In the spring of 1927, Picasso produced a large painting known as *The Painter and His Model*, now in Tehran. Perhaps because of its current location, the work has, until recently, gone largely unremarked in the literature on the artist. Nonetheless,

* This essay began as a qualifying paper written at the University of California, Berkeley in 2005 under the supervision of T. J. Clark, whom I wish to thank for his advice, example, and continued encouragement in all matters related to Picasso. An early version of the present text was presented in 2007, with incisive responses by Hal Foster and Garrett Stewart, at the conference “Picasso in the Late 1920s,” convened by Clark at Berkeley. In addition to Foster and Stewart, I am grateful to Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin Buchloh, Elizabeth Cowling, Whitney Davis, Lisa Florman, Michael Fried, James Glisson, Christopher Green, Charlie Miller, Anne Wagner, and Sebastian Zeidler for their helpful suggestions then and since.


2. The work was reproduced under this title—*Le peintre et son modèle*—in Christian Zervos’s catalogue raisonné, most likely with Picasso’s approval: Pablo Picasso, ed. Christian Zervos (Paris, Cahiers d’Art, 1932–), vol. 7, no. 50. (The painting seems also to have passed through Zervos’s hands: See the provenance printed in *Picasso by Picasso: His First Museum Exhibition 1932*, ed. Tobia Bezzola [Zürich: Kunsthaus Zürich; Munich: Prestel, 2010], p. 178.) In the pages of the “Hommage à Picasso” issue of *Documents*, the work appeared under the title *L’Atelier du peintre*. See *Documents* 2, no. 5 (1930), p. 148.

3. Within the last fifteen years, the painting could be seen in two important Swiss exhibitions: *Picasso Surreal: 1924–1939*, Fondation Beyeler, Basel, June 12–September 12, 2005, and *Picasso: Die Erste Museumausstellung 1932*, Kunsthaus Zürich, October 15, 2010–January 30, 2011. Even more recently, it has been the subject of “Lecture 4: Monster,” in T. J. Clark, *Picasso and Truth: From Cubism to Guernica* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 147–92. Clark presents a searching account of the picture in terms of his larger claims about the fate of “room space” in Picasso’s art since the advent of Cubism, and as part of a dialectic between what he takes to be two paradigms governing the relation between figure and space within the artist’s work of the 1920s and ‘30s: the aggressive irruptions of the “monstrous,” on the one hand, and the reparative, or at least less violent, spatial organization of the “monumental” on the other. For Clark, *The Painter and His Model* thus proves to be a signal instance of the way Picasso’s art of the later ‘20s “ha[s] no confidence in any totality not derived, contingently, from some accidental touch of the Other,” and therefore “proposes that worlds—space, difference, identity, substance—come out of figures, not the other way around” (*Picasso and Truth*, p. 228). Given the larger ambitions of his extraordinary book, which these remarks can only begin to suggest, Clark’s

---

**Tout l’intérêt de l’art se trouve dans le commencement. Après le commencement, c’est déjà la fin.**

—Pablo Picasso, 1932
it stands as his most arresting single canvas of the late 1920s—perhaps the strangest period of the artist’s production—and indeed as one of the supreme achievements of his career. In ways we have yet to grasp fully, the late ’20s marked a crucial turning point for Picasso: a moment of crisis, which seemed to require a total reexamination of his means. Over the course of 1927 in particular, his work took on a troubled, almost desperate air as Picasso reengaged with Cubism’s most difficult lessons, and constantly courted—at times even willed—aesthetic failure. At no time had the artist worked against himself with such intensity, or with such bewildering results.

This can best be appreciated visually: Take a painting and a drawing from the summer of 1927, completed in the wake of The Painter and His Model. Picasso had always, of course, employed a variety of pictorial modes—by the ’20s, this had already become the dominant cliché of Picasso criticism—but by 1927, their disjunction and variety posed newly difficult problems. For once platitudes about the multiplicity of Picasso’s genius are put aside, the difficulty lies in saying something concrete about what the differences and similarities between such works actually are, and what they might have meant. What, that is, might the exaggerated three-dimensionality of the

emphases ultimately differ from my own. Nonetheless, in general terms, as I hope will be clear, as well as in their shared sense of the importance of Picasso’s sketchbook materials for making sense of the painting, our accounts of The Painter and His Model remain in sympathy.
one—the pseudo-solidity of its torpedo breasts, the self-shadow clinging to each strand of hair—have to do with the fierce, diagrammatic precision of the other? There are superficial connections between them, of course (the strange business about the hair would be a place to start); but can these works be said to function together within some larger system of pictorial difference? Or do they scatter hopelessly apart? The longer one looks, moreover, the clearer it becomes that whatever they might share, it is not some “real” body that has been deformed and pulled into shape from one configuration to the other. If each image carries on a flirtation with the phenomenal world—and one can find this even in the relentlessly flat Figure, where each eye, dislocated but not detached from the other, seems to shelter its own affect—it does so with a sense of provisionality and self-awareness that also refuses to recognize that world as necessary for picturing. “Naturalism,” if that’s what such effects should be called, seems to function as a game or a tool, not a foregone conclusion. In this especially, Figure and its companion look directly back to The Painter and His Model. Their divergent pictorial strategies find a kind of fulcrum in the earlier painting. Rearticulating, revising, and refusing aspects of its configuration, both later works begin to suggest the sheer productivity and extremism of the Tehran canvas, and the way it would go on being a problem for Picasso: a continual, perhaps at last unanswerable, provocation.
The Painter and His Model stands as the key term among a series of paintings, drawings, and prints Picasso made between 1926 and 1928 that depict the relation between painter and model. The sheer ubiquity of this subject in the artist's later career has made the specificity of this first set of works difficult to retrieve. The Tehran canvas brings them into electrifying clarity. In the first place, The Painter and His Model proposes to show the work of picturing and the body it pictures simultaneously. The body is both there and not there, both actual presence and ghostly potential. This enables Picasso to interrogate one of painting’s deepest fictions: that the body exists, out there in the world, and can therefore be depicted. Picasso’s engagement with this fiction throughout his career was conflicted and intense. Leo Steinberg has offered the most powerful account of it. As Steinberg describes it, the work of picturing for Picasso consists of the imaginative deformation of a body already there in the service of eroticized visual interest. The constant, at times violent, reconfiguration of bodies across the surfaces of Picasso’s works, then, seeks to present some maximum of simultaneously visible aspects for the painter-viewer’s pleasure—a simultaneity, moreover, that would not “sacrifice” any of the body’s “real presence,” on which that pleasure is based. “The quest,” Steinberg writes, “was for the form that would be at the same time a diagram and an embrace.” With its emphasis on how certain paradigms of desire became, for Picasso, a powerful set of formal impulses, this account has tremendous explanatory power. Nonetheless, the very power of Steinberg’s account risks eliding a second, and perhaps even more necessary, fiction driving Picasso’s art of the later ’20s—a fiction to which The Painter and His Model draws attention and seeks to give allegorical form. The painting calls on us to recognize the primacy of mark-making, figuring the body not as precedent for, but as product of, painting’s operations. It asks us to see the “real presence” of the model not as body restaged but rather as fully a creature of painting, her figure instantiated in and as the material configuration of a surface.

The painting is large: more than six feet square. Its monumental format announces the picture’s “masterpiece” status as a periodic summing-up of the

4. Among the paintings, key works include The Painter and His Model (1926; Musée Picasso, Paris), The Studio (1927–1928; the Museum of Modern Art, New York), and Painter and Model (1928; the Museum of Modern Art, New York). The Painter and His Model also coincided with a commission from Vollard to illustrate a luxury edition of that totem object of modernist artists, Balzac’s Le Chef d’oeuvre inconnu (1831)—an overdetermined project, to say the least. Picasso eventually produced twelve etchings. For discussion, see Dore Ashton, “Picasso and Frenhofer,” in A Fable of Modern Art (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), pp. 75–95.


7. Ibid., p. 201.

8. Ibid.
artist’s ambitions—a manifesto on the scale of La Danse (1925) or Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (1907). In looking at it, we are first struck by the presence of a nude figure facing us, large and unfamiliar (the “model”), and by the dramatic organization of the painting’s surface, in which monochrome gray is pierced by two vivid swatches of light, for want of a better term, one cream-colored and one yellow. Given this intensity, it takes a moment to make out the presence of a second figure—the “painter,” palette and brush in hand—to the model’s right, and to see that part of the model’s body turns and gestures toward him. The relation between the two figures is far from clear, but one is tempted to say that within the psychic economy of the painting, the model’s sensuality and quasi-volumetric presence—the extravagance of “her” snout, breasts, and stretching limbs—come at the cost of those of the painter, who can barely be said to be a body at all. For “him,” line does not denote volume so much as stand in for it, and yet even this weak positivity fails to ensure conviction in his presence. As geometry, the painter’s disarticulation identifies him utterly with the proppings, framings, and bare delineations that surround the scene, as if he “embodied” the spatial markers that give the model being—without, however, taking her over. The question of her autonomy, meanwhile, is a sustained source of anxiety within the painting. Look, for instance, at the strange frames around the model’s face: Does the painter’s brush touch the edge of an easel, or does it mark another, more emphatic line further closing her in? Is his gesture weak or strong? Is the model the painter’s prop, just another set of lines to be manipulated, or does she luxuriate in herself, in her “to-be-looked-at” sufficiency?

The ambivalence and urgency at play here figure an encounter between the technics of making and the situation of looking, a confrontation located paradigmatically, for Picasso, in a body coded as female. And here the tension between the painting’s two informing fictions—the body seen and then depicted on the one hand, the body depicted and then seen on the other—becomes most acute. Steinberg’s account would suggest a narrative of difficulty overcome, the diagram become embrace, or perhaps of difficulty properly achieved; either way, a coming to grips with the violence of depiction as it is driven by desire. In the second account, however, violence and desire would no longer be understood as vehicle and tenor of an impulse to depict, but rather as two exemplary, mutually disorienting strategies for making a body up from scratch. As beholders, we would not

9. On Picasso’s “masterpieces” see Alfred Barr: “Every few years throughout his career Picasso has had the conviction and energy to concentrate into one large canvas the motives and problems of a whole period of his work. Such ‘masterpieces’ are not always as successful as smaller, less ambitious works. But for those who esteem courage above perfection they constitute important evidence of Picasso’s stature.” Barr, Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art (New York: the Museum of Modern Art, 1946), p. 36.

10. A precedent for these can be found a year earlier in the three zones of light that cross the surface of an enormous, rather inchoate picture also entitled The Painter and His Model (1926; Musée Picasso, Paris). This earlier work, however, is something of a ruin, achieving nothing of the power of the Tehran canvas’s forms.
be asked to imagine a history of visual experience on the far side of painting, in which the artist lays out his assiduously acquired knowledge about “real bodies” across a surface. Rather, we would be asked to imagine the unfolding of a history of mark-making that has made bodies real.

This double motivation (for both fictions ceaselessly assert themselves) constitutes the beguiling complexity of the model’s body, in this a metonym for the complexity of the whole. Her figure orbits around two axes of engagement: Reaching across the painting’s surface, however weakly, she acknowledges connection with the painter; staring out of the canvas, however complexly, she seems to pose for us. These are not neutral relations. Like Freud, Picasso was deeply interested in the destructive consequences of seeing and the sheer threat to vision posed by the gendered body. The model’s dynamic positioning is repeated in the bodiless form of the painting’s swatches of yellow and cream-colored paint, for they stage the tension between internal and external alignment in its purest form. At the same time as these shapes of light cut across the bodies they connect, they quicken the painted surface in relation to the viewer’s sight. They are utterly embedded in the painting’s material texture, and yet their difference from the bodies they “illuminate” encourages the viewer to read them in relation to an “outside” of the picture: as apertures that frame our seeing, or as projections of light that our presence has brought into play. This ambivalence, a measure of both intimacy and alienation between viewer and canvas, structures the work. In order to figure it, Picasso felt it necessary, again and again, to stage visual immediacy and material mediation simultaneously, side by side in complex relation, each vector in danger of obliterating the other. This essay aims to account for why he needed a thematics of violence and eroticism in order to do so.

* *

One thing violence and eroticism did easily was enliven a dead scene. In a sketchbook of early 1927, which looks ahead to the Tehran canvas, Picasso explored how. On its fourth page, a figure sits lifeless, barely realized, propped up on an armchair from which it can barely be distinguished. Where line represents at all, what it gives is inanimate sag. Elephantine feet rest dead on the floor; a shadowy, insensate sex gapes. For volume, perhaps, or for texture, Picasso went over the image with charcoal, darkening the genitals in particular and pushing the whole even closer to illegibility. He also made a tracing of the figure, as if to bring into focus what he now wished to face. Here the true strangeness of the scene is clarified, each breast marked out as distinct from the navel, vagina precisely counterpoised to buttocks. In this interplay between sketchbook and tracing, Picasso explores the doubleness of line, which on the one hand depicts space

11. One measure of the painting’s importance for Picasso lay in the number of preliminary works he undertook: Not since the Demoiselles, it seems, had he executed so many, as T. J. Clark points out in Clark, Picasso and Truth, p. 162.
and on the other equates the figure with pictorial surface, a negotiation that finds its most fraught form in the crude particularization of the genitals. The sexed body comes to stand for a crisis of picturing.

As one drawing follows another in the sketchbook, this crude figure will lead eventually to the model’s remarkable pose. Along the way, these drawings stage a give-and-take between the marking of sex, the articulation of space, and the acknowledgment of pictorial surface. They investigate what strategies of picturing might mean for each other, and how they might situate the body they concern. On page six, for instance, pubic hair gives way—is “seen through”—to reveal a cross-hatch pattern that equates the space between the figure’s legs (barely a figure, now, at all) to the patterned surfaces that make up its environment. As if in reaction to the loss, an inky blot obliterates the figure’s torso, bringing the whole configuration back to the surface. Ambiguities of space and form are relentlessly sexualized, and something like skepticism regarding the depiction of female genitalia takes hold. Is
the vagina to be seen as the site of dissolution or of bodily integrity? Should it be of the surface or belong to virtual space? Can it broker some accord between these terms? And lest we forget the beholder’s share in all this, certain drawings also propose the female genitals not as an artifact of the artist’s crude making but as the primordial seat of vision itself. In one sketch, the vagina offers itself up as a staring eye; immediately after, we are confronted by a drawing in which the newly geometricized sex forms an early version of the Tehran picture’s “apertures.” This strange triangle of light, anchored by an eye at its apex and marked as absence by the surrounding charcoal field, refigures the genitals as unmediated visibility through space. The drawing stages at once our seeing-through to the body and the figure’s abstracted sex emanating out towards us: The vagina becomes a vehicle of sight.

This conflation of the visual and the vaginal carries forward into The Painter and His Model. It sexualizes our access to the model (it is worth noting that her body has two genital markers, each partly crossed by an “aperture” of light) and also intensifies her capacity to stare outward. Behind this lies a proposal about the nature of seeing with which Freud can help. Castration anxiety, after all, has its origins in unhappy sight—in the visual “discovery” of sexual difference. Looking is thus located at the fraught connection between the differential knowledge of gender (“she” vs. “me”) and the most basic spatial distinctions—here/there, inside/outside—that orient the subject in the world. But crucially, castration anxiety also involves a refusal to accept that world as given. As Freud never tires of reminding his readers, the young boy’s sight of the female genitals produces an immediate disavowal of the seen: a negation that can only be given up reluctantly, if at all, and with great psychic pain. The very reality of a situation is refused, and, in its place, another world takes form. Disavowal is not simply a matter of internal psychic relations, in other words, but of world-making itself. Picasso’s model is situated at such a “crossing of perception and hallucination.” In Freudian terms, she is both the phallic mother—upright, powerful, inviolate—and the mother without a penis; something, then, like the Medusa’s head: a morbid combination of threat and disavowal, which throws up an impossible apparition before the viewer’s face. By noting the painting’s affinity with something like this line of thought, however, I wish only to emphasize the work’s own crude and powerful claims. In figuring within itself the special interaction between viewer and canvas, The Painter and His Model concerns the instability of seeing as such. A provisional description of Picasso’s achievement follows: to have found a way to keep his apparition from fixing into a fetish. Emphasis in the picture falls not on representation’s ability to “contain” a fraught psychic history, but rather on a wish, somehow, to be that history, bringing it to bear on the viewer as if for the first time, and with something like its full force.

12. Carnet 34, folio 15 recto (December 1926–May 8, 1927; Musée Picasso, Paris).
Another way to put this would be as a crisis of relation. It should surprise us how successfully the model achieves her sensual presence in space. The floorboards on which she stands curve up around her, but do not press her in. In certain construals of her pose, it is almost as if she were levitating, or balancing on her thick lower foot. Such effects depend utterly on the introduction of the painting’s third term: Its drama of autonomy, dependence, and fullness of form requires not just model and viewer but also the presence of the depicted painter. Is he Picasso? The question of the artist’s place in his own production is raised again and again in the works of the late ’20s, as if the painter-beholder’s twin identities could no longer quite be held together. Here, the triangulation proves crucial: Overlaid by the further drama developed in the “apertures,” it keeps the play between the painting’s various terms lively and prevents what might have been a simplistic system of differences from becoming merely some dispersing, enervating play of positions. The Tehran canvas seeks to achieve instead some real disjunction—spatial and conceptual—between figures that will nonetheless register as an impossible and striking whole.

The vivid integrity of the model, then, is as fragile as it is irresistible. Given Picasso’s investment in line as bounding contour, it should strike us as a carefully calculated decision to leave the body unbounded at the end of one appendage (again, it takes a moment to notice this tentative break in the body’s contour); to have that appendage be the figure’s most vulnerable and etiolated; and for it to point towards the bizarre geometries of the painter. One might well ask whether anything from his disorganized space can reach back, or whether the relation between these figures might open onto anything like the social. Picasso could be funny about this, depicting the studio as a wild, distressing menagerie. He could also be grim, as the shapes of the “apertures” attest. The one on the right might be seen to have the shape of a palette, reinforcing the setting as the studio. We might thus expect its companion on the left to stand in for the painter’s brush, and with some imaginative effort, we can almost see it as such, tracing a slashing movement over the surface. Yet this shape only becomes identifiable alongside two remarkable drawings executed in early 1927: There it appears unequivocally as a blade. These small India-ink drawings, catalogued as “decapitation scenes,” seem terribly close to scratchings on a lavatory wall. Their anarchic violence entails a crude disorganization of the sexed body—in the

15. The terms here are drawn from Michael Fried: See Courbet’s Realism (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990) and Manet’s Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996). Fried’s discussion, here and elsewhere, of the fraught ontological divide between spaces internal and external to representation—as well as of modern artists’ self-inscription at that divide—informs what follows.
16. For instance: Carnet 34, folio 16 recto (December 1926–May 8, 1927; Musée Picasso, Paris).
17. A related drawing also appears in the sketchbook I have been considering: Carnet 34, folio 50 recto (December 1926–May 8, 1927; Musée Picasso, Paris). As usual with Picasso, chronology proves complex. Even as they relate to the painting of 1927, these drawings also directly recall other decapitation scenes drawn in the summer of 1925, whose choreography of violence came in the wake of his work on La Danse (1925; Tate Gallery, London). See Carnet 31, folio 26 recto–folio 31 recto (June 28–August 1, 1925; Musée Picasso, Paris).
shaded drawing, a hairy orifice floats above the decapitator’s “mouth,” even as something like a penis dangles between its legs. This baseness makes their relation to the finished thing all the more impressive: Exaggerated scenes of killing and being killed lay behind the Tehran canvas’s picture of relationality; and behind the model’s wholeness, we find the abject accumulation of the body in pieces. The overlap between painting and drawings is unnerving. In the same shaded drawing, for instance, a version of the “apertures” themselves appears, standing in for some proleptic or retrospective swing of the blade, perhaps. And from its appearance in the second, unshaded drawing, the head of the decapitator—an impossibility articulated in the negative space between the figure’s own arms—becomes, when turned ninety degrees in the Tehran canvas, the painter’s own “face.” The artist wielding his brush thus finds its analogue in a beast waving its cleaver. And yet, that beast’s elephantine foot and leg are close to those of the model. Moreover, the model, with her reach towards the right, is also recalled in the drawing by the decapitated body’s amoeboid extensions: She is la victime et le bourreau. Turn the drawing’s decapitated, snout-nosed face ninety degrees, and you nearly have the model’s head. And further analogies abound.18

A consistent set of wild motifs, then—limbs, mouths, actions, sexes—circulate between the images. Within the melee of the decapitation drawings, however,

18. To cite just three more: The articulated “steps” in both drawings, for instance, become part of the painter’s body-apparatus in the painting, especially evident in his palette-arm. The lips of the severed head in the shaded drawing recur to the right of the model’s foot, an anomalous inflection of the painter’s space. The doorways through which apparitions present themselves in both drawings become, in the final canvas, two strange rectangles (canvases? windows?) upper right.

---

*Picasso. Left:* Scene of Decapitation. 1927.
*Right:* Scene of Decapitation. 1927.

*Both images © 2015 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photos © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY.*
Inscription and Castration in The Painter and His Model

we find more or less clear markers of narrative time, indicating the violence that has happened and the violence to come. By contrast, the thematicization of immediacy in The Painter and His Model would seem to depend on a collapse of temporal ordering, enacted in the wholesale redistribution of the drawings’ parts. The juxtaposition of drawings with the painting asks us to see the integrity of the model’s body—the integrity of the scene as a whole—as made up of such acts of pictorial dismemberment. Recycled motifs and their attendant bits of narrative are compressed into a presentation of pictorial instantaneous—all-at-once-ness of the picture surface.

This disfiguration of time cannot be domesticated: It does not fall into a logical sequence of “narrative” drawings leading to “iconic,” forward-facing masterpiece, for example. Rather, drawings and painting serve as each other’s “other scenes.” Reading from the painting to the drawings, we might say that the graphic works try on for size an account of the activity of art-making as violent, chaotic, and lethally effective: painting as a set of irreversible, sequential actions on the bodies it reconfigures. (Recall, here, the force of Steinberg’s account.) Reading from drawings to painting, we get something like the reverse. Painting would seem to require narrative allegorization, however ludicrous, in order to possess any legible temporality whatsoever. In refusing such temporal parsing, the painting makes a claim both for the primacy and for the concision of its material events. With this gain, however, comes irrecoverable loss. Painting gives up the coherent narrative of efficacy according to which those events could be understood. Indeed, art-making must cease to understand itself as a series of acts altogether, must perhaps cease being understood at all. The cooperation between immediacy and mediation turns out to consist of the tension—the warfare—between opposing terms.

The Painter and His Model proves ambivalent in this regard, too. In organizing the work’s surface, the shapes—the “blade” on the left and the “palette” across from it—negotiate between traces of violent interaction and this other, unknowable immediacy. They participate in a crossing-over of bodies with bodies, and of bodies with space that regulates but also makes more vivid the figures so crossed. There remain vestiges of narrative here: The “palette”-shape connects the model’s breast and reaching hand with the painter’s own palette-hand and one full eye. The “blade” recalls violence against the model, for as the shape proceeds from the painter’s brush-arm and cuts across her body, its edge comes perilously close to decapitating the figure once again. But it also seems to be an emanation of her body: a reflection and rotation of her upheld arm, perhaps, quickened into visual life, maybe even a weapon out to sever the painter’s working

hand. Fundamentally, however, these figures of light turn the painting out towards us, in effect grounding whatever projected narrative the beholder brings to bear. The “blade”-shape delimited a zone of visibility in which the model, her breast extending from her face, her hand gently touching her head, relates to herself. We see it as such a space. But is the model thus made knowable? Does she present a set of bodily experiences that are in any practical sense verifiable? Indeed, we may well ask whether the model is meant to repeat her relation to the painter in her relation to us, standing threatened, perhaps, but also, more pertinently, threatening.

The model’s stance, I have been suggesting, proposes something primal about the relation between painting and its audience. The urgency of its address seems theoretical as much as practical. It asks what the confrontation of beholder and apparition would look like: on what ground contact might occur. In this outward address, the picture seeks to fully unsettle the experience of viewing under conditions involving bodily threat. Which brings us back to Freud. “Decapitation = castration,” he notoriously wrote, and all the more so in drawings so full of lengthy, threatened snouts.20 The painting might be read as staging an intense combination of scenarios in castration’s vicinity: the painter’s dissolution into geometric pieces as the result of confrontation with the model’s difference, for example, or of an emergent reorganization of the body as it slowly comes to form. The model, herself a condensation of visual threat and disavowed sight, stands both as an apparition and its impossible taming, framed within the space of cultural production. The unshaded drawing presents a metaphor for such a process in a “normal” face peeking through the upper part of an archway. It is as if the threat (the occurrence) of decapitation were a precondition of such appearance, a line of thought that would inflect all the explorations of profiles that would follow—not least Picasso’s own.21

The historical proximity of Picasso to psychoanalytic thought is tantalizing. The 1920s, after all, were the heyday of castration theory.22 We are nonetheless best served by treating psychoanalytic accounts of castration as a parallel to Picasso’s own

---

21. In 1927, Picasso photographed the cast shadow of his own profile in his studio: Self-Portrait in Profile (Picasso Archives, Musée Picasso, Paris). For important painterly investigations of the profile, see, among others, Harlequin (1927; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), Painter and Model (1928; the Museum of Modern Art, New York), and Bust of Woman with Self-Portrait (1929; private collection).
vehement poetics of the studio rather than its secret key. In their crudeness and intensity, these accounts help us to articulate the extremism of Picasso’s conflating of the visual with the violently sexual, and they resonate with his project in unexpected ways. One wonders, for instance—it would not have been impossible, given the company he kept in the late ’20s—if Picasso would have been familiar with ideas broached at the beginning of the decade that located the genesis of castration anxiety in the withdrawal of the mother’s breast. For August Stärke, in his attempt to ground psychic distress in external experience, the moment stood as the child’s primal loss of itself to the world. Whether or not Picasso was familiar with such theories, however, the prohibition of touch represented by such withdrawal proves suggestive in relation to the separation of the painter’s “teeth” and “arms” from the model’s exposed breast. Such taming of the drives would mark nothing less than the beginning of the social: As a relay towards the threat of castration, the scenario stages induction into a cultural order. The Painter and His Model perhaps even pictures some birth of sexual difference. The female genitals are in an intermediate state—new and strange, and yet also so familiar as to need this doubling and reorientation. The model’s body redirects them into a realm of sexual infancy, in which the vagina is not yet “valued as a place of shelter for the penis,” not yet “enter[ed] into the heritage of the womb.”

Freud’s fraught terms—shelter, heritage, penis, womb—are the very stuff of social organization in sexual exchange. It is precisely because the painting places us so insistently at the inception of the social—before, that is, it is fully under way—that the relations figured in its organizing “apertures” suggest, but cannot in the end embody or describe, sociality itself. Nothing can be exchanged between persons or between sexes because neither persons nor sexes are yet there.


23. Here, however, it is worth noting that a strong case for Picasso’s tangible Freudianism has been made by Elizabeth Cowling. She argues that Picasso’s The Kiss (1925; Musée Picasso, Paris) depicts not lovers embracing but rather mother and child in an incestuous tangle informed by Picasso’s knowledge of psychoanalytic thought. See Cowling, Picasso: Style and Meaning (London: Phaidon, 2002), pp. 469–82.


first issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* in December 1924. Freud appears above, directly beside the anarchist’s face. This picture has often been interpreted as a paradigmatic instance of Surrealist attitudes towards Woman, a figure imagined to be an embodiment of disobedience and madness: desirable, no doubt, but best kept at a distance. The page’s structure, with its strict grid and alphabetic ordering, recalls key aspects of Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1913), which had been published in French translation in 1923. In that book’s third essay, Freud describes how the primal Band of Brothers, having ritually killed the Father because of his exclusive enjoyment of women, reinstitute his ghostly figure as Law—inmutable, abstract, relentlessly organizing. At the foundation of this social structure, too, stands a prohibition of touch, barring immediate pleasure in the possession of women’s bodies. According to Freud, this sadistic, guilt-ridden scenario institutes a social order based on renunciation and exogamous structures of sexual exchange. In spite or perhaps because of the political radicalism of its central figure, this portrait—homosocial in the strict sense—keeps Freud’s social coordinates emphatically in mind. Even more pertinent may be the Surrealists’ closed eyes in René Magritte’s replication of the picture five years later, in the magazine’s final issue. Here, it is as if the presence and eerie decorum of the painted nude on the one hand, and the discrete ordering of photographed artists on the other—as if the ordering of this social world, in short—depended precisely on the refusal of sight.

The version of Surrealism these pictures offer is one-sided, of course, and my account steers perhaps too close to carica-

---

ture. They are better seen on a continuum with the movement’s darker (stronger) representations of masculinity as shattered. The deathliness of Magritte’s collaged photographs in particular recalls this tropology. (Would it be unfair, then, to confront Magritte’s figures with the model’s open face?) Nonetheless, I do want to say that the Surrealists’ pictures imagine linear demarcation to stand in for cultural organizing, and to suggest that though Picasso’s painting no doubt draws on this association, it also, in the end, refuses its logic. For the Tehran canvas simultaneously offers the ordering grid and its opposite, the disaggregated body. The “painter” falls apart and stands up structured at once; the “model,” open-eyed and staring straight ahead, is both framed and unframed. Which is to say that linearity in Picasso’s painting takes on an uncanny life of its own. Demarcating and structuring like Magritte’s patriarchal grid, it nonetheless also acts autonomously—perhaps sexlessly—within the picture, undoing figuration at every material turn.

In taking the full measure of mark-making’s imagined force in The Painter and His Model, one needs to see it in relation to another sequence of paintings from the early months of 1927. At the same time as Picasso interrogated the depictive properties of line, he also concerned himself with another mode of figuration: writing. The series may seem at first a sterile, unappealing exercise—an anemic replay, perhaps, of Cubism’s passion for linguistic signs. But there is much more to it than this. Take, for instance, Guitar with Profile, from late February or early March 1927. In its haunting play of positive and negative space, the painting juxtaposes both modes of figuration: A ghostly cream-colored profile floats beside a jauntily delineated “guitar,” the dark lines of which also (of course) read as letters. They have always seemed to ask for decoding. As has often been pointed out (to the Picasso industry’s immoderate


28. In her fine discussion of these images, Lyford emphasizes their “aesthetics of dismemberment,” and their relation to the historical traumas wrought on masculinity by the Great War. See Lyford, Surrealist Masculinities, pp. 71–76.
glee), the series of still lifes centers on the cryptogrammatic coding of proper names: “MT” for Marie-Thérèse Walter, Picasso’s latest conquest, and in this case also a “P” for the artist himself. The relevance of such paintings to The Painter and His Model, however, lies not in the biographical as such (how could it?) but rather in the procedures by which mark-making comes to signify. These paintings are concerned with what the cryptograms’ various functions as language, as pictorial composition, and as literal, surface-level inscription have to do with each other. Here again, transposed to a different key, we find the Tehran canvas’s concern with immediacy and mediation. The most energetic of such canvases place the letters in situations of furious complexity, constituting a true dismemberment of sense. But there are also canvases of almost disconcertingly neutral tone, which seem to explore some minimum sufficiency for picture-making. In looking at the hermetic spatial play of Guitar (April 1927), for example, as the strings of the instrument fade away from left to right and the cryptogram floats free, one realizes that the picture achieves its balance not through linguistic encoding but precisely through letting signification go, releasing erotic meaning for the delicate procedures of line. Further canvases in the series reflect even more explicitly on the relation between inscription and embodiment. Is inscription a phenomenon that can be faced, one discrete presence to another? Is it something that can be touched?

Throughout the Tehran picture, one can locate echoes but, importantly, not the literal presence of the M’s and T’s that organize these paintings. (For an overdetermined example, look to the model’s crotch.) This is not surprising: The...
Painter and His Model presents the problem of distinguishing between body and non-body—between body and sign—at its most acute. The lines that constitute the painter, bringing him into and out of presence, show precisely how inscription undoes the bodies it produces. And the luxuriant contours of the model, integral as well as open, present the problem in even more compelling form. Her eroticism proves something wholly other than some banal fantasy of Marie-Thérèse posing for masterful Pablo, then: It rather takes us to the heart of the painting’s generation of perceptible form. The late writings of Paul de Man prove clarifying here. In perhaps the most inconsolable footnote of his career (it occurs in his essay “Hypogram and Inscription”), de Man comments on his account of the “erotic mode of ‘mere’ sense perception,” revealing it, with a mordant flourish, to be nothing more than “an allegory of cognition”—a dubious restatement of the self-enclosed nature of thought. The senses prove themselves to be merely “signs of the mind,” trucking in hallucination rather than true perception: “[c]onsciousness ... become[s] consciousness only of itself.” Here is the footnote in full:

Rather than being a heightened version of sense of experience, the erotic is a figure that makes such experience possible. We do not see what we love but we love in the hope of confirming the illusion that we are seeing anything at all.

Desire, then, is a mechanism for summoning bodies into perceptual being. The model’s eroticism operates alongside her violence as a way of phenomenalizing—of bringing into adequacy with perception—a bare material thing. For all its claim to sensual plenitude, eroticism in fact acknowledges the fictionality of her body, and its dependence on a shifting, arbitrary field of perceptual effects.

It is here that we need to attend to the force of de Man’s distinction between phenomenality and materiality, pursued obsessively in his final years. De Man’s thought on these matters is notoriously difficult; at times it seems almost designed to lead readers astray. Roughly speaking, though, de Man meant to signal an automatic human tendency to intermingle mind with nature, and to adequate the world with the self through sign-making. Signs, he says, believe in their own phenomenality, and in their efficacy as instruments of perception. They dream of taking hold of the world. For perception entails accessibility to cognition (seeing

32. Ibid., pp. 48–49.
33. Ibid., p. 54, note 23.
something is always, in this account, seeing it as something) and is therefore always a matter of producing the world as possessable—as framed. Materiality, meanwhile, names everything that disrupts the spurious phenomenality of signs. It stages, in de Man’s grim formula, “the undoing of cognition and its replacement by the uncontrollable power of inscription.”

35 “Uncontrollable,” because attention to materiality delivers us into sign-making’s literal basis as material thing—or better: as process in a material, which is to say, a fundamentally nonhuman world. The distinction, of course, can only be analytic: There can be no materiality without its phenomenalization, and no phenomenality, de Man wagers, without some material base to lure into pathetic form. But the distinction is also strategic. For as de Man’s often lurid metaphors of dismemberment and defacement suggests, the materiality at stake is not just that of language but also that of the world. The incorrigibly literal nature of sign-making (of marks, for instance, on a canvas) is what there is—perhaps is all there is—of human culture that might escape the tyranny of phenomenal accessibility, and which might link itself instead to those other, more fundamental processes, inhuman and dynamic, that structure the world. It is materiality, in other words, that divorces itself from the perceptual narcissism of the human. In this, de Man steers close to the great critic Carl Einstein’s approval of invérifiablet in painting and his corresponding disgust at the self-aggrandizing convention de la colonne vertébrale, which governs viewing and which he saw Picasso bringing to an end before his eyes. The deep problem of de Man’s late texts, we might say, lies in negotiating the actual connection between these two processes: Could the one materiality, signaled by representation collapsing in on itself, ever really refer meaningfully to the other? Could disturbances within representation’s most fundamental operations touch or even somehow “be” the radical materiality of the world?

De Man’s theoretical construction, it goes without saying, opens itself to criticism on any number of grounds. Yet we need not subscribe to his late pronouncements—or even to my distortions of them—in order to recognize their relevance to The Painter and His Model. For it has been the burden of my discussion to show that such were the stakes of painting for Picasso in 1927; no less. He wagers that given just the right locking into place of its parts, just the right staging of its material means, a painting might leap into actual efficacy—might transfer, and show itself transferring, its materiality into pure vision, producing and just as soon

36. In this, a parallel could be drawn with the psychoanalytic unconscious as not a place, or a substantive thing, but rather manifest as a disturbance within the operations of consciousness—“testimony to the irruption of an other causal chain,” as Jean Laplanche puts it. See Laplanche, “A Short Treatise on the Unconscious,” in Essays on Otherness, ed. John Fletcher (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 88.
shrugging off the figures of threat, terror, and violence that allegorize its presence as force. As I have also suggested, however, the very hyperbole of the work’s claims keeps that conversion virtual—a matter of picturing at its most artificial. How else are we to read the simultaneous immediacy and abstraction of those “apertures” of light? Soliciting unmediated sight, they also figure insurmountable space. Pictorializing the work’s eroticism and violence, they remain, nonetheless, metaphotorial devices. It is this unhappy self-division that constitutes the work’s greatest strength. The Painter and His Model proposes a recognition of material conditions separate both from “mere” sense perception and from the premature recognition of literal, self-evident physicality. It proposes that it might bypass a materiality figured as some overfamiliar phenomenality, and give instead a truly other, truly inanimate materiality something like a body. Indeed, it seeks to produce a form that might radically redefine “body,” that bedrock figure of the phenomenal, altogether. Such ambition is itself a powerful achievement. And it goes hand in hand with another: the recognition that in figuring all this, The Painter and His Model figures as well the material grounds on which it refuses false stability, and so enables itself to fail.

Failure, however, is never final for Picasso. And given the intensity of this particular exercise in representing origins, it would perhaps be better to speak of the painting’s carrying out, in the face of everything that would bring it under control, a continual, exhilarating process of de-composition. The games of masking and manipulation this essay traces seek ultimately to absorb the viewer into some primary scene of form-making, but only in order to spirit him or her out of it again. This is what constitutes the picture’s productivity. When Einstein came to speak of these matters in his 1930 essay on the artist, he formulated it this way: “To create a picture, it is necessary to become alien to oneself, to escape oneself, and art can be defined as a technique of continual doubt, departure, and death.”39 The Painter and His Model answers to this definition: It stages its manufacture always under the sign of its own negation. In the end, such techniques of de-composition open up space for other paintings. They are what make painting as a phenomenal and material endeavor possible. In its vehemence, then, The Painter and His Model offers a kind of clearing. It shows how doing something again and again—how doing it to death—is, for Picasso, to be always doing something else.