

# Balthus's Thérèses

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ONE LOOKS IN VAIN for playful children in Balthus's work. Balthus's children, when awake, never smile. They remain remote, withdrawn, and self-absorbed. Often they are pensive and float in daydreams. These dreams sometimes produce languid abandonment; at other times, they induce the gangling postures that convey the ambiguities that are part of puberty.

The painter's finest portrayals of adolescents are his series of paintings from 1936 to 1939 for which young Thérèse Blanchard served as model. Thérèse and her brother Hubert were neighbors of Balthus at the Cour de Rohan, near the place de l'Odéon in Paris. The two children make their first appearance in the artist's work about 1935 in the small, undated oil sketch *Thérèse and Hubert* (Figure 1), in which Thérèse looks about eleven and Hubert about nine years old. In many years of research on the artist, I tracked down most of his models but, unfortunately, not the Blanchard "children," who, if still alive, would today be adults in their seventies. Thérèse and Hubert posed together in two more paintings, the more famous of which is *The Children* of 1937, discussed below.

Thérèse posed alone or with her cat in at least ten additional paintings, not all of which will be discussed here. One of the earliest of these works is *Thérèse* of 1936 (Figure 2), once owned by the French writer Pierre-Jean Jouve (1887–1976), who was a friend of Balthus's. With tenderness and intuition Balthus has caught the girl's grave look, which, added to the dark dress, endows her with fragile dignity. Only a painter who understood his sitter could have expressed the young model's graveness as movingly as Balthus has done here.

Two years later in the Metropolitan's *Thérèse* of 1938 (Figure 3), the young girl's deadpan expression hints at the boredom of having to sit still too long. The composition recalls Courbet's portrait of his young sister, *Juliette Courbet* of 1844 (Figure 4), whose prim demeanor, however, becomes nonchalance and boldness in the twentieth-century Thérèse Blanchard. The casual ele-

gance of young Thérèse's pose imbues her with the security of someone much older. Likewise, her clothing—the tailored brick jacket and plain dark taupe skirt—has the understated sophistication usually found on adults. She is young yet knowing, vulnerable yet tough.

Thérèse Blanchard also posed for *Girl with a Cat* of 1937 (Figure 5) and its later, more masterly version *Thérèse Dreaming* of 1938 (Figure 6) in the Gelman Collection. With her kneesock falling down and her sleeves pushed up, Thérèse in *Girl with a Cat* looks as if she has been called away from play. Her pale skin and turquoise, white, and red garments stand out against the harsh background of the painter's studio, in which the fat tiger cat blends imperceptibly. Balthus has imbued her quite innocent exhibitionism with suggestiveness. The erotic mood is heightened by the strict discipline of the composition.

In *Thérèse Dreaming* young Thérèse, lost in reverie with her hands folded above her head, a rapt expression on her face, and her legs uncovered, becomes the epitome of dormant adolescent sexuality. With the gray cat lapping milk from a saucer Balthus adds yet another erotic metaphor. The picture presents a haunting description of that stage in life that veers between lassitude and exuberance, innocence and sexual fantasies, reality and dream.

The artist adopted Thérèse's posture in both works from the Man Ray photocollage (Figure 7) that appeared in the same issue of *Minotaure* as Balthus's illustrations for *Wuthering Heights*.<sup>1</sup>

In 1939 Thérèse posed for what seem to be the final two portraits of her (Figures 8, 9). Later that year, the artist was called up for army service and left Paris, returning only after the war. Caught from two different profile views and wearing a floppy white collar, Thérèse already looks less childlike and more prim and glum.

In his series of Thérèse Blanchard, Balthus mingles intuition into his young model's psyche with an overt erotic desire. On the one hand, he gives his model as much dignity and importance as if she were viewed by someone of her own age. On the other hand, he adds a provocative, tantalizing layer to her innocence. This coexistence of empathy and erotic desire for the

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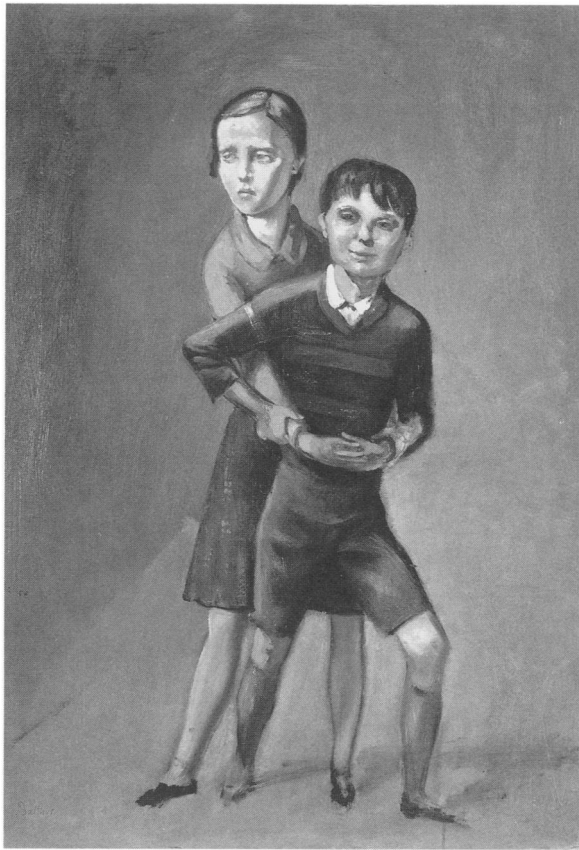


Figure 2. Balthus. *Thérèse*, 1936. Oil on canvas, 60 x 49 cm. Private collection (photo: private collection)

Figure 1. Balthus (Balthasar Klossowski, French, b. 1908). *Thérèse and Hubert*, ca. 1935. Oil on canvas, 91.4 x 66 cm. Washington, D.C., Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution (photo: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden)



Figure 3. Balthus. *Thérèse*, 1938. Oil on heavy cardboard mounted on wood, 98 x 79 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Mr. and Mrs. Allan D. Emil, in honor of William S. Lieberman, 1987, 1987.125.2



Figure 4. Gustave Courbet. *Juliette Courbet*, 1844. Oil on canvas, 78 x 62 cm. Paris, Musée du Petit Palais (photo: Bullioz, Paris)

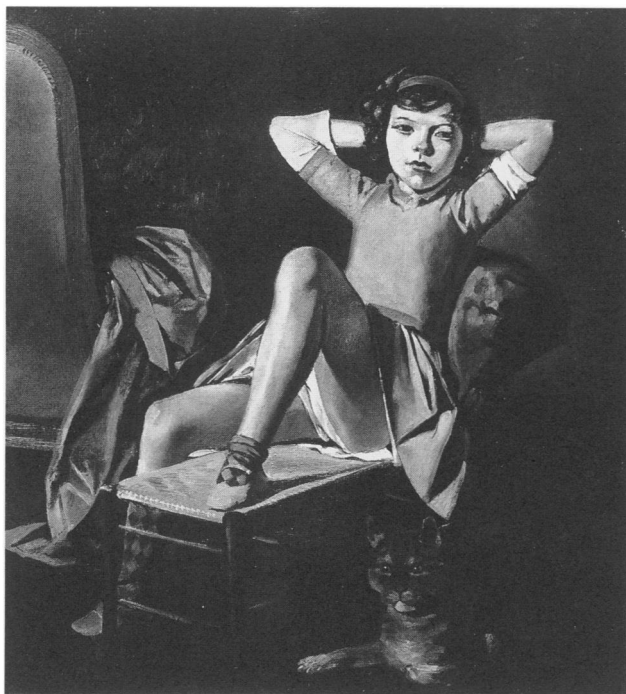


Figure 5. Balthus. *Girl with a Cat*, 1937. Oil on canvas, 88 x 78 cm. Art Institute of Chicago (photo: Eric Pollitzer)



Figure 6. Balthus. *Thérèse Dreaming*, 1938. Oil on canvas, 150 x 130 cm. The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection (photo: courtesy Pierre Matisse Gallery)

pubescent girl creates not only an undercurrent of tension, but also an uneasiness that many viewers, especially women, confess to experiencing in front of these pictures. Malaise seems to lurk in these interiors, a tension between “the commonplace and the disquieting, between innocence and blatant immodesty, privacy and public display.”<sup>2</sup>

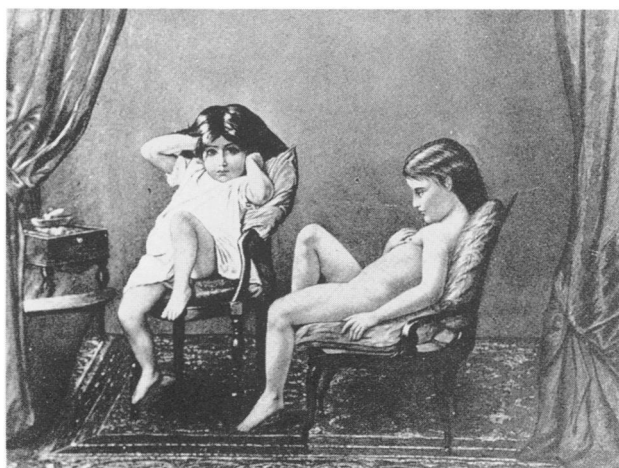


Figure 7. Man Ray. *Photocollage*. Reproduced in *Minotaure* 3 (1935)

The dichotomy between the painter’s desire for and empathy with the adolescent girl finds a formal analogy in her titillating posture, which is then severely disciplined by a pictorial order of architectural rigor. It gives these works an added poignancy, which Cyril Connolly described as “the almost deliberate opposition between the choice of subject and the treatment, a kind of counterpoint between them.”<sup>3</sup> Another critic described it as the “coexistence between surface calm and predatory desire,”<sup>4</sup> while the French writer André Pieyre de Mandiargues went so far as to say that these pictures are about “impending rape.”<sup>5</sup>

Balthus insists that he cares only about structure. His explicit denials of any possible eroticism, however, only add to the ambiguity of these pictures. It is in Balthus’s spirit of feigned ignorance that his older son, Stanislas Klossowski (born 1942), suggests in his slim monograph on Balthus that his father’s adolescent models belong to an elevated company of muses. He writes that these young girls are “emblematic archetypes belonging to another, higher realm. Their very youth is the symbol of an ageless body of glory, as adolescence aptly symbolizes that heavenward state of growth which Plato refers to in the *Timaeus*.”<sup>6</sup> Balthus’s depictions of children are indeed based on earlier prototypes—not, however, the timeless heavenly ones suggested by his son, but willful, nineteenth-century literary ones. His



Figure 8. Balthus. *Thérèse*, 1939. Oil on canvas, 61 x 46.4 cm. Private collection (photo: private collection)



Figure 9. Balthus. *Thérèse*, 1939. Oil on canvas, 55 x 46 cm. Private collection (photo: private collection)

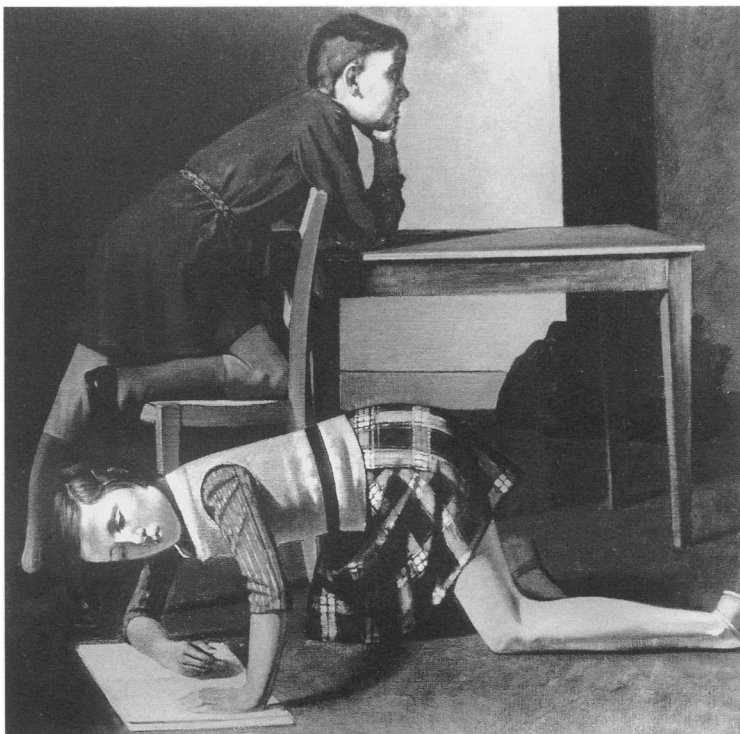


Figure 10. Balthus. *The Children*, 1937. Oil on canvas, 125 x 129 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Donation Pablo Picasso (photo: Musée Picasso)



Figure 11. Balthus. "I have got the time on with writing for twenty minutes." Illustration for *Wuthering Heights*, ca. 1934–35. Ink on paper, 25 x 24 cm. Private collection (photo: private collection)





Figure 12. John Carlin. *Forbidden Fruit*, 1874. Oil on canvas, 31 x 25 cm. New York, Hirschl & Adler Galleries (photo: courtesy Hirschl & Adler Galleries)



Figure 13. Anonymous artist. Painting of a girl reading, ca. 1870s. Present location unknown (photo: Sabine Rewald)

fascination with the ambiguities and the dark sides of adolescence corresponds to his infatuation with Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights* (1848). Balthus was the first artist to attempt, without being commissioned, to illustrate this English novel, which had never been illustrated in France before. Balthus was interested only in the strange childhood of Cathy and Heathcliff on the Yorkshire moors. His final illustrations, dating from 1934 to 1935, therefore cover only the first part of the novel. Balthus identified deeply and personally with this book and gave Heathcliff his own features, while Cathy has those of his future wife, Antoinette de Watteville (1912–1997). Because of his arbitrary interpretation of Brontë's novel, Balthus never found a publisher for his venture. The illustrations, however, did provide him with an opportunity to work with his most personal theme—adolescents isolated in rooms closed to the outside world. In fact, these illustrations form the sources for most of his later works and their variations until today.

The best known of these is Balthus's painting *The Children* of 1937 (Figure 10). This painting—once owned by Picasso—is based on the second of his fourteen illustrations of 1934–35 for *Wuthering Heights* (Figure 11), as indeed are many later variations of this

work done down to the mid-1970s. Again the forbidding austerity of his cour de Rohan studio served as a background in which Thérèse Blanchard posed with her younger brother Hubert. Both children seem much at home in the harsh empty interior, which does not inspire playfulness. But then his children never seem to feel like playing anyway. Their everyday clothes—his schoolboy's classic black smock and her pleated skirt, sleeveless vest, and striped shirt—match the simplicity of the setting. In a never-ending, eventless afternoon, these self-absorbed children seem as remote from each other as they are from the viewer.

How much the stark setting in *The Children* contributes to the painting's impact becomes apparent when the work is compared with similar yet saccharine images of pensive or brooding children by Victorian painters (Figures 12, 13). These artists cast their children as pretty objects in overstuffed interiors together with bowls of fruit, mantel clocks, patterned table covers, and pets.

Balthus's penchant for focusing particularly on the ambiguities of adolescence relates to certain writers and poets who also explore that theme in their works, among them Robert Musil (1880–1942), Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), and Jean Cocteau (1889–1963).

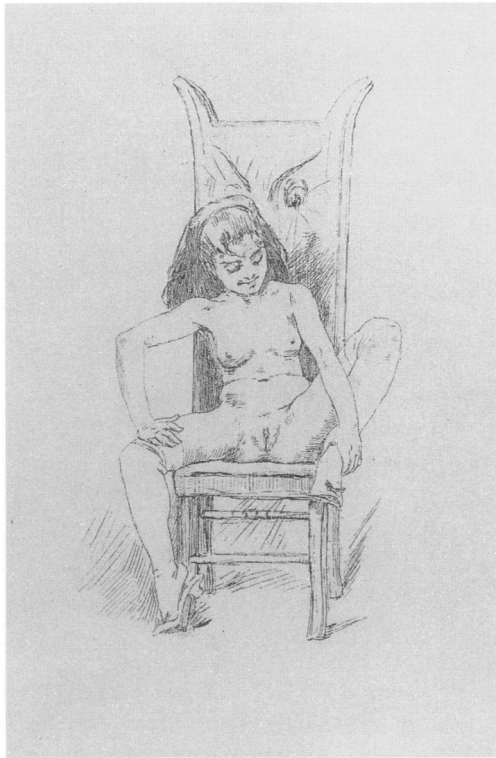


Figure 14. Félicien Rops. *Puberty*. Lithograph reproduced in Jean-François Bory, *Félicien Rops: L'Oeuvre graphique complète* (Paris, 1977, p. 656)



Figure 15. Egon Schiele. *Young Girl*, 1910. Gouache on paper. Bloomington, Indiana, Institute for Sex Research, Indiana University (photo: courtesy Institute for Sex Research)

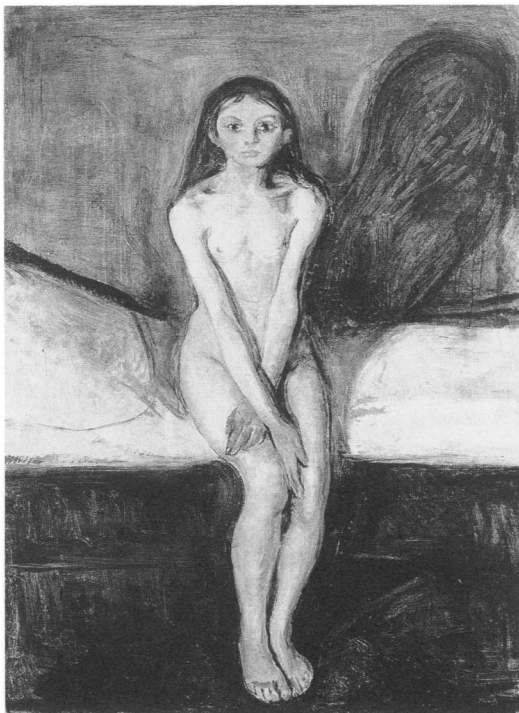


Figure 16. Edvard Munch. *Puberty*, 1894–95. Oil on canvas, 151.4 x 110 cm. Oslo, Nasjonalgalleriet (photo: Nasjonalgalleriet)

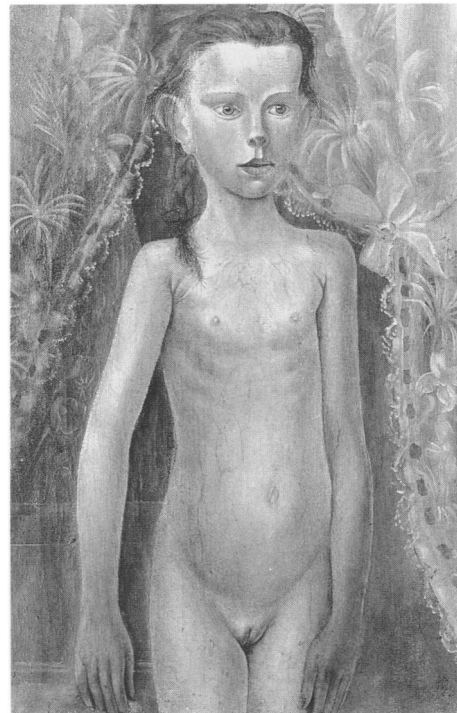


Figure 17. Otto Dix. *Little Girl*, 1922. Oil on canvas, 80.5 x 50.8 cm. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts (photo: The Minneapolis Institute of Arts)



Figure 18. Sally Mann. *Victoria at Four*, 1989 (photo: Sally Mann)



Figure 19. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. *Marzella*, 1909–10. Oil on canvas, 71.5 x 61 cm. Stockholm, Moderna Museet (photo: Moderna Museet)

In his novel *Young Törless* (1906) Musil describes his adolescent hero's sexual and emotional confusion with as much empathy as if it were told by the boy himself. When Törless escapes into one of his habitual states of complete self-absorption, Musil might be describing young Hubert Blanchard staring into space in *The Children* of 1937: "He thought of nothing, yet was within himself completely occupied. At the same time he observed himself, however, in such a way as if he really looked into the void and perceived himself only as if in an unclear glimmer from the side."<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, the following lines from Rilke's poem "Dauer der Kindheit" (Childhood), written on July 5, 1924, evoke the mood of Balthus's interiors with the Blanchard siblings.

A child's long afternoon  
not yet fully alive, still maturing  
subject to growing pains  
helpless period of waiting . . .  
lonely afternoons  
gazing from one mirror to another<sup>8</sup>

Rilke always stressed the importance of childhood. The German poet's own childhood, which he regard-

ed as unhappy, often served as inspiration for his poetry and prose. Analogies exist between the Rilkean fey world of childhood and the world of Balthus, in whose paintings boys also play only passive roles. If in Balthus's paintings girls and cats dominate, in Rilke's world "only children and women, both young and old, feel at home."<sup>9</sup>

Rilke's and Balthus's children share an air of remoteness and lassitude. Those of Rilke, during their endless afternoons when "nothing happens be it to a thing or an animal," when "loneliness started and lasts until today,"<sup>10</sup> are susceptible to

rain which reduces the entire afternoon to a single hour, which is not registered by the hour's chime and which lasts as long as childhood afternoons during which one reads with one's head between one's fists.<sup>11</sup>

By their capacity for complete self-absorption, Balthus's adolescents also find literary counterparts in the brother and sister Paul and Élisabeth featured in Cocteau's novel *Les Enfants Terribles* (1929), who, living in closed rooms, spend much time in that "state



Figure 20. Angel Franco. *Eight-Year-Old Yanela Netier in Her Family's Apartment in Havana, Cuba, January 1998* (photo: Angel Franco, *The New York Times*)

of semi-consciousness in which children float immersed."<sup>12</sup> Their mode of existence, as dreamlike and removed from adult interference as is Cathy and Heathcliff's on the Yorkshire moors, makes of them neurotic, worldly twentieth-century Parisian counterparts. Paul and Élisabeth live in mental and physical disarray in a cluttered room in which most of the story unfolds. These children "fall silent before the approach of older people. They fall silent and resume the ways of another world. As accomplished play actors they can suddenly bristle like a porcupine or arm themselves with the humble sweetness of a plant, without ever revealing the obscure rites of their religion."<sup>13</sup>

We may also draw analogies between this atmosphere, which Cocteau described at the beginning of his novel, and that of Baladine Klossowska's (1886–1969) small two-room apartment in Geneva, where she lived with her two sons, Balthus (born 1908) and Pierre (born 1905), from 1919 until 1921, and later that of her Paris studio on the rue Malbranche, where they lived from 1926 until the early 1930s. Elsewhere I have discussed in detail how Baladine Klossowska's unorthodox upbringing and surroundings influenced the art of her two sons.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, Thérèse in *Thérèse Dreaming* of 1938 might also have appealed to the middle-aged Humbert Humbert of Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), who has an

obsession for "nymphets" between the ages of nine and fourteen, for their "fey grace, the elusive, shift, soul-shattering, insidious charm."<sup>15</sup>

The eroticism of Balthus is ambiguous, implied and not explicit, seductive and not openly inviting. In Balthus's art, with few exceptions, there is no overt sexuality, the kind other artists have shown in their representation of pubescent girls: salaciously, as in Félicien Rops's lithograph *Puberty* (Figure 14), provocatively, as in Egon Schiele's gouache of a young girl masturbating of 1910 (Figure 15), frightened by forebodings, as in Edvard Munch's *Puberty* of 1894–95 (Figure 16), or with a sense of vulnerability, as in Otto Dix's *Little Girl* of 1922 (Figure 17), one that is echoed in Sally Mann's photograph of 1989 of her provocatively strutting nude child (Figure 18). This unsettling undercurrent in Balthus's works does find analogies in Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's paintings of his twelve-year-old models, Fränzi and Marzella, as for example in *Marzella* of 1909–10 (Figure 19).

The Balthus adolescent has now become a trademark in film, advertisement, and fashion, and surprisingly, served recently as an inspiration for a documentary photograph on poverty in Cuba (Figure 20). In the film *Still of the Night* of 1982, the director Robert Benton used the image of the little girl in a suggestive pose





Figure 21. Scene from Robert Benton's film *Still of the Night*, 1982 (photo: United Artists Corporation)

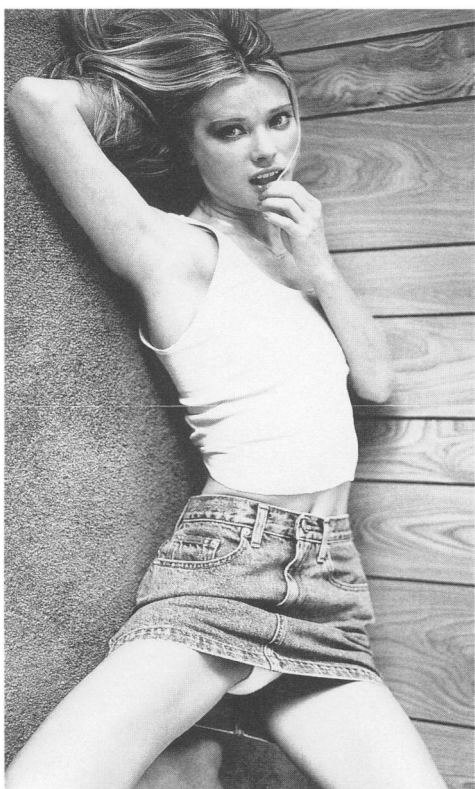


Figure 22. Calvin Klein advertisement, August 1994 (photo: Steven Meisel)

and wearing a white shirt and white socks (Figure 21). Her appearance at once evoked works like *Thérèse Dreaming* of 1938 or its later variants. The figure appears in the dream of the film's main character, whose subconscious—as Benton explained in a letter to this author—“was dealing with a woman who was both innocent and erotic, therefore it would be natural for him to dream in terms of Balthus's imagery.”<sup>16</sup>

In the early 1980s, the adolescent featured in Benton's film was still based on the Balthus model. Similar figures channeled into advertising in the mid-1990s are so no longer. The underage models appearing in recent Calvin Klein ads, either sickly, strung-out and sulking, or titillatingly beckoning (Figure 22) make their Balthusian prototypes now look quaintly wholesome and somewhat over the hill. Or do they?

## NOTES

1. Man Ray's photcollage accompanied Paul Éluard's essay “Appliquée,” *Minotaure* 3 (June 1935) p. 16. This photcollage was based, in turn, on the painting *After Dinner* of 1886 by the Victorian painter Émile Munier (1810–1895), which was used in a Pears' Soap advertisement. See Sabine Rewald, *Balthus*, exh. cat., MMA (New York, 1984) p. 42.

2. R. S. Short, "Erotically Lounging," *Times Literary Supplement* (Sept. 1983) p. 1063.
3. Cyril Connolly, *Balthus and a Selection of French Paintings*, exh. cat., Lefevre Gallery (London, 1952) n.p.
4. Robert Hughes, "Poisoned Innocents, Surface Calm," *Time* (April 16, 1984) p. 76.
5. André Pieyre de Mandiargues, conversation with the author, Paris, July 24, 1982.
6. Stanislas Klossowski de Rola, *Balthus* (New York, 1983) p. 10.
7. Robert Musil, "Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless" (1906) in *Sämtliche Erzählungen* (Hamburg, 1968) p. 71.
8. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke* 1 (Wiesbaden, 1955–56) pp. 290–291.
9. Richard Kassner, *Gesammelte Erinnerungen 1926–1956*, Klaus E. Bohnenkamp, ed. (Pfullingen, 1976) p. 6.
10. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1906–07*, Ruth Sieber Rilke and Carl Sieber, eds. (Leipzig, 1930) p. 292.
11. Idem, "Kindheit," in *Sämtliche Werke*, pp. 510–511.
12. Jean Cocteau, *Les Enfants Terribles* (Paris, 1979) p. 23.
13. Ibid., p. 9.
14. See Sabine Rewald, "Balthus Lessons," *Art in America* 9 (Sept. 1997) pp. 88–95, 120–21.
15. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (Berkeley, 1977) p. 18.
16. Robert Benton, letter to the author, Feb. 9, 1983.