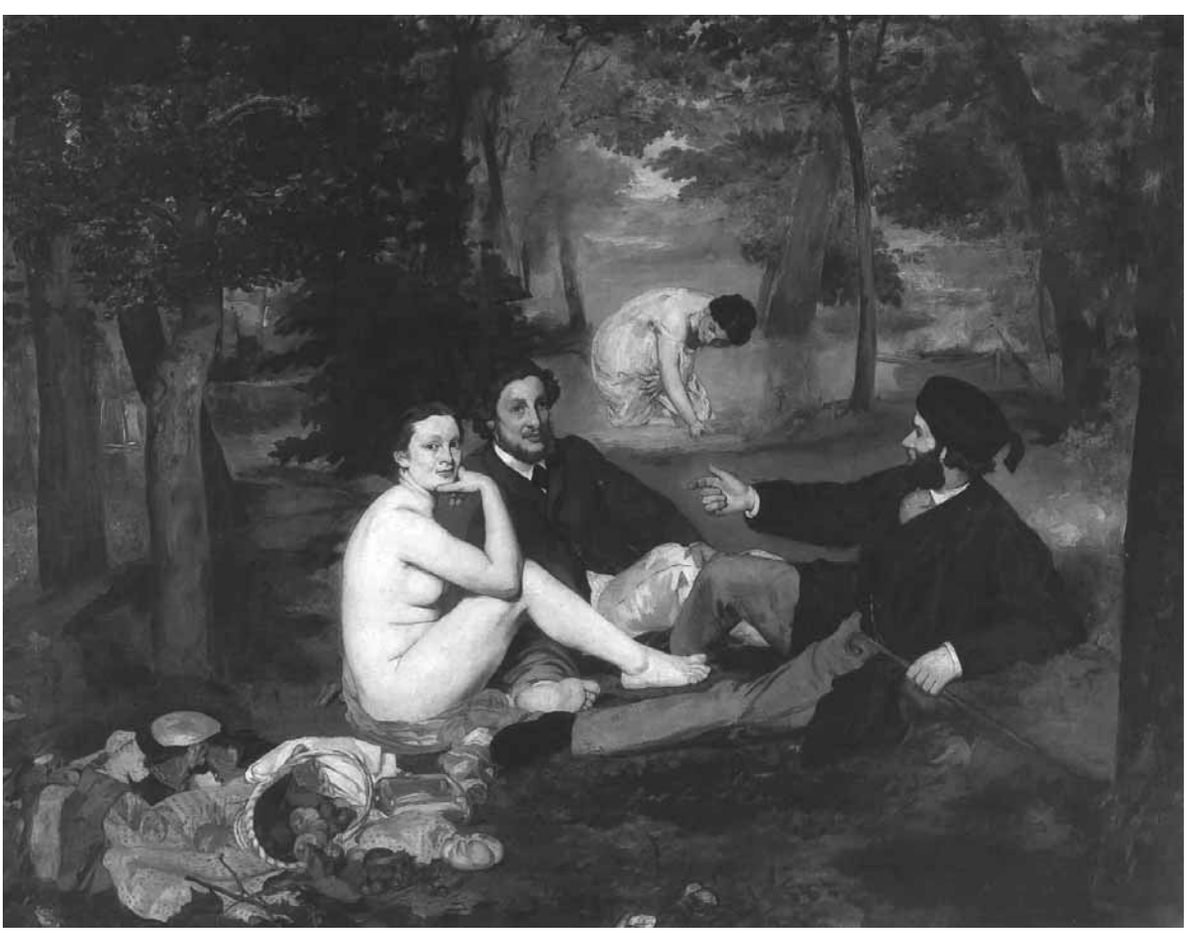
I see the historical novel today as the equivalent of a residential development in mock Tudor, Victorian or Edwardian style. With their fake beams, turrets and bay windows, those houses evoke the past as a picturesque theme park. It is a seductive representation of history – made popular by BBC costume drama – that encourages an escape away from the difficult present and into the time that seemingly has no problems that cannot be solved. The historical novel and mock historic buildings offer a nostalgic past that detracts from the present and, in that sense, the two are politically reactionary. Our past can only exist in our present: history is not 'what happened' but what we now see as 'what happened'. Just as every column and every arch come to us with a host of associations, so all our words are worn and loaded. But it is up to us to choose whether we use architectural forms and words to reconstruct a comfortable, idyllic past or to enter into a dialogue with the present by representing that past in new contexts.



V. R. Main's novel reveals truths about Manet's favourite model, Victorine Meurent

Charles Jencks' claim, in *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, that architectural elements have no absolute meaning but derive their significance from the structure in which they are used, is directly reminiscent of Saussure's thesis on language in his posthumously published 1916

'the use of the present tense deliberately breaks the conventions of a novel set in the past'



Self-confident and intelligent: Meurent in Edouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863

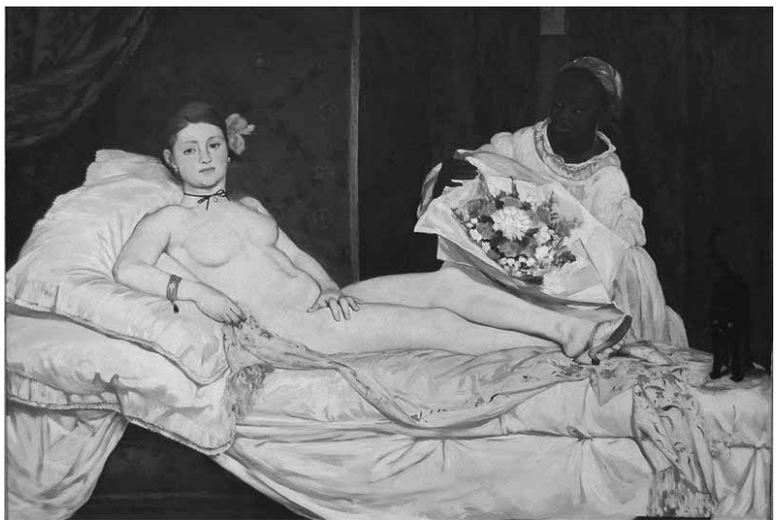
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Cours de linguistique générale. As Jencks argues, while Doric columns suggest rationality, restraint and sobriety, as opposed to the elegance and femininity of Corinthian columns, John Nash makes the Corinthian play the part of the 'masculine' by setting it against other forms of column in his Brighton Pavilion of 1815–1818. Similarly, Bernard Huet's Place de Stalingrad (1985–1989) looks to the past by detaching itself from its historical moorings. Closer to home, Venturi's Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery uses stylistic quotations from buildings as disparate as the clubhouses on Pall Mall, the Scala Regia in the Vatican, Victorian warehouses and Ancient Egyptian temples. The past is always the origin of meanings that exist in the present and demands to be revisited but Post-Modern architecture, like the Post-Modern novel, restores and sustains connections with the past in an ironic and self-reflective way; that is what makes it different from Modernism.

In my novel, I used stories from Zola: I lifted the couple, Gervaise and Lantier, from *L'Assommoir*. I hoped the reader would recognise them as fictional characters rather than see them as descriptions of real nineteenth-century people: the borrowing is to emphasise the idea of the novel as a story with a point of view, rather than as the representation of the period. Similarly, when my heroine Meurent goes shopping for new dresses before her departure for Boston, she finds herself in newly-opened, fashionable department stores and watches the scenes and characters from Zola's *Au bonheur des dames*. Again, my intention was a playful pastiche whose recognisable homage makes the reader reflect on the present and on the excesses of our own shopping experience.

At the end of my story, Meurent, whose ambition to become an artist is hindered by her class and gender, seems to be on the way towards overcoming her circumstances. However, the reader does not go away with the warm feeling that the world is a perfect place where everything works out. The novel offers a solution whose flaunted fictionality prevents and, hopefully, makes us think of the continued marginalisation of women.

The referential use of other paintings and the self-conscious way in which they interrogate the present, became the trademark of Manet's art. *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, painted in 1863, borrows its composition from Marcantonio Raimondi's engraving of Raphael's *Jugement de Pâris* (c. 1525) and from Titian's *Concert champêtre* (1510–1511), while the background figure of the second woman is thought to derive from Watteau's *Villageoise*. Such aesthetic use of quotations creates irony and draws attention to the fact that the painting is not the imitation of reality, but a version of it.



Far from an idealised goddess: Meurent meets our gaze as an assured woman in Manet's *Olympia*, 1865

'the novel's flaunted fictionality prevents the feeling that everything works out'

Olympia, another of Manet's paintings that features in my novel, draws heavily on Titian's *Vénus d'Urbin* (1538). But, unlike the nude in Titian's Italian palazzo interior with her shy modesty, Meurent's provocative, yet composed and assured, gaze is of an unequivocally contemporary woman. This departure from the usual representation of the female nude as a goddess, painted in the academic style represented by Cabanel, shocked the Parisian public in 1865; it questioned representations of femininity in a way they found uncomfortable.

My story starts as a detective mystery and the opening setting is a museum. But the 'corpse' is a canvas with its palimpsest. While the conventions of the detective or mystery genre should lead us to the identity of the 'murderer' – in this case, the painter of the original picture – the novel offers a solution much too implausible to be accepted as truth. Denied the pleasure of a neat resolution, the disoriented reader is invited to ask questions about the struggles that female artists, in particular those from less affluent backgrounds, faced in 1860s Paris. The difference between a Post-Modern novelist and an incompetent detective is that the former chooses not to find the murderer.



The model as accomplished artist: Victorine Meurent, *Le jour des Rameaux*, 1885

V. R. Main's book A Woman with No Clothes On *is published by the Delancey Press, London (ISBN 978-0-9539-1197-4). Victorine Meurent's painting is reproduced by kind permission of the Musée municipal d'Art et d'Histoire de Colombes, France. The photograph of V. R. Main is by John Ullens.*

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