

Imaginatively Experiencing Paintings and Persons

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1. Introduction

That red boxer shorts and socks do just as well as fig leaves for concealing modesty in Tom de Freston's recent paintings demonstrates that modesty can also be a source of comedy. Monumental figures and poses that might otherwise inspire awe instead elicit a grimace. Perhaps this humor is not strictly an aesthetic virtue of de Freston's work. Even so, there are many genuinely aesthetically relevant features that we might attend to: representational properties, expressive properties, formal properties, and art-historical properties. In this article, however, I wish to draw attention not to the aesthetic value of de Freston's work but to its educational value. Although these works might be experienced as part of a tradition that seeks to appreciate art independently of our practical lives, I believe there is a particular way of reading some of the paintings that could offer the basis for moral education. This involves understanding the relationship between looking and imagining in our experience of de Freston's work—and not just in the experience of an individual work but in the experience of one work in light of the earlier experience of other of his works.¹ Such a study reveals the special significance that experiencing individual works of art as part of an artist's oeuvre might have for our moral education.

2.

De Freston's interest in the history of art is never far below the painted surface, so it is appropriate that we begin by thinking about how artists working in de Freston's tradition have invited us to look at their work. It does not take much imagination to determine how we are usually meant to look at a painting or drawing. The canvas or paper is usually marked on one side, and that is the side we are meant to look at. Depending how large or small

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the marked surface is, there is probably an appropriate distance from which we are meant to view it. And there will be other things that affect how we look at it—if it was intended to be displayed in a dark cathedral with candles glowing around it, or in a bright white modernist building with huge windows letting the natural light flood in. However, in each case something remains the same: we are often meant to experience the depicted scene as if we were looking through a window; as it would unfold around one standing in our position but within the depicted scene; as someone standing in *my* shoes in the picture would perceive the scene around him.

That we are usually meant to experience a picture from the perspective of one who surveys the scene from our own position is not to say we are always meant to do this. In Pieter Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, we are provided with a depiction of the moment when the monumental character of Icarus plunges into the sea—and to his death—because he flew too close to the sun, thus melting the wax with which his artificial wings were kept in place. Although this is an event of epic proportions, it is not depicted as such by Bruegel. The event occurs almost on the horizon. Much more of the canvas is devoted to depicting the peasant in the foreground, whose gaze is directed away from the dramatic event occurring near the horizon. One cannot help feeling that Bruegel is more interested in the peasant's experience than that of Icarus. It is as if Bruegel wants us—when looking at the painting—to imagine what it is like to be the peasant and then to identify imaginatively with the peasant so that we are the peasant in the picture. Then we might experience the painting from his perspective. The scene depicts something terrible happening to someone important. But we now experience the scene from the perspective of someone unimportant who is uninterested in the important character's fate because he must tend to his own burden, trivial though it be in the grander scheme of things.

This is an exemplary instance of a classic device in European figurative art. The artist depicts a scene and a particular figure in the scene such that the spectator imaginatively identifies with that figure—the internal spectator—and then experiences the scene from that internal spectator's point of view, not just from his line of sight but also from his emotional outlook on the scene.

3.

In de Freston's *The Last Romantic* we are confronted by a scene that is dominated by the back of the male figure in the center of the page.² The figure stands on some sort of platform or altar with arms outstretched and head upraised as he gazes into—or beyond—the dark heavens at the top of the page. There are some seven figures beneath him who face him and us. They are all of different sizes, although their heads are all roughly aligned near

the horizon at the middle of the page. These heads are the key to the picture. All are depicted with one side black, the other side white. Some are looking up toward the head of the large figure on the platform, who does not meet their gaze but looks even farther up into heaven. Others look away from him, either preoccupied with their own activities or, in one case, pointing to the large figure's head without actually looking at him.

Wherever the figures are looking, we cannot help but feel they are either looking at the central figure or deliberately avoiding him. The fractured black-and-white faces seem to be painfully and purposefully craning their neck toward, or away from, him. But this does not necessarily induce the spectator to crane his neck toward or away from the central figure. Rather, the spectator feels inclined to try to raise himself on tiptoe, to elevate himself to the level of the central figure toward or away from whom the other figures seem to orient themselves. Indeed, I suggest that the picture invites the spectator to identify with the central figure; to imagine that he is that figure; and then to experience the drawing from that figure's perspective. Now we have the simultaneous experiences of trying to gaze beyond into the elusive heavens while also being aware that the ground beneath us is occupied by figures who are striving to engage or avoid us. This reading of the picture demonstrates that the internal spectator is a device that we might suppose de Freston employs in some of his works to good effect. He invites us to identify with a figure and then experience it from that figure's perspective.

4.

The device of the spectator in the picture requires us to use our imagination when looking at a picture. That looking at a picture is as much an imaginative experience as it is a visual experience is an insight that is at the core of Richard Wollheim's philosophy of art and art criticism. Wollheim (1923–2003) was an Anglo-American philosopher who was an expert on the European painting tradition and on psychoanalysis and held the Grote Chair in Mind and Logic at University College, London, for many years. Imagination is central to Wollheim's philosophy, and this informs his remarkable readings of paintings, some of which employ his development of the traditional conception of the internal spectator.³

Let us assume that sometimes we imaginatively identify with a spectator depicted in a picture and then experience the picture for ourselves in the way that we imagine the internal spectator would experience it. If we can do that, perhaps we can also imagine a spectator in the picture who is located in the depicted space but just beyond the picture frame. So we imagine that although he is in the painted space, he is just out of our sight. This possibility is crucial to Wollheim's reading of several paintings by Manet.

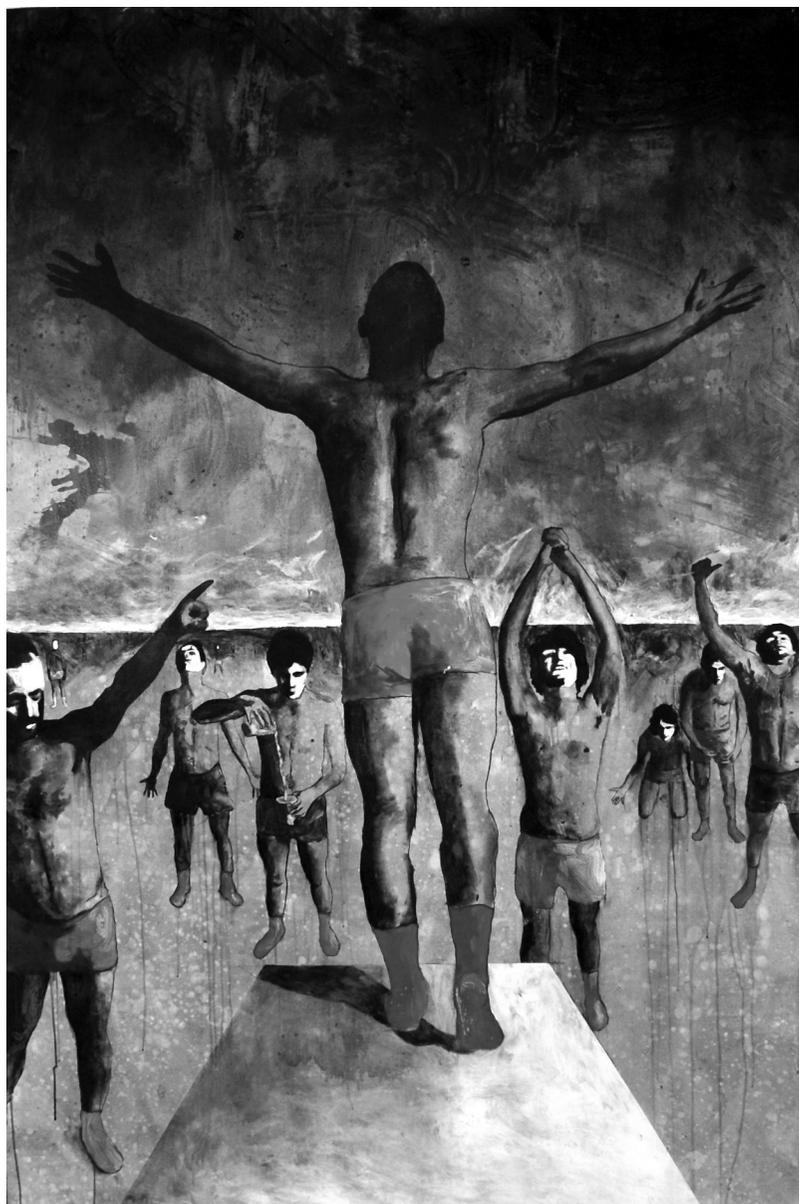


Figure 1. Tom de Freston, *The Last Romantic* (2009), acrylic on paper.

But just because we *can* imagine an internal spectator who is not represented, why *should* we do so? Why should we invent some complicated way of experiencing a picture that involves imagining things that are *not* there when we could just as well experience it wholly in terms of what *is* there? Wollheim offers an ingenious reading of Manet's single-figure paintings that provides us with a reason for doing just this: he claims that in order to understand the single-figure paintings properly, we have to appreciate them in light of Manet's multigure paintings.⁴ In Manet's single-figure paintings, such as *Woman with a Parrot* or *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, we encounter a remarkable sense of momentary reverie. Wollheim writes of these single-figure paintings:

What is common to the works . . . is a shared psychological subject-matter: they present us with figures characterizable in the same mental terms. They are figures who, at the moment at which we see them, are turned in upon themselves by some powerful troubling thought: they are figures who are temporarily preoccupied, figures who have retained and cherish, who cosset, a secret, to which their thoughts have now reverted. A moment later and the mood may dissipate, but until it does, they are absent from the world.⁵

To appreciate what Manet achieves in these paintings, Wollheim suggests that we must look at them in relation to his multigure paintings. In paintings such as *Le Balcon*, Manet presents a small group of people who are in close physical proximity and yet emotionally distanced from each other. They are together, yet they are alone. Wollheim observes that in this respect there is a superficial resemblance with Degas's small group paintings such as *Au Café*, in which there is psychological distance between the people whom Degas paints. The difference, however, is that the loneliness in Degas's paintings arises from the people in the picture; they are chronically unhappy, and we see depicted this aspect of their personality. In Manet's paintings, however, we see something quite different. The people are not fundamentally sad and detached from one another. Rather, Manet has caught a brief moment in which each happens to be lost in his own thoughts. We are given a brief moment in which each person fails to make eye contact with any of the others as they are caught up in their own moment of reverie.

When it comes to capturing the same emotions in paintings of single figures, Degas is free to paint them in the way that he paints his groups, as his effect is achieved by capturing the persistent condition of each subject, and this is no more difficult whether there is one or more subjects. For Manet, however, there is a special difficulty. His subjects are not fundamentally sad and detached. Rather, he captures a special moment in which this occurs. He captures the moment, not by bringing out the persistent condition, but by painting the way they fail to engage with each other in that moment.

When he paints a single figure, this technique is not possible. So how does he capture the moment of reverie? Wollheim suggests that he makes use of the device of an internal spectator. The internal spectator is located in the painted space but outside of the view of the space captured within the picture frame.⁶ Manet invites us to imagine this internal spectator, identify with the spectator, and look at the single figure in the way that internal spectator does. Thus, we see the single figure in a moment of isolation as one of the figures in the group painting would see the other figures in that painting. There might be many reasons for objecting to this reading. But what I want to suggest is particularly important is that the reading locates the particular painting in the wider context of Manet's figurative art. Whether or not we are obliged to do so, when we experience one of Manet's single-figure paintings in light of our experience of his multifigure paintings, a new possibility for understanding the single-figure painting emerges.

5.

In *The Last of the Seducer*,⁷ de Freston presents us with an image that is a pared-down version of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*. The raft at sea contains a single figure in the bottom left-hand portion of the page. He has the half-white, half-black face of the figures in *The Last Romantic*. The figure maintains a mournful,



Figure 2. Tom de Freston, *Last of the Seducer* (2009), charcoal on paper.

albeit strangely stoical, look as he nurses a corpse clad in red socks. The raft is also shared by another corpse, whose head is cut off by the right-hand edge of the page. The raft is adrift and seemingly drifts toward the horizon and away from the spectator. The figure's gaze is fixed toward us and away from the horizon toward which he is heading. With whom or what is he fixated? Perhaps it is someone stranded in the receding distance whom he drifts away from; someone who has no reason to feel stoical as well as mournful, as he does, not having the possibility of survival to entertain.

I have suggested that sometimes we are meant to experience a picture by identifying with an internal spectator. Are we meant to do so in this case? As there is only one figure in this picture, it would have to be that figure. But I cannot see how we could identify with him. He confronts us too directly for us to imagine being him looking at ourselves. However, as we have seen from our brief discussion of Wollheim's reading of Manet, our imaginative capacity is not exhausted by the depicted figures. Perhaps in this case we are meant to imagine the figure whom the raft is drifting away from. This figure is not represented, but we might still locate him somewhere out of sight but within the scene, perhaps somewhere behind where we stand when we look at the drawing. We might then identify with this unrepresented internal spectator and engage with the depicted figure's mournful stoicism in the same way the internal spectator would engage with it as he watches the raft—and his own hope for salvation in this life—drift away from him. Again we can make use of the device of an internal spectator when engaging with de Freston's work, but in this case it requires the imagination to work harder: it has to imagine the internal spectator who is not represented before it can imaginatively identify with him.

6.

Again we should ask why it is necessary to imagine a figure with whom we identify when experiencing this picture when it is perfectly possible to experience the picture just in terms of what is in it. I do not wish to make as strong a claim as Wollheim in this respect. I am not going to say that de Freston demands that we engage with his drawing in this way, and that a failure to do so is a failure to engage with the picture in the way he wants us to engage with it. But I am going to say that it is a possible way of engaging with the picture, that this possibility is a legitimate possibility, and that its legitimacy stems from the fact that de Freston makes the possibility legitimate. The source of the legitimacy lies not so much in what de Freston achieves in this picture but in how our experience of this picture relates to our experience of others created by him.

And it is at this point that I return to *The Last Romantic*. In that painting I suggested that we are presented with an internal spectator with whom we

imaginatively identify. What I now want to suggest is that we might bring the experience of *The Last Romantic* to our experience of *The Last of the Seducer*. Once we have found it rewarding to identify imaginatively with the internal spectator in the first picture, we are now ready to see the potential for imagining an internal spectator with whom we can identify in the second one. Just as we felt compelled to identify imaginatively with the figure that the black-and-white faces were looking at or away from in *The Last Romantic*, so we now feel compelled to imagine the figure that the black and white face is drifting away from in *The Last of the Seducer* and imaginatively identify with this imagined internal spectator.

Just as our experience of Manet's multigure paintings provides the basis for experiencing his single-figure paintings with the aid of an imagined internal spectator, so, I suggest, does our experience of de Freston's *The Last Romantic* provide us with a basis for experiencing *The Last of the Seducer* with the aid of an imagined internal spectator. With de Freston, as with Manet, new visual experiences are possible when we attend not merely to an individual work but to the works as an oeuvre. New possibilities for how we can experience an artist's work arise when we appreciate it not on its own but in the broader context of our experience of more of the artist's work to which it relates.

7.

I have suggested that, at least when I engage with some of de Freston's paintings, I can either experience them from my own point of view, or I can imaginatively identify with a spectator in the picture, be that a represented or unrepresented internal spectator. I have also suggested that at least in the case of the unrepresented spectator, this possibility is disclosed to me only when I engage with the painting in light of others by de Freston that I have previously experienced and that open up a new possibility for my experience of this painting.

Why should it matter that de Freston's works can be experienced in the ways I have suggested? One reason concerns the purely aesthetic value of his art: it enables us to appreciate that part of the aesthetic value of the paintings is the depth of experience they offer both individually and as an oeuvre. But there is a further value that they might have, not just for our aesthetic experience, but also for our practical experience of life. This possibility might more readily be noticed as a possibility of another art form: the novel.

The novel has often been used to provide an account of how an initial impression of an individual can be altered when it is seen through the lens of some wider experience of that individual: Nick Carraway's initial impression of Jay Gatsby is changed by their yearlong friendship in *The Great Gatsby*, just as Lizzie comes to understand her initial impression of Mr. Darcy

in light of her later experiences in *Pride and Prejudice*. Often in life it seems that there is an *obvious* way of understanding—or making sense of—another person's actions, an interpretation that seems natural and immediately apparent to us. However, this might involve reading the action in isolation from its wider context. Like Nick and Lizzie, we might subsequently learn to read the same action in another way. We might learn that sometimes ours is not the only way of understanding an action, but that we can come to understand it differently when we perceive it from another person's perspective. Furthermore, we might come to understand that in addition to understanding an action as an isolated event, we can understand it in the context of a larger set of actions by the same person, and that this context might offer us a way of understanding the action that was not possible when we engaged with it as a discrete action. This is not just a matter of developing a new awareness of a particular action, but it is also a matter of developing a new awareness of our capacity for experiencing others in a variety of ways.

In 2008 the American novelist Marilynne Robinson published *Home*, a companion piece to her Pulitzer Prize-winning *Gilead*.⁸ It is not a sequel, but a companion piece: it provides an alternative account of the same story. It allows Robinson to explore one character's perspective on a relationship in *Gilead* and another character's perspective in *Home*. The connection between the books is much more complicated than that, however. In one novel the events are examined in light of theology without any serious interest in the significance of the political themes that lurk in the background, in particular the racial tensions that persisted in the United States. In the second book these political issues assume a more central significance. So Robinson has presented us with novels that offer different ways of understanding the same events. But more than that, she provides us with a very special experience in *Home* when we read it in light of our earlier experience of *Gilead*: the secrets have already been revealed to us; we have experienced the events through another character's eyes; we have come to think that what is central is theological rather than political concerns. The richness of the experience of *Home* is not that it is a better novel than *Gilead*—it is probably not—but that it is a novel that is intended to be experienced in light of its companion. This offers us new possibilities for our experience of *Home*. And it is in the same way that I have suggested the earlier experience of de Freston's painting with a depicted internal spectator can prepare us to experience the later painting by imagining an unrepresented internal spectator.

Just as we can experience *Home* as a stand-alone piece or a companion to *Gilead*, so we can experience de Freston's works individually or in light of his oeuvre. That we have these alternatives in both cases is morally, as well as aesthetically, important, because we have similar alternatives in the personal relationships of our practical life. This is the key to a further value of art. Engaging with some works of art might offer a special sort of moral

education. It offers us the possibility for personal growth, for learning that imagination and context can enable us to see things in new ways. If we can then translate this awareness into our personal relationships, we find that the looking and imagining in our experience of pictures can enable us to grow in our experience of other people. In this way, art can provide an education for life. It can make us aware that we can use imagination to engage with people in new ways, and to appreciate that sometimes the broader context *commends* our doing this in the same way that the broader experience of de Freston's paintings with depicted internal spectators commends our experiencing certain of his other paintings with the aid of an imagined, albeit unrepresented, internal spectator. So one important value of de Freston's art is the possibility that he offers us for exercising our visual and imaginative capacities in a way that can be redeployed to promote our moral education in practical life. That our experience of an artist's oeuvre might have such significance for how we engage with other people and their behavior is a possibility that would reward further philosophical investigation.

Notes

1. The works by Tom de Freston discussed in this essay were first exhibited in a solo exhibition, "Reflections," at Christ's College, Cambridge, September 5–18, 2009.
2. *The Last Romantic*, by Tom de Freston (1983–), 2009. Acrylic on paper, 150 x 200 cm.
3. R. Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987). See in particular lecture 3, "The Spectator in the Picture: Friedrich, Manet, Hals," 101–86.
4. For a critical evaluation of Wollheim's reading of Manet, see D. Herwitz, "The Work of Art as Psychoanalytical Object: Wollheim on Manet," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42 (1991): 17–153.
5. Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, 141.
6. **For a criticism of Wollheim's approach to the spectator in the picture, see R. Hopkins, "The Spectator in the Picture," in R. van Gerwen, *Richard Wollheim on the Art of Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 215–31.**
7. *The Last of the Seducer*, by Tom de Freston (1983–), 2009. Charcoal on paper, 150 x 200 cm.
8. M. Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004); M. Robinson, *Home* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008).