“Faucon” or “Perroquet”? A Note on Duchamp’s *Morceaux choisis d’après Courbet*

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Illustration 1.
© 1999 Succession Marcel Duchamp, ARS, N.Y./ADAGP, Paris.
Morceaux choisis d’après Courbet, 1968

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Illustration 2.
Gustave Courbet, *Woman with White Stockings,* 1861



Illustration 3.
Gustave Courbet, *Woman*

Holding a Parrot, 1866

I have always thought that the bird in Duchamp's 1968 etching, *Morceaux Choisis d'Après Courbet*,looks odd (Illustration 1). To me, the bird more resembles a parrot, or perhaps a pigeon,than a falcon (*faucon* in French). The bird is taken to be a *faucon* because Duchamp explained to Arturo Schwarz that "he's curious, and furthermore he's a falcon, which in French yields an easy play on words; so that here you can see a *faux con* and a real one."[(1)] I have tried to confirm my suspicions by looking at stuffed birds in science museums, at real birds in zoos, and at drawings and photographs of birds in guide books. To me, Duchamp's bird just doesn't look like a falcon or any other bird of prey. The beak is too small, the sitting position is too upright, the body is too slender, the eye is too small and vacuous, the feet are too unlike talons, etc. To be sure, it is not impossible to see a falcon in Duchamp's etching, but I think there is room for doubt about the bird's identity.[(2)] As an alternative, we can read a dual-language pun in addition to the *faucon/faux con* suggestion made by Duchamp himself. Namely, we can interpret the image in terms of its being a "false" image, a "con" in the sense of a confidence game. The *faux/con* in this latter connotation would "parrot" a falcon.

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Illustration 4.
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Duchamp, ARS, N.Y./ADAGP, Paris.

Pollyperruque, 1967

In addition to *Woman with White Stockings* (Illustration 2), the painting that Duchamp reworks in the print, there is another of Courbet's paintings, *Woman Holding a Parrot* (Illustration 3), that is often compared with the nude in Duchamp's last piece, *Given: 1st, the Waterfall; 2nd, the Illuminating Gas.* [3](It was the then still secret last piece that Duchamp apparently intended to index with the print, where the bird takes the place of the viewer at the peepholes in the assemblage.) The various connections in the complex, voyeuristic matrix of possible meanings involving parrots and nude women in these works indicate that Duchamp was concerned with "looking" and "interpreting."[4] He manipulates the viewer's gaze.

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Illustration 5.
Bird Illustrations

Notice also that the nude in Duchamp's etching looks at her stockings rather than directly at the viewer as she does in Courbet's original painting. Given Duchamp's changes, the viewer of the etching can be taken as a kind of dupe, a pigeon, who can be made to misconstrue a falcon. Considering Duchamp's interest in perceptual matters, it is possible that he was familiar with, or interested in, psychology experiments involving perceptual set.[5]Expectation can lead to very different perceptions, especially when the stimulus is labile.

As has been pointed out by a number of scholars,including Stephen Jay Gould and Rhonda Roland Shearer in a recent essay [(6)], Duchamp was clearly up to something in the domain of "looking" and "not looking." There is still a great deal of material in Duchamp's oeuvre that deserves to be looked at again, and again, from various points of view.

Notes :

Footnote Return 1. Arturo Schwarz, The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp 3rd ed.(New York: Delano, 1997), 2:885.

Footnote Return 2.Thomas Girst has pointed out to me that, in the page of bird illustrations that Duchamp used as a source for his 1967 collage *Pollyperruque*(see Schwarz, 2: 871, for a discussion of this work) **(figure 4)**, there is a "faucon," mirror-reversed from Duchamp's, that is not wholly unlike the image in the etching. To my eye, however, the differences are greater than the similarities. Girst also reminds me that the source for *Pollyperruque* was identified by Thomas Zaunschirm in his Marcel Duchamps Unbekanntes Meisterwerk (Klagenfurt, Austria: Ritter, 1986), 101 **(figure 5)**. Zaunschirm also discusses Duchamp's etching (pp.92-93), but he does not connect it with *Pollyperruque*. Carol James has discussed both *Pollyperruque* and *Morceaux choisis d'après Courbet* in her essay "An Original Revolutionary *Messagerie*Rrose, or What Became of Readymades," in The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp, ed. Thierry de Duve (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991),277-96. James does not compare the two works in her text, but images of them are reproduced on facing pages. I am also indebted to Girst for pointing out that Juan Antonio Ramírez has discussed Duchamp's collage and etching in his

recent book, Duchamp: Love and Death, Even,trans. Alexander R. Tulloch (London: Reaktion Books, 1998), 214-16.Ramírez, apparently following Carol James's implicit comparison, argues that "the supposed falcon (*faucon*) in the foreground was taken from the parrot of *Pollyperruque*, a 1967 readymade." Here too,even though I'm arguing that Duchamp's bird resembles a parrot, I think the differences between the bird in the etching and the parrots in *Pollyperruque* are greater than the similarities.

Footnote Return 3.See, for example, Hellmut Wohl, "Duchamp's Etchings of *Large Glass* and *The Lovers*," in Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century, ed. Rudolf Kuenzli and Francis M. Naumann (Cambridge: MIT Press: 1989),175-76.

Footnote Return 4.In this context, the general surrealist strategy of juxtaposing unlikely items comes to mind. For example, Joan Miró's *Object*, 1936, has a stuffed parrot and woman's leg with white stocking suspended in a keyhole-like opening.

Footnote Return 5.See, for representative examples, see E. G. Boring, "A New Ambiguous Figure," *American Journal of Psychology* 42 (1930): 444-45; J.S. Bruner and A. L. Minturn, "Perceptual Identification and Perceptual Organization," *Journal of General Psychology* 53 (1955): 21-28.

Footnote Return 6. Stephen Jay Gould and Rhonda Roland Shearer "Boats and Deckchairs" *ToutFait* 1, no. 1 (December 1999), www.toutfait.com/duchamp.jsp?postid=757&keyword=.