



7 The "Private" Pictures and Some Others

ONE OF THE MOST CHALLENGING ISSUES SURROUNDING MENZEL'S OEUVRE CONCERNS THE STATUS AND MEANING OF HIS SO-CALLED "PRIVATE" PAINTINGS. These comprise a relatively small number of modest-sized, freshly painted, spontaneous-seeming works in oil that he made early in his career, some of the most impressive in 1844–45, and kept in his studio for most of his life.¹ They began to surface around 1900 in exhibitions and private collections; the most famous among them, the *Balcony Room* (1845; see fig. 51), was acquired for the Royal National Gallery in Berlin by Hugo von Tschudi in 1903; but the moment of their first public unveiling was the vast commemorative exhibition of 1905 where a number were shown together and attracted considerable attention. From the first, they were seen as revealing a Menzel fundamentally different from the public figure, the painter of the *Coronation of William I at Königsberg* and the illustrator of hundreds of scenes from the life of Frederick the Great, who for decades had been the most famous artist in Wilhelmine Germany. Instead, the newly prominent works evoked a youthful, precocious modernist, a painter to be compared with Constable and Corot, a harbinger of Impressionism if not quite an Impressionist himself. A chief advocate of the new view of Menzel was the critic Julius Meier-Graefe, who by the turn of the century had emerged as a champion of modernist painting, which he identified mainly with the great achievements of French painters from Corot and Courbet on.² For Meier-Graefe in his polemical book *The Young Menzel: A Problem in German Art Economy* (1906), Menzel's career told a tragic story.³ On the strength of the "private" pictures, Meier-Graefe argued, it was clear that Menzel had possessed the requisite gifts to have become the great modern painter that Germany in the nineteenth century signally failed to produce. But Menzel had lacked the nerve and character to continue in that highly personal and essentially artistic vein, and instead had succumbed to the inartistic tastes of a public and a government that wanted only anecdotal realism of a sort that he was all too capable of providing. In effect, Meier-Graefe's reading split Menzel's art in two, chronologically, aesthetically, and morally – though he also remarked that "in the 1840s and 1850s on one and the same day Menzel could be found in worlds as different as those of the monumental heroicism of Anton von Werner and the Impressionism of Manet."⁴ And although commentators on Menzel from Max Liebermann to the present have sought in different ways to distance themselves from the terms of Meier-Graefe's analysis, one or another version of the dichotomy between the protomodernist and the official Menzel has continued to haunt subsequent discussions of his art (as I earlier suggested). Even if that were not the case, the "private" pictures would still pose a challenge to the interpreter by virtue of the stylistic and other differences between them and the rest of Menzel's remarkably diverse oeuvre. In a strictly chronological study, a selection of those pictures would have to be discussed near the outset of the narrative of Menzel's career; but my topic-oriented approach has

allowed me to put off that discussion until now, when we are better equipped to pursue it fruitfully. I shall concentrate on three works, with a brief look at a fourth.

(1) Menzel's oil on canvas *Rear Courtyard and House* (1844; fig. 45), depicts a seemingly unprepossessing scene: a stretch of bare ground crossed by wooden fences and littered with signs of construction as well as of neglect, viewed from an upper story of the rear of a house (this last is an inference from the point of view implicit in the scene as a whole).⁵ At the extreme right-hand edge of the canvas we see a vertical slice of a brick wall that presumably belongs to another house off-canvas to the right. The slice is extremely narrow, and is therefore sometimes cropped in illustrations of the painting. And yet, I shall suggest in section 10, it is far from the least meaningful element in the picture. Also toward the right but extending plainly into the canvas is the gray wall of the side of another house with several stories of windows looking out on a narrow yard in which laundry on a line blows in a strong left-to-right wind. (Note, by the way, how the play of orthogonals in the windows indicates that the elevated point of view from which the scene has been depicted is roughly level with the uppermost portion of the picture, a structural device that makes the viewer's downward gaze into the backyard nearest us feel especially precipitous.) Parallel to that wall and somewhat nearer the viewer, a wooden fence supported by angled struts runs into the picture space, interrupted in its course by a modest vertical structure that has been identified as an outdoors latrine. (Looked at closely, the fence seems to lean slightly toward the left; and not every one of the upright posts along it has an angled strut. My point is that these sorts of qualifications are required if we are to do even minimal justice to the sheer particularity of what the picture gives us to see.) Slightly more than halfway up the composition, the receding fence encounters another fence that runs from left to right at a receding angle to the picture plane; on the other side of that fence to the left we see two sheds (that is, we see their roofs, the side wall of the first, and part of the side wall of the second) where some sort of rudimentary industry may be going on, though slightly to the right of those shacks we also glimpse children playing (one seems to be mounted on a kind of wagon) in the narrow wedge of space defined by still another fence that almost meets the main one at a sharp angle; in fact it stops just short of doing so and then veers to the right so as to form a brief, "unit"-wide straight line with the fence in the right foreground. (My description of the activity taking place in the wedge-shaped plot is tentative at best; the left-to-right-running fence largely blocks our view of what is going on. My greater point, which I am not done making, is that simply to inventory the representational content of this picture requires a sustained effort of close looking.)

Beyond the farther fence is a strange, unspecifiable plot of open ground, toward the middle of which we see a large darkish patch that perhaps represents a muddy pond or depression; a wooden gate in the fence opens into that ground, and two tiny figures have wandered through the gate toward the darkish area (others seem to be approaching the gate – at least that seems to be the implication of the several heads we can just make out beyond the screening fence). Beyond the plot of ground, near the top of the canvas, hovers, insubstantial as an image in water (Keisch aptly describes it as floating "almost in the manner of a mirage"⁶), a summary indication of houses and perhaps a taller building still under construction, for the most part scratched into a tract of blackish, greaselike paint that resembles nothing we might expect to find on a painter's palette.⁷ And beyond or rather above the houses runs a darkish strip of what presumably is sky.



45 Adolph Menzel, *Rear Courtyard and House*, 1844, oil on canvas, 44.5 × 61.5, Nationalgalerie, Berlin (A 1957)

To return to the courtyard nearest us, as one's eye tends to do after it has explored the rest of the scene, bushes leaning in the wind cluster in the immediate vicinity of the fences; the dark, prominent upright object not far from the latrine is a hand-pump, with a raised makeshift sluice or conduit running to the left to carry water toward the construction area near the left-hand edge of canvas. Again, we can have only an imprecise idea of what sort of construction has been taking place; toward the left the ground rises slightly, the earth is lighter colored as if covered with sand or plaster, and there are low wooden forms or matrices for the casting of cement. On the ground between the site at the left and the end of the sluice, almost lost in the bushes, a narrow ladder lies at an angle (Menzel's love of ladders is one with his predilection for staircases and scaffolds).⁸

⁵Compare Kafka in his *Diaries* (1911), ed. Max Brod, trans. Joseph Kresh (New York, 1975), pp. 95–6: "The sight of stairs moves me so today. Early in the day already, and several times since, I have enjoyed the sight from my window of the triangular

piece cut out of the stone railing of the staircase that leads down on the right from the Czech Bridge to the quay level. Very steep, as though it were giving only a hasty suggestion. And now, over there across the river, I see a step-ladder on the slope that leads down

What at first appears to be a stretch of wet ground runs more or less parallel to the sluice just a few inches above the bottom edge of the canvas (note the longish plank that crosses that stretch of ground parallel to the left-hand half of the conduit, as if to provide dry footing for persons working there); in fact the closer we look at the light brown asphalt underpainting directly below the conduit, the more it suggests a shallow pool of water in which the uprights of the pump and the two slatlike supports for the conduit appear to be reflected. Finally, at the very bottom of the canvas, about one-third of the way from the left-hand edge, is a small darkish patch on which we seem to look almost directly down (another instance of lived perspective); whatever substance it represents – greasy mud would be a reasonable guess – appears to be the same one that the painter has spread and then scored to depict the hallucinatory houses near the top of the canvas, as if when he arrived at the upper portion of the canvas he dipped his brush in the muddy patch at the bottom (this is impossible, of course, but it conveys something of the non-fine-art, everyday material “feel” of the painting as a whole).

Then too there is the evocation of the various textures associated with the side wall of the house at the right, the light-colored (as if plastered over) wall of the latrine, and the roofs of the sheds at the left, as well as of the difference between the grayish weathered wood of the fence with struts to the right and the brownish, newer-seeming wood of the left-to-right-running fence it intersects. We might also note that one of the two windows just above the latrine is partly open and that a length of cloth hangs down from it; that on the side wall of the latrine an upper shutter has likewise been left ajar; and that the top of a ladder protrudes just above the nearest part of the fence with struts. Even these observations do not exhaust what might be said descriptively about the contents of the scene; the effect of the whole is of an endlessly profuse store of information about an utterly ordinary corner of the world, without any principal focus, or rather with multiple foci, none of which exerts a dominating claim on our attention,

to the water. It has always been there, but is revealed only in the autumn and winter by the removal of the swimming school in front of it, and it lies there in the dark grass under the brown trees in the play of perspective.” And at greater length, Kafka in 1910 explains his inability to write by saying that all the things that occur to him, “occur . . . not from the root up but rather only from somewhere about their middle. Let someone then attempt to seize them, let someone attempt to seize a blade of grass and hold fast to it when it heings to grow only from the middle” (p. 12). This leads to the following:

There are some people who can do this, probably, Japanese jugglers, for example, who scramble up a ladder that does not rest on the ground but on the raised soles of someone half lying on the ground, and which does not lean against a wall but just goes up into the air. I cannot do this – aside from the fact that my ladder does not even have those soles at its disposal. This, naturally, isn’t all, and it isn’t such a question that prompts me to speak. But every day at least one line should be

trained on me, as they now train telescopes on comets. And if then I should appear before that sentence once, lured by that sentence, just as, for instance, I was last Christmas, when I was so far gone that I was barely able to control myself and when I seemed really on the last rung of my ladder, which, however, rested quietly on the ground and against a wall. But what ground, what a wall! And yet that ladder did not fall, so strongly did my feet press it against the ground, so strongly did my feet raise it against the wall. (12–14)

Illustrated on p. 13 of the *Diaries* is a manuscript page which contains a small drawing by Kafka of the Japanese jugglers performing before onlookers. An important article relevant to the second quotation is James Conant, “In the Electoral Colony: Kafka in Florida,” *Critical Inquiry* 27 (Summer 2001): 662–702.

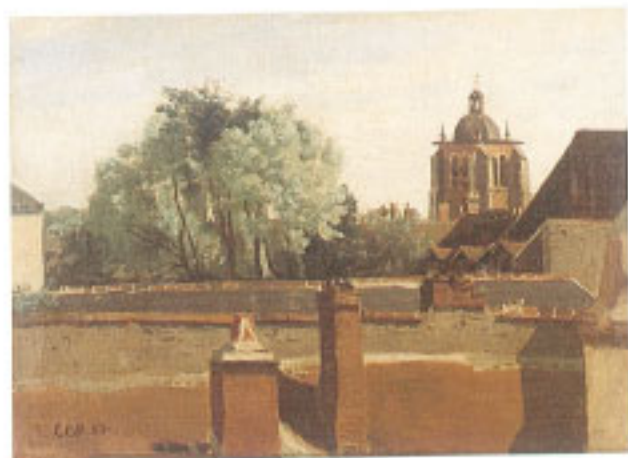
For more on the strange affinity between Menzel’s paintings and drawings and certain texts by Kafka, see “Coda: Brickwork” following section 15.

linked to one another only in the most contingent, loose-jointed, provisional way: the sequence of elements pump/sluice/fallen ladder/construction site may be taken as epitomizing the relation of part to part throughout the painting as a whole. (Actually between the left-hand end of the sluice and the right-hand end of the ladder we see a kind of tripod object with two other objects, perhaps small wooden forms, lying at its feet.) With respect to my basic argument, the body is everywhere implicated in the scene: in the view from above, situating the viewer at a precise height above the ground; in the further deepening of the angle of vision near the bottom of the canvas; in the wind gusting from left to right, buffeting the bushes and laundry, and the imagined sound of the laundry snapping in the wind; in the latrine, a grossly corporeal motif; in the pump, the handle of which would have been worked by hand and arm; in the two ladders, one of which requires to be set on its legs, the other of which is mostly hidden from view (but see how kinaesthetically we register its presence once we take it in); in the angled struts helping to support the fence to the right, to which we also respond empathically; in the heightened awareness that aspects of the scene are blocked from view behind fences and the like, which is also to say owing to our implied situation; and in the very sense of makeshiftness, of an entire environment having been put together, constructed, not in a spirit of permanence but rather in one of improvisation, with all the openness to *future* change, for good or ill, that that implies.² On the other hand, the very dispersal of focus means that the body is not massively or concentratedly thematized in connection with any single motif, so that one might almost begin to question the pertinence of the idea of embodiment to this particular work; probably the body is most intensely “present” in the form of a certain labor of looking.

All this is accomplished by a technique of the greatest flexibility and resourcefulness, a technique, moreover, that seems devoid of the least desire to impress. On the contrary, it is as if the act of putting paint on canvas is wholly given over to the task of depiction, which in this instance means both the representation of the multifarious particulars of the scene and the evocation of the movement of the artist’s attention as he took in those particulars. Nor does it seem quite accurate to speak of *Rear Courtyard and House* as sketchlike, as is often done, despite the rapid improvisatory play of the brush and also despite the sense in which the painting eschews not just traditional finish but all suggestion of finality: note especially the irregular “bare” patch on the side of the wall of the nearest shed at the left; is this a realistic detail, or are we to think of it as an area still to be painted in by the artist? It is as though on the level of execution as well as on that of the motif, *Rear Courtyard and House* presents us with an image

²Toward the end of Fontane’s *Effi Briest*, trans. Douglas Parmée (Harmondsworth and New York, 1967), p. 261, Innstetten, a successful bureaucrat who had earlier learned that his wife Effi (née Briest) had been unfaithful to him more than six years before and who had proceeded to kill her former lover in a duel and to break off relations with Effi herself, feels indifferent to the honors he has since received and contemplates resigning his position. A subordinate, Wüllersdorf, urges him to stay on and “practise resignation.” He quotes someone as having once said to him, ““Believe me, Wüllersdorf, you can’t do without makeshift constructions.” The man

who said that was an architect and he knew what he was talking about. And he used the right expression. Not a day passes without my being reminded of those “makeshift constructions” [in German: “Hilfskonstruktionen”].” The context in the novel has nothing to do with painting, but the phrase exactly applies not only to the organization of *Rear Courtyard and House* but more broadly to Menzel’s propensity for makeshift constructions throughout his oeuvre. For a discussion of the relation between Fontane’s novel and the Kierkegaardian everyday, a major concern of section 10 below, see “Postscript: Fontane’s *Effi Briest*” at the end of that section.



46 Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, *Orleans: View from a Window Overlooking the Saint-Paterne Tower*, ca. 1830, oil on canvas, 28.5 x 42, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Strasbourg



47 Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, *Tivoli: The Gardens of the Villa d'Este*, 1843, oil on canvas, 43.5 x 60.5, Musée du Louvre, Paris

of the sheerest makeshiftness, but just as the viewer is not led to imagine a fuller description of the chosen motif, so there is nothing about the execution to suggest that if only the work of painting were carried further or started again in a more ambitious spirit we would have before us a more complete or definitive or in any respect superior version of the present canvas. A painting as absolute in its non-finality as this one presents a challenge both to our intellectual categories and to our habits of viewing, not that the two are altogether distinct.⁸

A further, crucial point remains to be made, and that is that no work could be more alien to the spirit, in particular to the pictorial syntax or structure, of French modernist and pre-modernist pictures. (Here Meier-Graefe would disagree.) At the risk of simplifying a large and complex topic, I want to suggest that French painting throughout the nineteenth century remained essentially classical in its mode of constructing an illusion of spatial depth, by which I mean that in the work of generations of major painters from David and Ingres through Corot, Monet, Cézanne, and Seurat (and beyond), this was done by delineating a succession of planes all of which ran parallel to the picture plane and were stepped back into the distance by measurable degrees.⁹ The effect of distance was often reinforced by means of aerial perspective or its equivalent (the progressive degrading and, frequently, bluing of the color of more distant elements in a given painting evocative of the passage of light rays through air), just as the felt unity of the composition as a whole – the chief desideratum of the classical pictorial system as such – was further secured by a careful adjustment of relations among values, degrees of light and dark, both among and within individual planes (in Impressionism the work of value relation was largely taken over by contrasts of warm and cool). But the planar structure itself was decisive for the basic spatial organization of the picture. Virtually any canvas by Corot, an artist with whom the “private” Menzel has frequently been compared, makes this perfectly clear. Here for example is a work one might have thought would bear a certain affinity with *Rear Courtyard and House* by virtue of its point of view, *Orleans: View from a Window Overlooking the Saint-Paterne Tower* (ca. 1830;

fig. 46), but instead stunningly demonstrates the ability of the classical system to create a quasi-abstract effect of compositional unity, in this case keyed to the interlocking, largely rectilinear planar segments in the lower half of the canvas, while at the same time offering sufficient information about a particular motif (the precise configuration of the Tower of Saint-Paterne, the light on the trees in the middle distance, the warm browns and tans of the bricks and masonry in the foreground) to compel topographical conviction. Or consider the much admired *Tivoli: The Gardens of the Villa d'Este* (1843; fig. 47), in which the spatial logic, albeit somewhat looser than in the Orleans canvas, allows for a controlled progression from the near foreground, where a peasant boy sits facing the viewer on top of a low wall (a distinctly unMenzel-like motif), into the near middle distance with its three contrasting varieties of trees and, to the right, a village on a hill, through the farther middle distance where we discern, first, a dense cluster of buildings the facing walls of which are all parallel to the picture plane and, second, beyond the buildings, a broad stretch of *campagna*, the progression finally coming to an end in the silver-gray mountain silhouetted against the sky in the far distance. Corot's mastery of atmospheric effects in the Tivoli canvas leaves nothing to be



48 Claude Monet, *Promenade at Argenteuil*, ca. 1872, oil on canvas, 50.4 x 65.2, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection



49 (below left) Camille Pissarro, *River Oise near Pontoise*, 1873, oil on canvas, 45.7 x 55.25, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass.

50 (below right) Paul Cézanne, *Mill on the Couleuvre at Pontoise*, 1881, oil on canvas, 73.5 x 91.5, Nationalgalerie, Berlin (A 1 606)



desired, but the persuasive impression of deep space that the painting conveys is mainly a function of its planar organization, which determines the relative positioning of all the elements in the picture.

Without arguing the point in detail, I suggest that the same essential structure is at work both in the art of the "core" or landscape Impressionists, Monet, Sisley, and Pissarro, in whose paintings the succession of planes is often combined with a strongly receding river or stretch of road (or both), and in that of Cézanne, with certain modifications, mainly bearing on the fragmentation of the larger planes into planar patches of hatched brushstrokes and the development of a "vibratory" syntax in which individual patches and indeed individual brushstrokes relate simultaneously among themselves and to the picture plane.¹⁰ Let Monet's *Promenade at Argenteuil* (ca. 1872; fig. 48), Pissarro's *River Oise near Pontoise* (1873; fig. 49), and Cézanne's *Mill on the Couleuvre at Pontoise* (1881; fig. 50), a canvas bought by the Nationalgalerie in Berlin as early as 1897,¹¹ stand for the hundreds of paintings that might equally well illustrate my argument. Literally any Seurat would also serve the purpose.

My further claim, which in the present context I can only state, is that modernist painting, as it arose and flourished in France in the 1860s and after, would have been inconceivable if not for the prevalence of a classical paradigm keyed to the primacy of the picture plane that went back through Corot, David, and Chardin to Poussin and Claude, and beyond them to the great Italians (the landscapes of Annibale Carracci and Domenichino mark a decisive stage in the formation of that paradigm). But the persistence of classicism in modern French painting is not my concern in these pages, except insofar as the modernist thematization of the picture plane, building upon that earlier conception, has effectively determined the basic pictorial expectations of countless viewers of paintings, including many who have no explicit stake in modernist painting itself, with the result that Menzel's fundamentally disparate approach to the pictorial representation, when it is taken seriously at all, runs the risk of appearing eccentric, marginal, minor – brilliant in a handful of instances, above all the "private" pictures, but without deeper significance. (Making an exception for various German art historians, who have been unable to make their views on this score prevail generally, I think it is fair to say that his paintings have never really been seen to count in an essential history of nineteenth-century painting.¹²) For as we have seen, nothing could be further from a modernist emphasis on the picture plane than the dispersive, multi-angled, and kinaesthetically charged syntax of *Rear Courtyard and House*: a viewer occupying an unusually elevated point of view looks out and down, not straight ahead, at a world fundamentally skewed relative to his or her implied orientation, a world comprising a multiplicity of relationships that defy geometrical ordering, indeed that defy totalization or unification of any kind (the narrow slice of wall at the extreme right of the composition, so easy to ignore, epitomizes this), and therefore can be made out, apprehended as relationships, only by a combination of extremely close looking and projective imagination. For all the seeming instantaneousness of features of the motif – bushes and laundry blowing in the wind – actually coming to terms with *Rear Courtyard and House* calls for a sustained act of visual (also in a sense multisensory) exploration, one that is all the more demanding for the way in which the painting itself offers only the sparsest guidelines as to where to begin or how to proceed, and in fact the viewer continually arrives at perceptual dead ends that require starting again somewhere else. As for technique, the brushwork in Menzel's canvas seems entirely dedicated to its repre-

sentational, its mimetic, task; the artist's touch – the play of his brush – somehow avoids thematizing the picture plane, which thereby is rendered not so much invisible as, in a manner of speaking, beside the point. In contrast to all this, the perspicuousness of the planar structure of Corot's paintings has the effect of almost magically delivering the image whole, as a satisfying gestalt, to the modernist beholder, who proceeds both to contemplate the depicted scene – in the case of the Tivoli picture, to "travel" effortlessly through the landscape – and to admire the French artist's nonpareil mastery of his means: the familiarity, the seeming naturalness of the classical mode of pictorial organization foregrounds technique that *does* thematize the picture plane as a particular source of visual pleasure.¹³

It would be possible to devote a whole section of this book to Menzel's assault on the picture plane throughout his career, though perhaps the notion of assault assigns more importance to the picture plane than his practice usually granted it. On the other hand, one of his most ambitious works, the *Iron Rolling Mill* (see fig. 71), depicts just to the right of the middle of the canvas a dangling chainlike assemblage of iron rods with hooks and rings at the ends, culminating in a heavier, leverlike tool, which by virtue both of its strategic placement and of its apparent nearness to the viewer irrevocably destroys the very possibility of planar closure (another dangling element, perhaps even nearer the viewer, hangs down to its right). (Compare Keisch's description of the figure of Prince Maurice of Dessau in the *Address at Leuthen* as "literally breaking through the fictional frontier between the image and the viewer."¹⁴) Or consider the magnificent *Studio Wall* in the Hamburg Kunsthalle (fig. 160, to be discussed at length toward the end of this book). For the moment I want simply to call attention to the strongly receding slant of the wall itself, and to how in combination with the mainly upward angles of the embodied artist viewer's lines of sight and the dramatic, not to say melodramatic starkness of the play of light and shadow among the numerous plaster casts hanging on the wall (we sense that the painting was made at night, by lamplight of one sort or another), that slant effectively negates all awareness of the picture surface as an abstract plane, just as the sheer multiplicity and dispersion of pictorial foci defeat any attempt to perceive the painting as a unified whole. (For reasons that will become clear, I want nevertheless to resist the common tendency to associate Menzel's art with an aesthetic of the fragment.)

As for Menzel's drawings, his propensity to depict on a single page objects and even persons from sharply different points of view often works against a sense of the unity of the drawing as a whole, which in turn contributes to a general minimizing in that medium too of planarity as such. It was in part Meier-Graefe's failure to take the measure of Menzel's lifelong disregard for the picture plane that allowed him to imagine that the "private" works were steps on the path followed by French modernism. In fact (to cite another major early twentieth-century critic) it was Menzel's attitude toward the picture plane and more broadly his anticlassicism rather than simply his realism that underlay Roger Fry's dismissal of his work. "At the opposite pole to Corot's drawing with its splendid revelation of plastic significance we must put Menzel with his fussy preoccupation with undigested fact," Fry writes in "Drawings at the Burlington Fine Arts Club" (1919). "It is hard indeed to see quite how Menzel's drawings found their way into this good company, except perhaps as drunken helots, for they are conspicuously devoid of any aesthetic quality whatever. They are without any rhythmic unity, without any glimmering of a sense of style, and style though it be as cheap

as Rowlandson's is still victorious over sheer misinformed literalness.¹⁴ Plastic significance, rhythmic unity, and a sense of style are all notions linked in Fry's writings to the modern French tradition, and more broadly to the classical ideal; from that perspective Menzel's drawings, which one might have thought would reveal their transcendent qualities in any context whatsoever, especially to a viewer usually as acute as Fry, appeared sadly wanting.

(2) I come now to the best-known of the "private" works, *Balcony Room* (1845; fig. 51), a painting that has received copious commentary since its public emergence in 1903. For a long time it stood as the most emphatically forward-looking (protomodernist, quasi-Impressionist) of the "private" works as regards both style and motif; more recently scholars have emphasized what they have seen as its various "instabilities and ambiguities," such as compositional asymmetry, incompatible implied viewpoints and a ground plane that "seems to slide from underneath the viewer's feet," the casual disarray of the furniture (the two chairs "positioned haphazardly to each side of the large mirror . . . face away from each other"), an overall impression of emptiness, randomness, and fragmentariness, above all the lack of match between the reflection in the standing mirror against the right-hand wall, which shows a sofa covered in a green- and pink-striped fabric with a framed print or drawing hanging above it, and the portion of the room toward the left of the composition, where we glimpse part of a red-and-gold rug with a black fringe on the floor and beyond it a dull mossy gray patch that presumably was meant to indicate the arm of a sofa but in its present state is unreadable in any definite terms.¹⁶ In addition, as Keisch writes, "the meaning of the light patch on the bare [rear] wall . . . remains an enigma: a reflection of sunlight? Did the house-painter break off work there, or did Menzel leave his picture 'unfinished'?"¹⁷ Keisch, building on Werner Busch, also associates the way in which objects in the painting have been treated with varying degrees of precision to the everyday experience of "selective perception: while concentrating on one object it takes in others in an ever more blurred way the further they are removed from the main element," an experience, he goes on to say, that was not unknown to the theorists of the day, such as Rudolf Wiegmann at the Düsseldorf Academy.¹⁸ (This is interesting, though I am not sure how importantly it bears on the painting. Or rather, insofar as it takes a step toward acknowledging the importance of embodied perception, it remains too "ocular" in its emphasis – it does not go far enough toward acknowledging the role of muscular activity, of the eyes as of other bodily organs, in Menzel's art.)

The main incident in *Balcony Room*, as has always been noted, is the implied movement, the gentle inward billowing, of the light-filled muslin curtains in the breeze entering the room through the open French windows – the most lyrical of all Menzel's many evocations of wind in his art. (The French windows are glazed only down to about the bottom third of their height, a fact that is largely masked by the sheer quantity of light they admit to the room as well as by the screening action of the farther curtain. On the other hand, it is not just confirmed but emphasized by the window reflection-plus-shadow on the floor.) Throughout the painting the brushwork is light, fluent, sure; again, the temptation is to characterize the overall effect as sketchlike, but as in the case of *Rear Courtyard and House* this should be resisted to the extent that it implies the possibility of imagining a fuller or more resolved treatment of the motif: note for example the many small curtain rings from which the curtains are suspended, the embroidered



51 Adolph Menzel, *Balcony Room*, 1845, oil on board, 58 × 47, Nationalgalerie, Berlin (A 1 744)

pattern on the curtains, the pink and green floral decorative motif that runs along the uppermost ceiling molding, and the sculpted gold frame around the print in the mirror, all of which refute the notion that they could be improved by more detailed treatment. I would prefer to say that *Balcony Room* is a work of extraordinary *lightness*, the movement of the curtains and the virtual liveness of the chair facing them being emblematic of the stylistic modality of the whole. (The chair seems barely to rest on the floor, an effect enhanced by the brushy shadows springing down from the bottoms of the legs.) And then the painting is signed and dated – “A.M. 45.” – which suggests that the artist regarded it as a finished work, whatever we take that to mean.

Also, as in *Rear Courtyard and House*, the picture is neither organized nor painted in a manner that affirms the primacy of the picture plane. This is less obviously true than in the earlier work; in particular the rear wall, because nearly parallel to the picture surface, appears at first to be determinant for the pictorial structure as a whole. But on closer examination other factors come to the fore. For example, the movement of the curtains continually draws the viewer's attention away from that wall toward the corner of the room and beyond it to the distinctly oblique right-hand wall; moreover, the length of the curtains, from ceiling to floor, underscores the fact that the scene as a whole cannot properly be taken in at a single, global *coup d'oeil* – the same act of looking cannot do justice to the floor, with its shadows and reflections that carry our eye acceleratingly to the bottom of the canvas, and the upper wall and ceiling moldings with their various decorations (not to mention the rug and partial sofa to the left and the chair and wall lamp to the right). Then there is the larger logic of the composition, with its emphasis on the right-hand wall, its French windows opening onto a breezy sunlit exterior we cannot see, and its full-length mirror, standing against the wall, offering a rival focus to the windows but reflecting reaches of the room to the left rear from which we are otherwise excluded. And when we direct our looking back toward the left, which is to say toward the rear wall and the objects we have been led by the reflection in the mirror to expect to find there, not only are we disconcerted not to find those objects in a form we can recognize, but we are also disoriented to discover on the wall itself the somewhat shapeless, vertically oriented light patch with its rectilinear-seeming inner “frame,” which has been variously interpreted but no matter how it is seen has the curious effect of dislocating the plane of the wall, of making its entire surface hover indeterminately in a spatial limbo, thereby disqualifying the wall from serving as a compositional anchor for the picture as a whole. The indeterminateness of the “sofa,” indeed the entire question of finish that arises in the left-hand portion of the composition, also contribute to that effect, as does, in a slightly different way, the strong sense of verticality that arises from the painting as a whole – as if the *Balcony Room* allows us to glimpse, by contrast, a kind of elective affinity between the classical planarity I have associated with the modern French tradition and horizontal formats generally.¹⁹ In other words, as in *Rear Courtyard and House*, coming to grips with *Balcony Room* requires submitting oneself to its inner workings in ways that differ fundamentally from those posited by the French (or indeed French-American) modernist ideal.

The analogy, also therefore the difference, between the windows and the mirror are reinforced by the fact that each has its own chair; at any rate, I associate the farther chair with its back largely turned toward us with the windows and curtains and the nearer, more or less facing chair at the lower right with the mirror, whose image it partly interrupts. And the effect of the analogy-plus-difference between windows and mirror

is to enforce an awareness not just of the separateness of the acts of seeing that each respectively elicits (just try focusing on the billowing of the curtains and the image in the mirror in the same act of attention) but also, even more important, of the different affective or symbolic implications of the two motifs. By now it will come as no surprise to learn that I see the billowing curtains in bodily terms, in the first place because they register the flow of wind, always a carnal theme in Menzel's art, and in the second because they give a certain tangible expression (or “body”) to the inrush of light, which we feel enters the room along with the air. The “window” chair too is bodily, both because it evokes the action of sitting (lightly, as I have said) and because it conveys by its placement, rococo-like animation, and the almost ideographic brusqueness of its execution a sense of heightened attentiveness to the inward billowing of the curtains. I do not think it goes too far to suggest in addition that the gown-like curtains have a distinctly “feminine” air and that the sense of attentiveness I associate with the chair is, at least by virtue of the latter's juxtaposition with the curtains, implicitly “masculine.” (It might be objected though: why should not the chair with its rococo curves be seen as simply confirming by metonymy the “feminine” character of the windows-plus-curtains? I have no answer to this.)

In comparison with the windows and curtains, the mirror at first seems a less overtly bodily motif. But partly owing to its proximity to them, it too takes on not just bodily connotations (we sense its uprightness, its rigidity, in kinaesthetic terms) but sexual ones as well: whatever the status in this regard of the “window” chair, the tall rectangular mirror in its dark enclosing architecture seems indubitably a “masculine” element (that is, the window-plus-curtains and the standing mirror make a heterosexual pair). I shall have more to say about this presently, but for the moment I want to stress the mirror's own intensely subjective aura – indeed I see in it a figure for subjectivity itself, or say for the intellectual activity that philosophers in the Kantian tradition, including Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and Kierkegaard, called “reflection.”²⁰ (The modern age, Kierkegaard argued, was one of reflection, for good and ill.²¹) More precisely, I suggest that the window and mirror together, or rather the painting in which they appear, may be understood as an allegorical, which is also to say a radically reconfigured, image of the embodied and reflective subject of contemporaneous philosophy. Viewed in those terms, the superior clarity of the image in the mirror in comparison with what we are shown toward the left rear of the room suggests an implicit critique of the idea of reflection as in any sense doubling or duplicating what already exists; on the contrary, it implies a privileging of the reflective activity itself, understood as “positing” the sofa and the framed print or drawing over it, at the same time as the “actual” partial and unfinished sofa at the left (assuming that is what it is) leaves open the question of the relation of the reflection in the mirror to the “actual” world, that is, the world “this” side of the mirror. (Specifically, it leaves open the question of to what extent the “positing” by the mirror is constrained by the contents of the “actual” world.) In addition, there is a strong sense in which the two back-to-back chairs, which belong to that world, may themselves be said to mirror or reflect one another (so much for the merely “haphazard” character of their placement), though even as we register that fact we become aware of the partial, angled reflection of the back of the “window” chair in the mirror, a reflection partly obscured by the back of the “actual” “mirror” chair, which it almost seems to mirror in turn (but of course it does not).

The exact significance of all this for a philosophical reading of Menzel's canvas is not easy to specify, but perhaps I may say:

52 Caspar David Friedrich,
Woman at the Window, 1822,
oil on canvas, 44 × 32,
Nationalgalerie, Berlin



– Mirroring or reflection in *Balcony Room* cannot be analogized to the “I think” that for Kant “must at least virtually accompany all the experiencing subject’s representations.”²² At the risk of oversimplifying a complex matter, I am tempted to associate the Kantian “I think” with Caspar David Friedrich’s *Woman at the Window* (1822; fig. 52), in which a woman in a long green dress gathered above her waist is depicted from the rear gazing through an open window at a river landscape only part of which is visible to us. (The woman is the artist’s wife, Caroline; the room in which she stands is Friedrich’s austere studio, almost devoid of furnishings, in the house on the Elbe where they had lived since 1820. Through the window we glimpse the masts and rigging of two ships, one nearer than the other – is either one moving? it is impossible to tell – as well as a stand of poplar trees on the far bank of the river. The sky is blue, light-filled, with a few scattered clouds.) On the one hand, there is in the Friedrich no explicit imagery of mirroring; on the other, the inwardness of a specific reflective subject – the woman – is strongly felt, an effect that is all the more pointed owing to both our sense of the mysterious appeal of the view directly before her and, equally important, the fact of her centeredness. By this last point I refer both to her place in the composition and to the further thematization of centeredness, as if of consciousness or cognition itself, in and by the crosshair-like wires that divide in four the upper window with its broad expanse of sky. Nothing could be more foreign to such centering than the oblique, imbal-

anced, and dispersive character of Menzel’s composition, which suggests that, with respect to the figuration of reflection, we are dealing in the latter with another order of conceptual difficulty.²³

– Mirroring or reflection in the Menzel is also what might be called perspectival or, better, aspectual in its mode of operation, in that the reflection of the “window” chair-back in the mirror, as well as the partial obscuring of that reflection by the “mirror” chair, calls attention to the viewer’s implied location relative to the image as a whole. So does both the reflected light from the windows on the polished floor toward the bottom of the canvas and the view of the sofa, framed print, and “window” chair-back in the mirror, in that we are made to feel that only from our present vantage point would those things appear precisely as they do. At the same time, the implication of our “actual” presence at or to the depicted scene does not give us means to assess the extent to which the larger thematic of reflection-plus-embodiment in the painting is a function of the embeddedness and contingency of our own reflective self-determining,²⁴ which is to say we are forever uncertain whether or to what extent the subjectivity we are led to intuit in the picture is in any sense “ours.”

This lack of certainty is given further emphasis by the absence in *Balcony Room* of any depicted person – any particular, contained subjectivity, distinct from the viewer’s and yet by virtue of that fact accessible to imaginative “identification” – as in the Friedrich. Rather, Menzel’s canvas offers a highly nuanced structure, keyed to but not exclusively consisting in relations of reflection, that pointedly confounds any clearcut distinction between “actual” and reflected elements at the same time as it implicitly addresses or interpellates the viewer, who in effect is called upon to respond projectively to the multiple evocations of a subjectivity that on the one hand seems to hover everywhere we look and on the other to come to rest, to condense and stabilize, nowhere in particular. Perhaps it is in this connection that the fact that we are not given more than the barest hint of the view the other side of the French windows reveals its true significance: if we were given such a view, it would provide an outside relative to the room as a whole (as in the Friedrich), whereas in *Balcony Room*, with its breeze-blown, light-struck, and undeniably material curtains mediating the flow of light and air into the room, and also with its obliquely angled mirror ostensibly reflecting features of the room that lie beyond the painting’s left-hand framing edge, outside and inside (in more than one sense of those words) are in the end little more than inflections of a single, in crucial respects seamless pictorial and phenomenological field. Moreover, a view through the window would inevitably draw and focus the viewer’s attention, whereas the whole point of the relationships I have been tracking is to rule out such a possibility in favor of continual circulation among them. Simply put, in *Balcony Room* no single motif or crux on which our attention momentarily comes to rest, not even the billowing curtains or the play of reflections in the mirror, indeed especially not those given the competition between them, is sufficiently dominant to still the eye and satisfy the mind even provisionally. And because that is the case, the viewer, at least this viewer, continually searches the painting as if for a solution that is not forthcoming (the inscrutability of the light patch on the far wall may be taken as emblematic of this).

– Another feature of *Balcony Room* as an image of embodied reflection or subjectivity is the salience of the connotations of sexual difference that I have associated, first, with the juxtaposition of the “feminine” curtains and the “masculine”(?) “window” chair and, second and more importantly, with that of the curtains and the mirror. As it

happens, a mirror encountered in a sexual context plays an important role in a major philosophical text I have already cited in passing, Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* (1843). In part one, in the famous section called "The Seducer's Diary," the nameless first-person protagonist spies on his quarry, a young woman of seventeen, in a shop:

As yet she has not seen me; I am standing at the other end of the counter, far off by myself. There is a mirror on the opposite wall; she is not contemplating it, but the mirror is contemplating her. How faithfully it has caught her image, like a humble slave who shows his devotion by his faithfulness, a slave for whom she certainly has significance but who has no significance for her, who indeed dares to capture her but not to hold her. Unhappy mirror, which assuredly can grasp her image but not her; unhappy mirror, which cannot secretly hide her image in itself, hide it from the whole world, but can only disclose it to others as it now does to me. What torture if a human being were fashioned in that way. And yet are there not many people who are like that, who possess nothing except at the moment when they are showing it to others, who merely grasp the surface, not the essence, lose everything when this is going to show itself, just as this mirror would lose her image if she were to disclose her heart to it by a single breath. And if a person were unable to possess an image in recollection at the very moment of presence, he must ever wish to be at a distance from beauty, not so close that the mortal eyes cannot see the beauty of that which he holds in his embrace and which the external eyes have lost, which he, to be sure, can regain for the external vision by distancing himself from it, but which he can, in fact, have before the eye of his soul when he cannot see the object because it is too close to him, when lips are clinging to lips. . . . How beautiful she is! Poor mirror, it must be tormenting. . . .²⁵

Kierkegaard's thought is notoriously difficult (the passage is typically pseudonymous, which introduces a further level of complication) but several points suggest themselves. To begin with, the human subject, the self, is imagined as embodied; this is an obvious implication of the question of closeness, and more broadly of the entire sexual problematic of "The Seducer's Diary." Furthermore, there runs throughout the passage an awareness of conflict between bodily possession, thematized in terms of closeness, and (what we have been calling) "ocular" appearance or manifestation, which requires distance between subject and object and is associated, as in the second sentence in the passage, with "contemplation" or, presumably, reflection. Put slightly differently, the passage dramatizes the essential separateness or non-coincidence – the inner difference – of bodiliness and reflection, which may be analogized to the juxtaposition of the French windows with their "bodily" curtains and the manifestly "reflective" mirror in Menzel's picture. At the same time, it suggests that by means of a recollected image a man "can have [the object of desire] before the eye of his soul when he cannot see the object because it is too close, when lips are clinging to lips," and although there is no equivalent in Menzel's canvas to recollection as such, the sharpness and fullness of the image in the mirror nevertheless imputes to the mirror a degree of autonomy relative to the "actual" world that, we feel, could in principle enable it to hold on to its chosen object under virtually any circumstances. In Friedrich's *Woman at the Window*, in contrast, the impression of the woman's bodiliness is minimized by the thinness verging on transparency of the paint with which she is depicted, though – anticipating the dispersal of attributes in the Menzel – there is in Friedrich's canvas the suggestion of a

certain separation of consciousness or reflection from the empirical person by virtue of the elevation of the wire-thin crosshairs in the open space above the figure of the woman as well as, perhaps, by her slight bodily inclination toward the left (relative to the vertical crosshair she is not exactly centered).

In addition, an obvious point, the sexual thematics of the passage from *Either/Or* casts the mirror as "masculine" and the object of its reflection as "feminine"; this is no doubt overdetermined, but it invites comparison with *Balcony Room*, where the sexual dynamic turns on the contrast between the "feminine" windows and curtains and the "masculine" mirror with its upright stature, rectangular form, and dark framing architecture, though in both the Seducer's ruminations on the mirror and in Menzel's picture the idea of bodiliness cuts across those oppositions (for example, "masculine" possession requires the idea of closeness, just as in the painting the "window" chair has been described by me as affectively "masculine"). Finally, the passage as a whole expresses a painful uncertainty on the part of the Seducer as to whether or not *his* consciousness or subjectivity possesses "secret depths" in which an image might be hidden, or whether on the contrary it is reflective on the model of an ordinary mirror; the very figure of reflection, because of its reliance on a metaphysics of mirroring, makes "deep" subjectivity – a subjectivity that belongs essentially to the subject, not to the objects of the subject's thoughts and reflections – a source of anxiety. I do not quite wish to propose that a comparable anxiety is expressed in *Balcony Room*, if only because the disparity between the clearcut image in the mirror and the vagueness and indeterminacy of the partial sofa-like form at the left suggests that *this* mirror, far from being enslaved by the objects of its representations, enjoys a position of mastery if not autonomy with respect to them. But could not that become a source of anxiety in its own right? Are we to imagine "deep" subjectivity simply indifferent to the question of the relation of its reflections to external reality? In any case, if I am justified in finding in Menzel's painting something other than an evocation of a firmly *grounding* subjectivity, the Seducer's uncertainty, for all its expression in terms of a metaphysics of surface and depth that *Balcony Room* plainly exceeds, may not be entirely foreign to the viewer's own.

I might add that I am aware that nothing I have said begins to bridge the gap between the resolutely secular or everyday atmosphere of Menzel's canvas and the profoundly religious substructure of Kierkegaard's thought even in "The Seducer's Diary." But nothing is more characteristic of Kierkegaard's thought than his insistence on the absence of any manifest sign of distinction associated with the religious life as such (more on this in section 10). Am I then suggesting that *Balcony Room* may in fact be a "religious" painting by virtue of its not appearing to be one? In any case, my aim in juxtaposing *Balcony Room* and the passage from *Either/Or* has not been to propose that there exists a strict equivalence between them but rather to suggest that they belong to a similar moment or epoch in the philosophy of reflection, perhaps the most contested concept of the Kantian aftermath.²⁶

This is as good a place as any to say something more about the intuition, for that is what it is, that has led me to read aspects of Menzel through Kierkegaard (and vice versa). The two men were nearly exact contemporaries (Menzel was born in 1815, Kierkegaard in 1813); neither married, Menzel for reasons we can easily surmise, Kierkegaard following a dramatic broken engagement to Regine Olsen, one of the

determining events of his relatively short life (he died in 1855).²⁷ Each experienced the sense of being an "exception" (Kierkegaard's term), Menzel because of his odd physique and perhaps also because of the fierceness of his sense of vocation, Kierkegaard both because of his commitment to an existential ideal of Christianity that had no institutional expression in modern Denmark (or anywhere else) and because he became the target of public ridicule, in part concerning his own eccentric appearance, as the result of a conflict he deliberately launched with the journal *The Corsair*. Kierkegaard lived almost all his life in Copenhagen, but his mind was shaped by German philosophy (his early thought engages in a passionate struggle with the Hegelian system), and during the first half of the 1840s he spent two extended periods in Berlin, during the first of which he wrote the second part of *Either/Or*. In associating Menzel and Kierkegaard I do not mean to suggest any explicit concern on the artist's part with philosophical or religious issues; nor do I claim that Menzel read Kierkegaard, whose thought became a factor in German intellectual life only later in the century. My point, which will fully emerge in section 10, is that crucial aspects of Menzel's art invite understanding in terms analogous to those developed in certain early writings by Kierkegaard, chiefly but not solely *Either/Or*.

Consider, for example, the following remarks on "lightness," a quality I have attributed to the *Balcony Room*, from "Crisis in the Life of an Actress" (1848). The passage analyzes the art of a young actress Kierkegaard greatly admired, though the ultimate purpose of his essay is to characterize the fundamentally different qualities that went into her performance of Juliet later on in life.²⁸ He writes:

Her indefinable possession signifies finally: *that she is in the right rapport with the tension of the stage*. Every tension, according to the dialectic's own dialectic, can have two different effects. It can reveal the strain it creates, but it can also do the opposite, can conceal the strain; and not only conceal it, but constantly transform it, change and transfigure it into lightness. Thus the lightness is invisibly grounded in the strain produced by the tension, but this strain is neither seen nor suspected; only the lightness is revealed. A heavy object can weigh something down. But conversely, it can also conceal the fact that it is heavy, and express its heaviness in the opposite way, by lifting something up in the air. People usually talk as though one became light by casting off one's burdens, and this view of the matter is the basis for all trivial outlooks on life. But in a higher, poetic or philosophical sense, the opposite is the case: One becomes light by means of – heaviness. One swings up high and free by means of – a pressure.²⁹

Without elaborating the point, I suggest that these remarks come far closer to capturing the overall mood of *Balcony Room* than any amount of stylistic analysis in the usual sense of the term. Nor is it unimportant that the passage celebrates the performance of a young artist, and that the larger argument of "Crisis" suggests that with the advance of age the lightness Kierkegaard valued so highly will no longer be available to her; similarly, the special brio and radical decenteredness of the "private" works largely disappear from Menzel's art after the 1840s, as if with the passage of time the heaviness of the body was allowed to express itself in a different way.³⁰

A final, somewhat different example comes from another early text, one closely related to *Either/Or*, *Repetition* (1843). The passage, a long one, requires quoting in full:

I arrived in Berlin after all, and hastened at once to my old lodging in order to convince myself how far a repetition might be possible. I can assure every sympathetic reader that on my first visit I succeeded in getting one of the most agreeable apartments in Berlin, and this I can now affirm with the more confidence because I have seen many. Gendarmes Square [Gendarmenmarkt] is surely the most beautiful in Berlin. The theater and the two churches make a fine appearance, especially as viewed from a window by moonlight. The recollection of it contributed much to hasten my steps. One ascends a flight of stairs in a house illuminated by gas, one opens a small door, one stands in the vestibule. On the left is a glass door leading to a cabinet. One goes straight ahead, one finds oneself in an antechamber. Beyond this are two rooms entirely alike and furnished entirely alike, with the effect of seeing one room doubled in a mirror. The inner room is tastefully lighted. A branch candlestick stands on the writing table, beside which stands a handsome armchair covered with red velvet. The first room is not illuminated. Here the pale light of the room is blended with the stronger illumination from the inner room. One sits down upon a chair by the window, one looks out upon the great square, one sees the shadows of pedestrians hasten along the walls. Everything is transformed into a theatrical decoration. A dreamy reality looms up in the background of the soul. One feels a desire to throw on a cloak and slink quietly along the walls with a searching glance, attentive to every sound. One does not do it, one merely sees oneself doing it in a renewed youth. One has smoked one's cigar, one retires to the inner room and begins to work. Midnight is past. One extinguishes the candles, one lights a small night lamp. The moonlight triumphs unalloyed. A single shadow appears still darker, a single footstep takes a long time to disappear. The cloudless vault of heaven seems sad and meditative, as though the end of the world were past and heaven undisturbed were concerned only with itself. One goes out again into the antechamber, into the vestibule, into that little cabinet, one goes to sleep – if one is of that fortunate number that can sleep.³¹

Here my intuition is that we are offered a virtual gallery of Menzel-like motifs and effects: the view from a window by moonlight recalls *View over Anhalt Station by Moonlight* (see fig. 7) and other works such as *Looking at the Moon (Moonlight on the Rooftops of Berlin)* (ca. 1855–60)³² and *Corner of a House in the Moonlight* (see fig. 161); the flight of stairs in a house illuminated by gas summons up *Stairway Landing in Nocturnal Lighting* (see fig. 11); the uncanny motif of the two entirely similar rooms that produce the effect of seeing one room doubled in a mirror (a kind of "repetition") recalls the back-to-back chairs in the *Balcony Room* and beyond that the thematic of reflection in that picture; and the further description of the inner room with its candlestick on the writing table might be analogized to another of the "private" pictures, the intensely poetic night scene, *Living Room with the Artist's Sister* (1847; fig. 53), apropos of which one might also wish to say – though perhaps the words best evoke the apparent state of mind of Emilie Menzel in the doorway – "A dreamy reality looms up in the background of the soul." Beyond these specific associations, I am struck by the author's projective sensibility: seated in a chair by a window he is led within a few sentences to visualize himself down in the square, wearing a cloak "and slink[ing] quietly along the walls with a searching glance, attentive to every sound." Even the way the passage closes with a reference to going to sleep recalls, having come this far, Menzel's ravishing drawing of his unmade bed and indeed his many depictions of sleeping figures,

about which I shall have more to say. Kierkegaard's writings are rarely so pictorial, and one could almost believe, but of course it is out of the question, that he had Menzel's early works in mind when he wrote these words.³

(3) The third painting to be looked at closely in this section, the *Théâtre du Gymnase* (1856; fig. 54), was made some time after Menzel's return from a stay of two weeks in Paris in September 1855. He had gone there to visit the Exposition Universelle, in which his own *Round Table of Frederick II at Sanssouci* (1848; lost in the Second World War) was shown; this was the first of three visits to Paris by Menzel, and it gave him the opportunity to see a remarkable gathering of major works by the century's leading artists from different countries (France's contribution was especially impressive) as well as to take in the large one-man exhibition that Gustave Courbet, the iconoclastic French Realist, mounted at his own expense. While in Paris Menzel evidently attended a performance at the famous Théâtre du Gymnase, which featured popular plays and melodramas;³³ at any rate, one of the Paris sketchbooks contains a two-page drawing that clearly prefigures the final composition, complete with color notations suggesting that the artist was already thinking of basing a painting on the subject (1855; fig. 55). The

"The same passage from "the multiply important *Repetition*" is quoted by Theodor W. Adorno in his first book, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (1933; Minneapolis, 1989), *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 61, pp. 45-6. Adorno then comments: "The idea of judgment, as otherworldly as the moonlit scenery behind the *intérieur* and mere inwardness, softly echoes in the image of the apocalypse. Gas lighting and red plush armchair are the historical traces in the image; with the false comfort of singing flames, with their diffuse light, with the cheap imitation of crimson, they are at the same time the refuge of semblance [*Schein*, a key notion in German Romantic aesthetic theory and throughout Adorno's book]. The gaslight flees from the moon back into itself . . . and suffers the street only as a reflection, 'a dream world glimmers in the background of the soul.' [The translation from Kierkegaard in Adorno's book is not identical with that in the edition of *Repetition* I have used.] The duplication of the room is unfathomable, seeming to be a reflection, without being so; like these rooms, all semblance perhaps resembles itself, so long as it itself, obedient to nature, persists as semblance" (p. 46). Adorno's central idea is that Kierkegaardian "objectless inwardness" (the adjective is Adorno's) is modeled, without Kierkegaard realizing it, on the nineteenth-century bourgeois interior. By this Adorno means not only that "images of interiors are at the center of the early Kierkegaard's philosophical constructions" (p. 41), but also that "the central motive of reflection belongs to the *intérieur*" (*ibid.*), and moreover that the inhabitant of the interior, the Kierkegaardian subject, is "the private person, soli-

tary, inactive, and separated from the economic process of production" (p. 42). More precisely, in Adorno's "sociological" reading, because Kierkegaard fails to take seriously the social questions of his age, he "falls to the mercy of his own historical situation, that of the *rentier* in the first half of the nineteenth century" (pp. 47-8), whose privileged refuge from the capitalist world is the apartment interior in which things alienated from use-value by the process of commodification assume new meaning as "symbols" of spiritual interiority or inwardness (p. 44). Such a reading (here greatly abbreviated), for all its reductiveness, has at least the virtue of bringing to light the importance of the motif of the interior in the early writings; and of course I have juxtaposed the mirror passage in "The Seducer's Diary" with Menzel's *Balcony Room*, as magical a painting of an interior as any in nineteenth-century art, by way of developing a thematics of reflection that both does and does not correspond to Adorno's speculations. In particular the concept of semblance plays no role in my account, and I attach far greater significance to ideas of embodiment and sexual difference than Adorno finds in Kierkegaard's thought. Not coincidentally, Adorno's analysis of the bourgeois interior bears a close connection to his friend Walter Benjamin's treatment of the same topic in "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century" and related texts (Benjamin cites Adorno on Kierkegaard in *The Arcades Project*, while Adorno in the Kierkegaard book quotes Benjamin's *Origins of the German Play of Lamentation*); see section 14 of this book for a discussion of Benjamin's notions of the interior and traces in relation to my interpretation of Menzel.



53 Adolph Menzel, *Living Room with the Artist's Sister*, 1847, oil on paper, board backing, 46.1 × 51.7, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Neue Pinakothek, Munich (8499)

following year, after completing one of the most ambitious of the Frederick canvases, *Night Attack at Hochkirch* (1856; destroyed during the Second World War), Menzel made the sketchbook drawing the basis for a painting of roughly 1½ by 2 feet that drew warm praise when it publicly surfaced shortly after 1900 and that remains one of the most widely admired works in his oeuvre.

The best-known account of *Théâtre du Gymnase*, by Meier-Graefe in *The Young Menzel*, holds it to be the greatest single triumph of Menzel's art.³⁴ Specifically, his analysis dwells at length on what he sees as Menzel's masterly treatment of color, admires the Goya-like vitality of the handling of the massed audience, repeatedly exalts the painting's harmony and unity (Meier-Graefe's ultimate terms of praise), and remarks that in spite of the richness of the color the viewer reads the composition with pleasant rapidity ("wohlthuender Schnelligkeit"), thanks in large measure to the planar organization of the composition as a whole. This is to say that Meier-Graefe saw in Menzel's



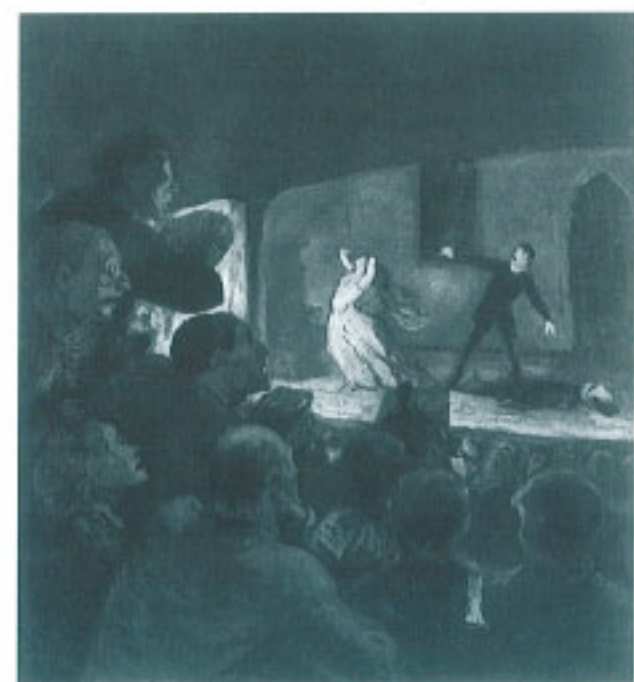
54 Adolph Menzel, *Théâtre du Gymnase*, 1856, oil on canvas, 46 × 62, Nationalgalerie, Berlin (A 1 901)

canvas a work that satisfied the formal demands he associated with modern French painting (Goya like Constable being for him an honorary Frenchman), above all the pursuit of painterly and coloristic unity. ("Here one can learn what unity really is," he remarks at one point.) And in fact there is much to be said for such a view of *Théâtre du Gymnase*, which undoubtedly reflects the artist's experience of French painting – I think particularly of Delacroix³⁵ – the previous year. Yet even in this exceptional canvas there are other tendencies at work.

To begin with, the choice of motif is decidedly odd. In the French works that are most often compared with Menzel's picture, Honoré Daumier's *The Drama* (ca. 1860; fig. 56) or any of a number of paintings and pastels by Degas, either the primary focus of the image is never in doubt, or the point of the composition is precisely to contrast the audience and the onstage action in a single, immediately apprehensible gestalt. In Menzel's painting, however, the viewer's attention is forcibly divided between the actors on the stage to the left, the occupants of the various boxes across the hall, and the orchestra and audience, toward the right-hand edge of the latter of which two men attract attention by standing up and holding opera glasses to their eyes (more on this



55 (above) Adolph Menzel, sketch for the *Théâtre du Gymnase*, 1855, pencil, 14.6 × 8.1, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin (sketchbook 14, pp. 132–3)



56 Honoré Daumier, *The Drama*, ca. 1860, oil on canvas, 97.5 × 90.4, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Neue Pinakothek, Munich

shortly). Indeed, where Meier-Graefe was struck by the richness of Menzel's *chords* of color – the brown, red, and cream-white of the background planes resonating together against the brilliant blue of the leftmost actress's dress – the viewer who begins by registering a certain multiplicity of emphasis might well be struck by the *sequence* of color zones: first the dark brown of the stage with the dazzling blue and white of the principal actress's dress and shawl inset against it, then the warm, intense red of the intermediate wall at the side of the stage (with the yellow armchair with red touches bridging the brown and red zones), then the cream-white of the auditorium wall with its gold trim (the red wall too is trimmed in gold, but less conspicuously), the two walls punctuated at different heights by the darkness of private boxes. The brightly illuminated area where the footlights reach the far wall is a separate center of attraction, all the more so for the scroll of a double bass silhouetted against it. (In my experience, the eye is continually pulled toward that brightest point in the canvas, from which it is then compelled to orient itself all over again relative to the scene as a whole.) The modest character of the stage action contributes to the sense of dispersal of focus: the woman in blue appears to be speaking to the other two figures (nothing could be more economical than the description of the turn of her head and her hand gestures), but the moment lacks obvious drama and one's attention inevitably drifts away from the figures toward the warmer, brighter zones of color to the right. Moreover, it takes a certain effort of viewing to distinguish between the orchestra immediately in front of the stage and the audience seated in rows behind it. All this works against the sort of planar, chordal, instantaneously apprehensible structure that Meier-Graefe discovered in the painting and that in his opinion made it Menzel's masterpiece.

Meier-Graefe says nothing about the imagery of opera glasses or binoculars in the *Théâtre du Gymnase*, presumably because they have no bearing on the issue of unity as he understood it. But not only is it striking how many figures in the audience are depicted looking through opera glasses, the artist also seems to have gone out of his way to call attention to the fact; it is difficult otherwise to explain the use of opera glasses by women in boxes quite near the stage and audience members in the front rows as well as the presence toward the right-hand edge of the canvas of the two standing men with opera glasses who I have already claimed attract our attention (and direct it back toward the stage). Why did Menzel do this? What is the meaning of the motif of looking through opera glasses in the *Théâtre du Gymnase*?¹⁶

There is more than one answer to this question. Earlier I discussed the fine drawing with gouache of *Moltke's Binoculars* (see fig. 21), and called attention to the artist's interest in the thumbscrew for focusing the binoculars by changing the distance between eyepieces and objective lenses. I went on to detect in this a concern on Menzel's part with what I called the integration of different sensory modalities, in that case vision and touch, and further suggested that such a concern is in play throughout his oeuvre, in works as ambitious in scale and intent as the *Flute Concert* and the *Iron Rolling Mill* and in drawings as seemingly strictly descriptive as the studies of a bicycle and the *Viola d'Amore at Salzburg Castle*. Another source of Menzel's passion for binoculars has to do with the way in which they involve (and the explicitness with which depictions of them thematize) acts of looking that not only are conspicuously bodily (a viewer who wishes to shift his or her attention from one part of a scene to another is forced physically to move head, hands, and instrument in order to do so, and perhaps to refocus the instrument as well) but that also militate strongly against the global, unity-

intending mode of seeing that Meier-Graefe assumes is fundamental to modernist painting as such – a person using binoculars willingly gives up all sense of a scene as a whole in the interests of gaining an improved view of a relatively small portion of it. No doubt personal considerations are also relevant here: Menzel was extremely shortsighted and habitually used an old-fashioned lorgnette and a pair of opera glasses to compensate for that deficiency. In fact, as Hanns Fechner brilliantly suggested in an early reminiscence of the artist, Menzel made his weakness into a strength through the use of those instruments, by which I take Fechner to mean that they allowed Menzel to scrutinize his models or the outdoor scenes he depicted with particular intensity – hence in part the remarkable precision of detail that characterizes much of his oeuvre.¹⁷ To recall just one example, in section 3 I remarked on the binocular-like precision of the rendering of the buildings in *Garden of Prince Albert's Palace* (see fig. 5); now I shall simply add that that painting includes a particularly “focused” detail, one that is discovered only as the viewer scans the depicted scene at close range, the window-plus-awning hidden in a rift in the trees to the left of the middle of the canvas (fig. 57).



57 Adolph Menzel, *Garden of Prince Albert's Palace*, detail of fig. 5

58 Adolph Menzel, *Frederick the Great and General Fouqué*, 1852, oil on canvas, 34 × 26.5, Museum Narodne, Poznan (Mo 430)



Menzel's preoccupation with binoculars and opera glasses as an aid or prosthesis for vision is only the most conspicuous expression in his art of a fascination with prosthesis generally – the use of mechanical or other artificial devices to supplement bodily faculties and functions. The bicycle drawings superlatively show that fascination at work, as does, in a different mood, the *Iron Rolling Mill* (see fig. 71) with its utterly persuasive depiction of a gang of workers wielding various industrial tools and implements in a fierce collective effort to master the extremely demanding task before them. Menzel's lifelong obsession with clothing and uniforms is also to the point, both being a supplement to the body's outer surface largely though by no means solely for the purposes of protection and warmth. Or consider one of his strangest canvases, *Frederick the Great and General Fouqué* (1852; fig. 58), which depicts the aged Frederick in the company of the distinctly more decrepit General Heinrich August de la Motte-Fouqué, whom he had known since his youth and who had served him in his wars. "In order to enjoy walks with his friend," Theodor Fontane wrote of the pair, "Frederick made him

sit in a specially designed chair, in which he was pushed through the gardens of Sanssouci while the king walked at his side. When Fouqué's hearing failed, he arranged for all kinds of sound amplifying trumpets for him. When he had difficulty in speaking, a machine was invented with which he could finish the words he could no longer pronounce, by assembling the letters."³⁸ In the painting Frederick walks with the aid of a cane; he bends his head toward the wheelchair-bound Fouqué, who holds a small ear trumpet to his ear (Frederick seems to be speaking directly into it) and who bears in his lap the device for spelling out words to which Fontane alludes. For Fontane, the friendship with Fouqué "allowed the great king's human and compassionate side to find its full expression."³⁹ No doubt Menzel was alert to that aspect of his subject, but he was equally alert, I suggest, to the opportunity the latter gave him to depict no less than four prosthetic devices: the wheelchair, the ear trumpet, the machine for spelling out words, and Frederick's cane. I take this to be typical of the way in which works by Menzel that may appear to have only anecdotal significance often turn out to bear a deep relation to his essential concerns.

In all these connections two other works take on emblematic status: a pair of pastels on cinnamon-colored tinted paper, *The Opera Glass* and *Lady with Opera Glasses* (both ca. 1850; figs. 59, 60). Each depicts a fashionable woman seen from above and behind, one assumes at the opera or theater, wearing a shawl below her shoulders and gazing through opera glasses. Each is marked "Erinn." (for "Erinnerung") to denote its origin in a remembered motif rather than in present-tense observation; and each was given by Menzel to a close friend – the first to the poet Paul Heyse and the second to the military physician Wilhelm Puhlmann (see my discussion of the drawing *Dr. Puhlmann's Bookcase*, fig. 1, at the beginning of this book) – which suggests that they were especially meaningful to him.⁴⁰ The second sheet in particular is remarkable in that we are not shown the woman's left hand supporting the opera glasses (her right hand presumably rests in her lap), which therefore give the impression of growing directly out of her head. And in fact, phenomenologically speaking, tools and prostheses are typically *incorporated* by the body, or to put this slightly differently, precisely because they supplement its normal functioning they tend to be assimilated to and by that functioning and hence to withdraw from the user's conscious attention (as do the particular bodily organs with which a person seeks to accomplish a task).⁴¹ Thus a person absorbed in a scene viewed through a pair of binoculars may tend to "forget" the binoculars themselves, just as much of the time in ordinary life we are oblivious to wearing eyeglasses (as Menzel did from early on) or contact lenses, not to mention clothing or shoes. Of course, a prosthesis may be so cumbersome as to defeat the process of incorporation, and occasions can arise when even the most incorporated of bodily supplements are suddenly experienced as foreign, detached, obtrusive. But in Menzel's universe, at least until late in his career, incorporation seems to be the rule – see the worker wielding the enormous pincers in the *Iron Rolling Mill*, whose monstrous upper body seems to have been developed exclusively to manage the pincers and all but combine with them – and the *Lady with Opera Glasses* may be taken as emblematic of that fact.

At the same time, once the viewer becomes aware of the non-support of the opera glasses by a visible hand, the drawing has the effect of positively directing his or her attention to the act of supplementation, and this too is characteristic of Menzel's treatment of prosthetics generally; so for example the worker's monstrous physique not only compels an awareness of the effort required to operate the pincers, it can actually seem

59 Adolph Menzel, *The Opera Glass*, ca. 1850, pastel on cinnamon-colored tinted paper, 27.8 x 11.9, Collection Alfred Winterstein, Munich



like a kind of prosthesis in its own right. Or think of the generals in the *Address at Leuthen*, wrestling with their cumbersome pelisses, from beneath which swords distractingly protrude. Indeed the artist's paintings and drawings of his own hands and feet (see figs. 25-7, 118, 120) have the related import of directing attention, in the first instance his own, to body parts which, because they are in more or less direct contact with the world, tend under ordinary circumstances to be taken for granted.⁴² A further implication of Menzel's interest in prostheses of all sorts is that his art offers not the slightest purchase for a distinction between an imagined natural or organic body on the one hand and the historical or technological body on the other. On the contrary, in the paintings and drawings I have been examining the senses and more broadly the body and its organs are represented as always already technologized, supplemented, prosthertized, the worker in the *Iron Rolling Mill* being only an extreme instance of this.⁴³ No doubt there is more than one reason for the almost complete absence from his oeuvre of studies of the living nude, but his desire to underscore the interaction of the body



60 Adolph Menzel, *Lady with Opera Glasses*, ca. 1850, pastel on cinnamon-colored tinted paper, 28.2 x 19.4, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin (SZ Menzel Kat 650)

61 Adolph Menzel, *Plaster Model Storeroom in the Altes Museum*, 1848, colored chalks on brown tinted paper, 46.2 x 58.8, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin (SZ. Menzel N 1761)



with its external prostheses is surely one of them; in this connection it is striking that both in an early study of classical sculpture, *Plaster Model Storeroom in the Altes Museum* (1848; fig. 61), and in the Hamburg *Studio Wall* with its female and male torsos taken from ancient sculptures (see fig. 160) emphasis falls squarely on the technological mediation or “denaturalization” of the nude via plaster casts. “The forming of the five senses is the labor of the entire history of the world down to the present,” the young Karl Marx wrote in 1844;⁴⁴ like Kierkegaard in the passages in *Either/Or* and *Repetition* we have glanced at, he might have been thinking of Menzel’s art.

Finally, it is hard to know how much to make of the fact that the most important painting to come out of any of Menzel’s Paris visits portrays a scene in a theater. In a series of books and articles starting with *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* and including *Courbet’s Realism* and *Manet’s Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s*, I have tried to show that central to the modern French pictorial tradition from the mid-eighteenth century until at least the advent of Manet and his generation in the 1860s was a problematic according to which the task of the painter was ultimately if only fictively to negate or neutralize the presence before the painting of the beholder.⁴⁵ The critic and theorist who more than any other established the terms of that problematic was Denis Diderot (1713–84), who understood the issues at stake in largely dramatic terms. So for example in two major texts on the theater, “Conversations on ‘The Natural Son’” (1757) and “On Dramatic Poetry” (1758), he called for a new stage dramaturgy that would eschew *coups de théâtre*, improbable events taking place within the action of the play and sharply changing the fortunes of the various characters, in favor of *tableaux*, which he defined as

groupings of personages on the stage that would attract and hold the viewer if they were encountered in a painting and that in an obvious sense – the personages themselves being unaware of their existence – do not belong to the action of the play. (In other words, the *tableau* is visible as such only to the audience.) By the same token, in his *Salons* and theoretical writings on painting, Diderot urged the painter to imagine his composition dramatically, bearing down hard on questions of motivation, expressiveness, and intelligibility as regards the treatment not only of individual personages but also of the composition as a whole. (What I have characterized as the classical structural basis of French painting throughout this period – the dominance of a compositional system based on the primacy of the picture plane – was wholly in keeping with this.) The crucial point, as I have explained in *Absorption and Theatricality* and its successors, was that the personages on the stage or within a painting should appear wholly unaware of the existence of their audience. More precisely, they were to be depicted as entirely caught up or absorbed in what they were doing, thinking, and feeling, and by virtue of that absorption as oblivious to anything else, crucially including the fact of being beheld; only if that illusion of absorption-hence-obliviousness were sustained, an illusion Diderot also describes as one of seeming as if alone relative to the beholder, would the actual beholder be stopped and transfixed before the representation. (The externality to the action of the dramatic *tableau* was instrumental to that effect.) Such a conception of drama and painting, I have argued, was essentially, indeed programmatically antitheatrical; thus Diderot drew a sharp antithesis between drama, expression, and action (all good) and theater, grimace, and attitude or pose (all bad): the task of both dramatist and painter was to achieve the first by defeating the second. As regards painting, the antitheatrical project extends from Greuze through Courbet, with Manet bringing it to a close – though not quite to an end – owing to the strikingness, but also to the peculiar impassiveness or (Bataille’s word) indifference, with which his paintings characteristically acknowledge the ineluctable presence of the beholder. On the evidence of the art criticism of the time, the combination of those traits turned out to disconcert his contemporaries more than any mere failure within the absorptive tradition.

Menzel’s choice of subject matter in the *Théâtre du Gymnase* is therefore intriguing: is it conceivable that he was somehow aware of the archetypal status of such a subject for the French antitheatrical tradition as a whole? After all, both Daumier’s and Degas’s scenes set in theaters bear a close relation to that tradition. In the case of Daumier, the explicitly theatrical settings are inseparable from the larger issue of caricature, the artist’s preferred vehicle and one that positively encouraged a certain overt theatricality in the form of expressive exaggeration, dramatic overkill, and hyperbolic contrast;⁴⁶ in the case of Degas, the many depictions of the young girls of the *corps de ballet* rehearsing steps or actually performing acknowledge the inescapableness of an audience even as the emphasis on repetitive habitual movement and the general minimizing of individuality are on the side, if not precisely of absorption, at any rate of extinction of self-consciousness. (Degas’s ballet paintings postdate the *Théâtre du Gymnase*.)

What of Menzel? In the first place, as I have noted, a major focus of the composition is the specialized viewing activity of members of the audience. Not only does the audience play an important role in the composition, but the widespread use of opera glasses defines the audience less as a collectivity than as a multiplicity of individual and essentially private observers (to borrow Crary’s term) the sum total of whose activities, to the extent that they can be totalized, goes against the grain of the Diderotian



62 Adolph Menzel, *Clara Schumann and Joseph Joachim in Concert*, 1854, colored chalks, 27 × 33, Collection of Doctor Peter Nathan and Barbara Nathan, Zurich

experience (for one thing, the Diderotian *tableau* involved the scene as a whole, not just individual faces or personages). Moreover, the painting's point of view, as I have also remarked, largely suppresses the distinction between stage and audience in favor of an emphasis on the brightly lit zones of red and cream-white, interrupted by boxes in which sit women with binoculars who – especially the group in the prominent box in the white zone – give the impression of having been depicted so that we might gaze at *them*. As for the red wall with its two boxes one above the other, it appears on the one hand to belong to the space of the stage and on the other to belong to the world of spectatorship; but does the lower box hold spectators or, in some sense, participants in the play – a prompter or someone of the sort? (A fine gold mesh extends across the dark opening, and the figures in the box seem to retreat from our view, in contrast with the focused visual activity of the woman in the upper box.) Put more strongly, the interaction or exchange between stage event and spectators is disconcertingly oblique, decentered, scattered, with no suggestion of a Diderotian facing-off of *tableau* and beholder. Finally, the performers are shown in proximity to the edge of the stage, not exactly addressing the audience – a convention Diderot deplored – but by no means seeming to ignore it – as required by the antitheatrical ideal. Altogether, then, it is impossible to align Menzel's



63 Adolph Menzel, *Clara Schumann and Joseph Joachim*, 1854, pencil, 21.1 × 26, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin (SZ Menzel N 621)

canvas no matter how loosely with the Diderotian problematic even as the choice of subject invites one to try. (I shall have more to say about Menzel and the issue of theatricality in sections 8 and 9.)

The original drawing for the *Théâtre du Gymnase* also falls into two halves, divided by the inner spine of the sketchbook. Indeed it is tempting to imagine that the two-part structure of the left- and right-hand pages, if it did not determine the organization of the drawing, at least contributed to the appeal of that structure to the artist by offering a kind of preexisting template for the composition in the material substratum of the open sketchbook. From this it would follow that the composition of the final painting, although based on a much more laterally extended rectangle than that of the drawing, itself reflects the original structure of the sketchbook pages. Something similar takes place in at least a few other works, the affecting "memory" drawing in colored chalks of *Clara Schumann and Joseph Joachim in Concert* (1854; fig. 62), which develops a two-page pencil drawing in a sketchbook of the same year (fig. 63),⁴⁷ and *Meissonier in His Studio at Passy* (1869), which utilizes drawings made during Menzel's visit to his friend's studio in 1867.⁴⁸ It is an open question how many of Menzel's finished works fit this two-part paradigm. But its hidden presence in the *Théâtre du Gymnase* suggests that it might be operative in other paintings that do not obviously signal the possibility.⁴⁹