

THE RHETORIC OF REALISM: COURBET AND THE ORIGINS OF THE AVANT-GARDE

RHETORICS OF REALIST ART AND POLITICS

GUSTAVE COURBET (1819–77) BELONGED TO THE Post-Romantic generation of French artists and writers that included Honoré Daumier, J.-F. Millet, Gustave Flaubert, and Charles Baudelaire. They were born at the close of an heroic age. In their youth, they witnessed the breakdown of a common language of Classicism, the dissipation of revolutionary idealism, and the growing division between artists and public. In their maturity, they saw the abandonment of Enlightenment principle and widespread accommodation of authoritarianism. At the end of their lives, they beheld the promise and threat of Communist insurrection and the complete collapse of a bourgeois public sphere. Together, these crises and caesuras combined to convince the artists and writers of the mid-century that they were living through a cultural rupture of unprecedented dimension: the name given for that broad epoch of change was “modernity,” and the name for that specific post-Romantic generation was Realist. “I am not only a socialist,” Courbet wrote provocatively to a newspaper in 1851, “but a democrat and a Republican as well—in a word, a partisan of all the revolution and above all a Realist . . . for ‘Realist’ means a sincere lover of the honest truth.”

The rhetoric of Realism, however, is not confined to artists’ manifestos or to France; it is written across the age and across Europe, in its politics, literature, and painting. The artists and writers mentioned above may not have read Marx’s *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1847), but their works shared with it a depiction of epochal anxiety, transformation, and desacralization:

The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science into its paid wage-laborers. . . . Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. . . . All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

Marx’s words are redolent with images from Realist art and literature. Physician, lawyer, priest, poet, and man of science are veritably the cast of characters in Flaubert’s bitter satire of country life, *Madame Bovary* (1857); the depressing results for humankind of the “uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions” are exposed in Daumier’s *The Third-Class Carriage* (ca. 1862), Millet’s *The Gleaners* (1857), and Courbet’s *The Stonebreakers* (1850); the poet stripped of his halo is the subject of Baudelaire’s ironic prose-poem “The Loss of a Halo” in *Paris Spleen* (1869). 196
197
206

In the art and literature of Courbet and Flaubert, reverence for the ideal and honor of the Classic have no place: the former depicted gross wrestlers, drunken priests, peasants, prostitutes, and hunters; the latter described common scribes, pharmacists, journalists, students, and adulterers. In the caricatures of Daumier and the poems of Baudelaire, there appear no Romans in togas (except for purposes of satire) or medieval knights in armor: they preferred to honor ragpickers in their shreds and patches, country bumpkins in their ill-fitting city clothes, and bourgeois men in their black suits. “It is true that the great tradition has been lost,” wrote Baudelaire



196 HONORÉ DAUMIER *The Third-Class Carriage* ca. 1862. 25½ × 35½ (65.4 × 90.2)



197 JEAN-FRANÇOIS MILLET *The Gleaners* 1857. 33 × 44 (83.8 × 111.8)

at the dawn of this new age, in “On the Heroism of Modern Life” (1846),

and that the new one is not yet established. . . . But all the same, has not this much abused garb its own beauty and its native charm? Is it not the necessary garb of our suffering age, which wears the symbol of a perpetual mourning even upon its thin black shoulders? Note, too, that the dress-coat and the frock-coat not only possess their political

beauty, which is an expression of universal equality, but also their poetic beauty, which is an expression of the public soul—an immense cortège of undertakers’ mutes (mutes in love, political mutes, bourgeois mutes . . .). We are each of us celebrating some funeral.

Compared to modern men in “frock-coats,” like those from Balzac’s novels, the poet then explains, “the heroes of the Iliad are but pygmies.”

J'avais lu l'*Art d'aimer* d'Ovide; plein de respect pour le beau sexe, et plus poli que Sextus, je me retirai.

La poussière du Forum m'avait desséché le gosier; j'entrai dans un café. — *Puer!* m'écriai-je, apportez-moi une glace à la pomme des Hespérides et au rhum.



Absorbé par un flamine qui payait la demi-tasse à deux vestales, le garçon ne prenait point garde à moi.

198 GRANDVILLE "Apple of the Hesperides and rum ice," from *Un Autre Monde* 1844.

In contrast to Baudelaire's irony, Daumier and his fellow caricaturist Grandville (J.-I.-I. Gérard, 1803–47) chose anachronism to satirize the "real conditions" of their "suffering age." In the 1840's, they highlighted the dubious heroism of the present by depicting the stylishness of figures from the Classical past, as in Daumier's lithograph "The Abduction of Helen," from *Le Charivari* (1842), and Grandville's engraving of Romans ordering an "apple of the Hesperides and rum ice." In the latter sheet, from the Fourierist *Un Autre Monde* (1844, see pp. 203 and 298), a modish ménage wearing Roman sandals are seated in a bistro, being served drinks by a surly waiter standing in Classical *contraposto*. Once again the rhetorics of Realist art and politics may be seen to overlap. Anachronism and caricature were the linguistic weapons of choice for Karl Marx a few years later when he sought to describe the hypocrisy and servility of the bourgeoisie who permitted Louis Napoleon (nephew to the first Napoleon) to destroy the Second Republic in a *coup d'état* on December 2, 1851:

Hegel remarks somewhere that all great, world-historical facts and personages occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce. Caussidière for Danton, Louis Blanc for Robespierre, the Mountain of 1848–51 for the Mountain of 1793–1795, the Nephew for the Uncle. And the same caricature occurs in the circumstances in which the second edition of the Eighteenth Brumaire is taking place. [18 Brumaire is the date in 1799, according to the Revolutionary calendar, when Napoleon I assumed supreme power.]

No longer can Classical antiquity be plausibly invoked, Marx argues, to cloak from the men and women of 1851 the real nature of their unheroic deeds and attitudes. Neither the bourgeoisie nor their proletarian interlocutors can any longer have recourse to such idealist "self-deceptions." Because 1789 served to liberate only the bourgeoisie and not all of humanity from oppression, Marx writes, the revolutionists of that day "required world-historical recollections in order to drug themselves concerning their own content." Since, on the other hand, the present revolution was being waged by the proletariat on behalf of all humanity, it required absolute clarity as to means and ends. "In order to arrive at its content," Marx says, "the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead. There the phrase went beyond the content; here the content goes beyond the phrase."

In England no less than France, the style and phrase of Classical antiquity—there only recently embraced—quickly gave way to an art and literature that emphasized fidelity to the materiality of things, directness of emotional appeal, and honesty to natural appearances. The artists who formed the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) in 1848—William Holman Hunt (1827–1910), John Everett Millais (1829–96), and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–82)—were inspired by the revolutionary events on the Continent and by the English working-class movement for a People's Charter, to attempt a reform of British art. Rejecting the mannerism of the later Raphael as much as the formulas of the Royal Academy, the PRB turned for inspiration to fifteenth-century Italian and Flemish painting and to early nineteenth-century German art by Runge, Friedrich, and the Nazarenes. (The Nazarenes, so called for their beards and long hair, were a brotherhood of Catholic-converted German artists active in Rome after 1810. They included Peter Cornelius, Johann Friedrich Overbeck, and Franz Pferr.) From these near and distant sources, the PRB sought the bases for a regeneration (the group's journal was named *The Germ*) of British culture and society.

Millais dispensed with Classical costume and architecture as well as with High Renaissance grace and timelessness in *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1850). The genre scene of



199 JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS *Christ in the House of His Parents* 1850. 33½ × 54 (85 × 137.2)

200 WILLIAM HOLMAN HUNT *The Awakening Conscience* 1853. 29½ × 22 (74.9 × 55.8)

the boy–Christ and his working-class family instead enshrines matter-of-factness, physical labor, and the unidealized body. Derived from his observation of a carpenter’s shop on Oxford Street in London, Millais’s interior is filled with accurate details of *métier*—tools and wood shavings—connoting the human and spiritual worth of sweat and handcraft.

200 By contrast with Millais’s *Christ*, the interior of Hunt’s *The Awakening Conscience* (1853) is filled with all manner of Victorian gewgaws and bric-a-brac. The picture records the moment when a young woman, “with a startled holy resolve,” in the painter’s words, determines to escape her sinful, fallen life. Like the woman and man themselves, the drawing-room has a physiognomy that tells a story which is, as Ruskin wrote, “common, modern, vulgar . . . tragical.” Furniture, rugs, curtains, tapestry, book, clock, and picture all possess a “terrible lustre” and “fatal newness” which bespeak, in Ruskin’s words, “the moral evil of the age in which it is painted.” As with Couture’s *Romans of the Decadence*, Hunt’s *Awakening Conscience* argues that the issue of moral and material degeneracy is inseparable from “the woman question,” but whereas the one depicts a female as the heedless agent of modern society’s corruption, the other sees her as its guileless victim.



Like Millais's *Christ in the House of His Parents*, Ford Madox Brown's (1821–93) monumental and complex painting *Work* (1852–65) preaches the Christian Socialist gospel of work as the cure for the social unrest and moral iniquity that plagued mid-Victorian England. (Both paintings, in fact, were commissioned by the same evangelizing patron, the Leeds stockbroker and philanthropist Edward Plint.) Unlike the former painting, however, Brown's is based on contemporary London life, not on biblical narrative. The scene is set in mid-afternoon at Heath Street in Hampstead; a group of men known as navvies—"representing the outward and visible type of *Work*," as Brown wrote in his extended explication of the picture—is shown digging a trench into which a new waterworks main will be laid. To the left, carrying a basket of wildflowers for sale, stands a "ragged wretch," a representative of the *lumpen* (ignorant and disenfranchised) proletariat. In contrast to the "fully-developed navy who does his work and loves his beer," he "has never been taught to work . . . [and] doubts and despairs of every one." Above him, on horseback and on foot, are the idle rich who "have no need to work." One of them—with umbrella, bonnet, and downward-cast eyes—has just handed a temperance tract to a navy who returns a skeptical glance. To the far right of the painting stand "two men who appear to have nothing to do," but who are in fact "brainworkers." Their job is to think and criticize, like the "sages in ancient Greece," thereby helping to assure "well ordained work and happiness in others." These "sages," in fact, are the Christian Socialist Frederick Denison Maurice at right and the great polemicist and "reactionary socialist" (as Marx wrote in 1848) Thomas Carlyle at left.

Indeed, amid the extraordinary welter of persons, anecdotes, and details, "not the smallest [of which] has been considered unworthy of thought and deep study" (as the artist's granddaughter noted), the presence of Carlyle is especially significant. In his *Past and Present* (1843), Carlyle condemned the loss of affective human bonds in contemporary British society, and their replacement by a cold and impersonal "cash-payment nexus." The solution to the present crisis, he believed, lay in leadership by an aristocracy of talent, and in the cleansing power of hard work. Physical labor, he wrote: "[is like] . . . a free-flowing channel, dug and torn by noble force . . . draining off the sour, festering water . . . making instead of a pestilent swamp, a green fruitful meadow." In *Work*, Brown made the Carlyle metaphor concrete and *real*. His navvies are laying pipe, as the art historian Gerard Curtis has discussed, to provide fresh water to replace the fetid streams that turned working-class neighborhoods into filthy and pestilential slums. Hard work, Brown and Carlyle believed, is essential to human health and human nature itself; it ennobles people and cleanses their very

souls in the face of a system that would otherwise degrade them, and enslave them to filthy lucre.

Millais, Hunt, and Brown's pictures, like many others by the PRB and their associates in their first decade and a half, were disdained by critics precisely for their insistent particularity, contemporaneity, and topicality, regardless of the subject depicted. Indeed, at almost the same moment when Courbet's paintings of proletarian labor and ritual were condemned at the Paris Salon for their ugliness and vulgarity, Millais's *Christ* at the Royal Academy Exhibition was being attacked by Charles Dickens for its rejection of "all elevating thoughts . . . or beautiful associations" in the name of "what is mean, odious, repulsive and revolting." Brown's painting was subjected to no such obloquy when it was finally finished and exhibited in 1865; instead it was ignored for the most part, by critics and public alike. At no time in the nineteenth century were the visual cultures of England and France closer than during the European turmoil of 1848 and its aftermath.

In the exact middle of the nineteenth century, "the content went beyond the phrase," to repeat Marx's formulation, in both politics and art. A cataclysmic, European-wide economic decline during the years 1846–8, coinciding with a series of national political crises, led to an outbreak of revolution in France in February 1848. Uprisings quickly followed in Germany, Austria, Hungary, Poland, and Italy, among other states and kingdoms. The February revolution in France, however, was succeeded in June by a second and still more significant insurrection. The closure of the National Workshops—whose recent establishment had been a half-hearted attempt by the Provisional Government to placate the left—led to a massive proletarian rising on June 23. On the following day, barricades rapidly ribboned through the old twisting streets of Paris and a pitched battle was waged between working-class insurgents and the National Guard supported by a bourgeois and peasant "party of order." By the 26th, the workers (and such intellectual fellow-travelers as Baudelaire) were isolated in their *faubourgs*, their defenses were in tatters, and their cause was doomed; 1500 died in the three days of battle, 3000 more were slaughtered in the immediate aftermath, and many thousands in addition were arrested, imprisoned, and transported to distant penal colonies. The June days, the conservative political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, were "a struggle of class against class"; Marx was in agreement, calling the insurrection "the first great battle . . . between the two classes that split modern society." The revolution was defeated in France and everywhere else in 1848, but the image of the *quarante-huitard*, armed and brimming with revolutionary ardor, informed the rhetoric of the age.

During and after 1848, artists and revolutionaries in France (the names of the latter include P.-J. Proudhon, Louis Blanc



201 JEAN-FRANÇOIS MILLET *The Sower* 1850. 39¼ × 32½ (101 × 82.5)

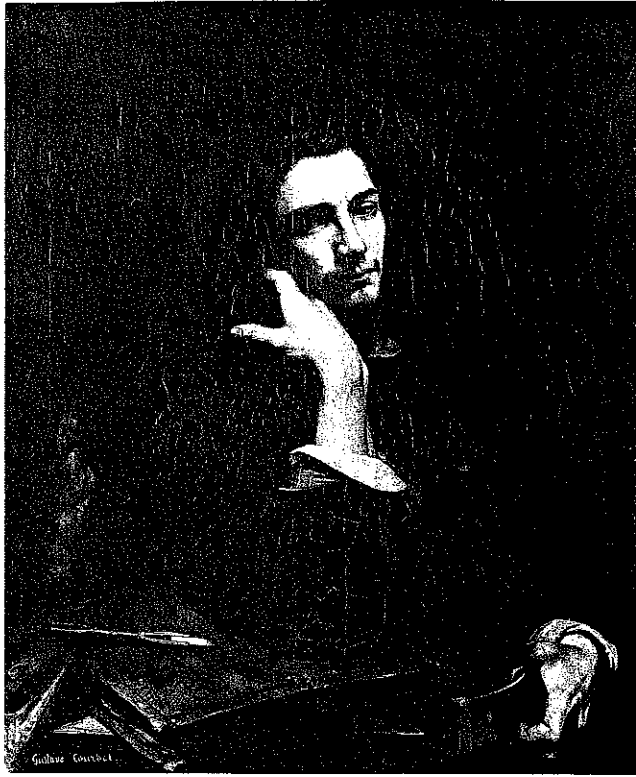
and Auguste Blanqui) felt compelled as never before “to face with sober senses [the] real conditions of life and [man’s] relations with his kind.” Many now believed that, regardless of the immediate outcome of the insurrection, a new stage in European evolution had been reached in which working people—pressed by circumstance to forge alliances and form opinions of their own—were on the point of overturning or transforming not just single policies, ministries, or even governments, but society itself. On this point there was a strange unanimity between right and left, and between sober politicians and wisecracking artist journalists: writing in the tense interregnum between February and June 1848, the right-leaning de Tocqueville exclaimed that he saw “society cut into two: those who possessed nothing united in a common greed; those who possessed something in common terror.” At the same time, the left-wing Daumier depicted a conversation between a peasant and his local mayor in *Le Charivari* (May 5, 1848): “‘Tell me, what is a communist?’ ‘They are people who want to keep money in common, work in common and land in common.’ ‘That’s fine, but how can it happen if they have no common sense?’”

Of the existence of a dominant rhetorical timbre to the French art and literature of mid-century, there can be little

doubt. Such diverse writers as Flaubert, Baudelaire, and de Tocqueville, and such varied painters as Courbet, Millet, Octave Tassaert, and Isidore Pils shared a perception of social dislocation, alienation from the Classical past, and concern or joy about a pending revolution. The Realist Daumier, who lived at this time in the midst of the working-class 9th Arrondissement of Paris, described and depicted in his paintings and caricatures, contemporary urban street life and leisure, and the domestic hardships and joys of working people. The Realist Millet, who left Paris in 1849 for the peaceful rural village of Barbizon, represented in *The Gleaners* and *The Sower* (1850) the virtue of agricultural labor and the biblical nobility of rural poverty. Both artists are Realists by virtue of their common focus upon contemporary working-class life and urban and rural conflict. Yet the very commonality of this rhetoric of Realism should serve as a warning that we are in the presence of an ideology whose function was to obscure as much as it was to reveal “the content beyond the phrase” of 1848. Indeed, by 1855 the dictator Louis Napoleon had succeeded in establishing a conservative school of official realism—including Pils, Tassaert, Jules Breton, Rosa Bonheur, Théodule Ribot, and many others—in opposition to the insurgent Realism of Courbet. Thus, what was hidden beneath the Realist consensus was a fierce struggle among artists and art institutions over precisely the measures to be taken in either advancing or retarding the great historical changes then underway in France and the West.

The key question about Courbet and the Realists, therefore, does not primarily concern his and their particular *attitudes* toward modernity: all Realists more or less shared Daumier’s credo *il faut être de son temps*; all more or less agreed with the novelist, critic, folklorist, and political chameleon Champfleury (Jules Husson) that art must represent the everyday life of common people. Rather, the issue concerns the actual *position* and *function* of Realist works within the mode and relations of production of their time. “This question,” Walter Benjamin writes, “is concerned, in other words, directly with the [artistic] *technique* of works.” Thus the argument made below will be that the innovative technique of Gustave Courbet—more than any other artist of the day—propelled political change by challenging the existing institutional relationship between art and the public.

Like Jacques-Louis David before him, Courbet employed a technique alien to the established traditions and audiences for art. For the Enlightenment David, this alienation arose from his rejection of Rococo and aristocratic *bon ton*, and his embrace of Neoclassical and bourgeois *noblesse*. For the Realist Courbet, this alienation entailed a rejection of academic and bourgeois *juste milieu*, and an espousal of the formal principles found in nonclassical and working-class



202 GUSTAVE COURBET *Man With Leather Belt* ca. 1845. $39\frac{3}{4} \times 32\frac{1}{4}$
(100 × 82)

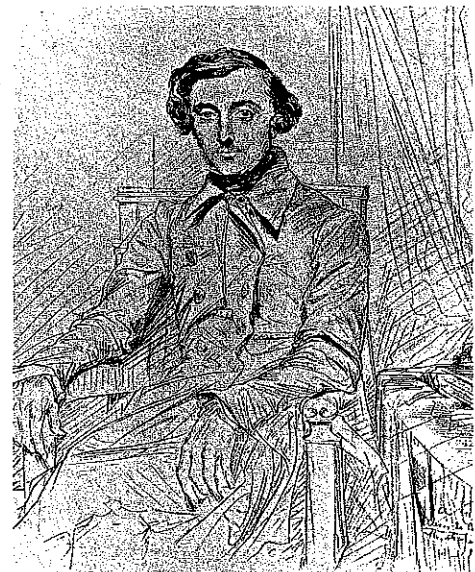
popular art. By this means, Courbet attempted to turn formerly neglected peasant and proletarian Salon spectators into artistic collaborators, thereby potentially ennobling and empowering them at the expense of their putative betters. In the course of the decade following 1848, Courbet enacted an interventionist cultural role that has since been defined as avant-garde. Avant-garde art, I shall argue at the end of this chapter, is exceptional in the nineteenth century, and exceptionally fragile. By the end of Courbet's life, it had mutated into a nearly quietist modernism.

COURBET'S TRILOGY OF 1849–50

Courbet was born in the village of Ornans, near Besançon in the region of central-eastern France called the Franche-Comté. His father Régis was a wealthy farmer who resisted his son's decision to become an artist, but nevertheless paid his way to Paris in 1839. There, Courbet studied in the private studios of a succession of mediocre academic masters, learning at first a somewhat labored Romanticism which recalls the "Troubadour Style" practised by Couture and others in the 1840's. Yet even as a young artist, Courbet demonstrated independence and self-assurance: his self-portraits including

Man With Leather Belt (ca. 1845) and *The Wounded Man* (ca. 1844–54) in fact mark a kind of liberation from the reigning *juste milieu*. In place of the Neoclassical linearism of contemporary portraits by, for example, Hippolyte-Jean Flandrin and Théodore Chassériau (*Portrait Drawing of de Tocqueville*, 1844), Courbet's self-portraits reveal a Romantic painterliness combined with a compositional informality or even awkwardness. In place of the sentimentality found in genre paintings by the emerging official Realists, such as Tassaert, Ribot, and Pils (*The Death of a Sister of Charity*, 1850), Courbet's paintings convey a psychological complexity, physical proximity, and eroticism that has its only precedents in Caravaggio and Géricault. (The former's *Ecstasy of Saint Francis* is perhaps a source for *The Wounded Man*; the latter's "portraits of the insane" are likely sources for *Man With Leather Belt*).

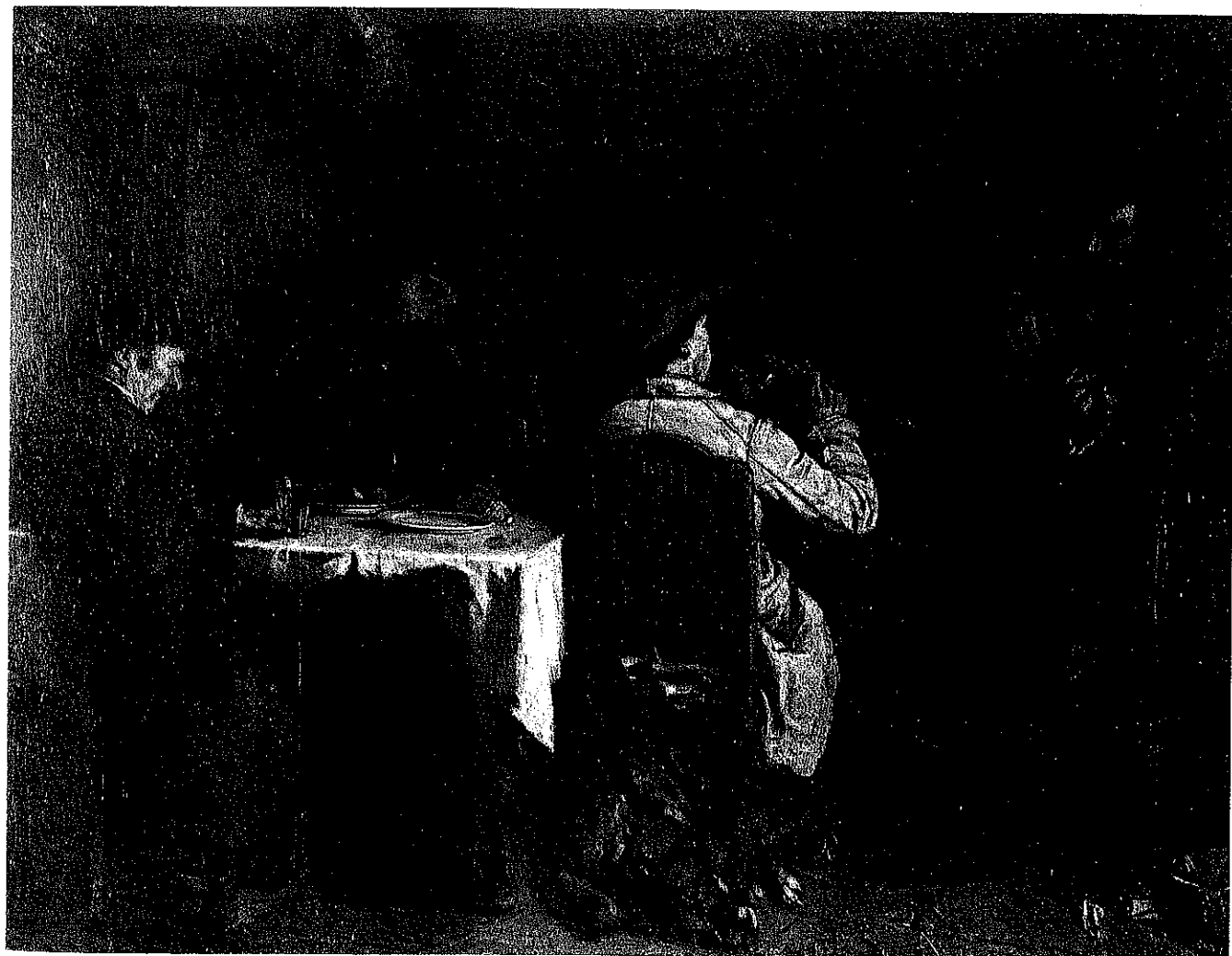
By 1848 Courbet was dividing his time among the Paris museums, his own atelier on the Left Bank, and the bohemian Brasserie Andler; at the Brasserie he came into contact with some of the most progressive and idiosyncratic figures of the day, including Baudelaire, the anarchist Proudhon, the leftist balladeer Pierre Dupont, and Champfleury. Bohemianism was a relatively new and contradictory subcultural stance in Paris—composed in equal parts of estheticism, asceticism, defiance, and sycophancy—and it functioned as a kind of laboratory for testing the various rhetorics of Realism. In January 1848 Courbet wrote to his family: "I am about to make it any time now, for I am surrounded by people who are very influential in the newspapers and the arts, and who are



203 THÉODORE CHASSÉRIAU *Portrait Drawing of de Tocqueville* 1844. $11\frac{1}{4} \times 9\frac{1}{2}$ (30 × 24)

204 ISIDORE PILS *The Death of a Sister of Charity*
1850. 95 × 10' (241 × 305)

205 GUSTAVE COURBET *After Dinner at Ornans*
1849. 76½ × 8'5½ (195 × 257)



very excited about my painting. Indeed, we are about to form a new school, of which I will be the representative in the field of painting." Courbet was correct in his predictions, though he could not have known that a revolution would be necessary to help him accomplish his goals.

According to his letters, Courbet remained on the sidelines during the fighting in February 1848, though he was immensely pleased at the overthrow of Louis-Philippe and the establishment of a Republic. In June, too, he kept a safe distance from the shooting, stating in a letter to his family: "I do not believe in wars fought with guns and cannon. . . . For ten years now I have been waging a war of the intellect. It would be inconsistent for me to act otherwise." Despite this expression of principled pacifism, Courbet's abstention from battle was probably the result of strategic as much as moral calculation: like many others, he quickly recognized the brutality and implacability of the bourgeois and peasant "party of order," and understood that a war fought for "the democratic and social republic" could not be won on the barricades of June. On the contrary, the struggle for labor cooperatives, fair wages, housing, debt relief, and full political enfranchisement for workers and peasants would require organization, propaganda, and a broadly based mass movement. Disdaining bayonets, therefore, Courbet became resolved to wage his combat with images; the time was ripe for such a battle, and he would not waste his chance.

205 After February, the exhibition policies of the Salon were liberalized, permitting Courbet free access for the first time. Whereas he had managed to show only 3 paintings in the previous seven years, he exhibited 10 works in 1848 and 11 the following year, including the peculiar *After Dinner at Ornans*. An ambitious and provocative picture, *After Dinner* was oddly oversized for its genre, indefinite in its lighting and compo-

sition, and indeterminate in its mood and subject. For all these anomalies, however, it sufficiently resembled Dutch genre paintings—then in renewed vogue—for it to garner praise from a number of Salon critics and the award of being purchased by the state.

The historical significance of *After Dinner* lies in two factors outside of its particular artistic weaknesses or merits: first, the gold medal Courbet received for it in 1849 automatically entitled him to free entry to the 1850 Salon; secondly, *After Dinner* is a precise mirror of Courbet's interest in the concurrent crises of French rural and urban life. In the wake of agrarian recession and urban insurrection, the definitions and political allegiances of both country and city were up for grabs, and any picture that treated ambiguously both realms could have been incendiary. The figures in *After Dinner* might as well be bohemians at the Andler as peasants at the home of the artist's Ornans friend Cuénot, thus potentially calling into question the opposition between worker and peasant that had ensured the failure of the insurrection of June. *After Dinner* was not scandalous in 1849, but its subject was and Courbet knew it. Therefore, in October 1849 Courbet left Paris and returned to Ornans in order to reflect upon and plan his future "intellectual" interventions. "I am a little like a snake . . . in a state of torpor," he wrote to his friends the Weys at the end of October. "In that sort of beatitude one thinks so well! . . . Yet I will come out of it . . ." Indeed, in the course of the next eight months, Courbet painted three colossal pictures that changed the history of art—*The Stonebreakers* (des- 206
A Burial at Ornans, and *Peasants of Flagey Returning 209*
From the Fair. As the art historian T. J. Clark has shown, and 210
as will be summarized here, each work constituted an attack upon the technical foundations of bourgeois art and a disquisition upon class and political antagonisms of the day.



206 GUSTAVE COURBET *The Stonebreakers*
1850. 63 x 8'6 (160 x 259)



207 FORD MADDOX BROWN *Work* 1852–65. 54 × 78 (137 × 197.3)

The Stonebreakers, its author said, “is composed of two very pitiable figures,” taken from life. “One is an old man, an old machine grown stiff with service and age. . . . The one behind him is a young man about fifteen years old, suffering from scurvy.” Stonebreaking for roads was a rare, though not unprecedented, subject for art, but it had never been treated so unflinchingly and so monumentally (the painting was nearly 5½ by 8 feet). Two nearly lifesize figures are set against a hillside, in approximate profile. Their gazes are averted from view, their limbs are strained by effort, and their clothes are in tatters. The colors and surface of the picture (such as can be surmised from its prewar photograph and the surviving oil study) are earthen and clotted, and the composition is uncomplicated. The predominant impression, as Courbet’s words suggest, is of humans acting as machines: hands, elbows, shoulders, backs, thighs, knees, ankles, and feet are all treated as alien appendages that only serve, as Ruskin wrote in *The Stones of Venice* (1853), to “make a tool of the creature.”

209 For *A Burial at Ornans*, Courbet gathered together some fifty-one men, women, and children on the grounds of the new

cemetery, and painted their portraits on a canvas almost 22 feet long. The mourners include the artist’s father and sisters, the town mayor, Courbet’s late grandfather, and a spotted dog. The coffin, draped in white with black teardrops and crossbones, belongs to one C.-E. Teste, a distant relative of Courbet; the ostentatious pair dressed in red with bulbous noses are beades. No one in the picture is paying much attention to either the coffin or the future resting place of the deceased; indeed, the crowd is composed of at least three discrete groups—women mourners at right, clergy and pall bearers at left, and a *bourgeois* and mongrel dog at center right—that are compositionally and emotionally disconnected from each other and the funeral ritual. (How different from the postures and expressions of rapt piety among the mourners in Pils’ exactly contemporaneous and acclaimed *The Death of a Sister of Charity*!) Adding to the impression of artifice and distraction in Courbet’s work is the insistent black and white of the canvas (compare the dog’s coat to the drapery over the coffin), as well as the odd superimposition of figures above one another.

204

Tonal simplicity, compositional fracture, and emotional



208 GUSTAVE COURBET *The Studio of the Painter: A Real Allegory Summing Up Seven Years of My Artistic Life* 1854–5. 11'10" × 19'8" (360.7 × 599.4)

210 opacity also characterize the *Peasants of Flagey*. Like the *Burial*, its subject was conventional (for example, Thomas Gainsborough's *Road from Market*, ca. 1767) but its treatment certainly was not. The *Peasants* is made up of discrete groupings of figures and animals unified only by a dull repetition of color and tonality: foreground and middle-ground planes awkwardly collide at the edge of a road extending from lower left to middle right; a boy and two peasant women are oddly insinuated among the inconsistently scaled horses and cattle; a man being led by a pig seems to float across the surface of the picture. Unlike Rosa Bonheur (1822–

211 99), whose *Plowing in the Nivernais: The Dressing of the Vines* (1849) records with patriotic specificity the agricultural practises of a particular region, Courbet disregards the cultural and physiognomic particulars of his human and animal subjects in *Peasants*. (Are those Jersey or Charolais cows under yoke?) Unlike Jules Breton (1827–1906), whose *The Gleaners* (1854) depicts the poor peasants of Marlotte as a faceless herd, Courbet provides his protagonists with individual and class identity, albeit ambiguous. (Is the man with peasant smock and stovepipe hat the same Régis Courbet who wears a bourgeois greatcoat in the *Burial*?) In place of the reassuring binary oppositions that will soon dominate official realism—city/country, bourgeois/peasant, proletarian/peasant—Courbet proposes a countryside that is as awkward,

indefinite, and contingent as the immigrant city of Paris.

Like the *Stonebreakers* and the *Burial at Ornans*, therefore, the *Peasants of Flagey Returning From the Fair* is all about the awkward antagonisms and injuries of social class. In the *Stonebreakers*, two peasants, reduced to penury, resort to stonebreaking in order to survive; in the *Burial*, a peasant community, got up in its Sunday bourgeois best, celebrates a funeral; in *Peasants*, a motley group of men, women, and animals, returning from an agricultural fair, meet a rural bourgeois in waistcoat walking his pig. This was the ungraceful form and subject of Courbet's much attacked trilogy shown in Paris at the Salon of 1850–51.

It would be easy to expound further—as the critics and caricaturists of 1851 did—upon the strange formal and thematic disjunctiveness of the *Peasants*, the *Stonebreakers*, and the *Burial*. Yet to do so would be to risk overlooking a new and provocative coherence in the works. In place of the old academic and political logic based upon Classical mimesis and clear class difference, Courbet has erected an alternative coherence based upon popular culture and social or class ambiguity and opacity. As Meyer Schapiro and T. J. Clark have shown, the formal touchstone for Courbet's trilogy was the “naive” artistic tradition—Epinal woodcuts and popular broadsheets, catchpenny prints and almanacs, chapbooks and songsheets—then being revived and contested across France

as a component of the political and class war of 1848. Especially in the months before the Napoleonic *coup d'état* of December 2, 1851, popular culture—best defined negatively as the unofficial culture of the non-elite—was a weapon used by peasants, workers, and their urban, bourgeois allies to help secure the *égalité* promised but not delivered by the first French Revolution. Courbet was a soldier in this war and the trilogy was his weapon.

In its lack of depth, its shadowlessness, stark color contrasts, superimposition of figures, and emotional neutrality, the *Burial* especially recalls the style and aspect of popular woodcuts, engravings, and lithographs, such as those used to decorate the many generic *souvenirs mortuaire* printed to help rural communities broadcast and commemorate local deaths, or the woodcuts that illustrated the traditional *Funeral of Marlborough* or other tales and ballads. (Indeed, in a letter to the Weys from 1850, Courbet cites the nonsense refrain “*miron-ton, miron-taine*” from the popular ballad of Marlborough.) Courbet was fascinated by popular culture during this period; in addition to composing several folk ballads and pantomimes, he illustrated a broadsheet of songs dedicated to the Fourierist apostle Jean Journet in 1850, and a decade later executed two drawings for Champfleury’s *Les Chansons populaires de France*. Further examples of the artist’s interests in popular culture are his 1853 depiction of a wrestling match, and his employment, a year later, of an Epinal print of the Wandering Jew as the basis for his autobiographical painting

213 *The Meeting* (1854).

In embracing popular art and culture—its audience, its

subjects, and even its ingenuous and anonymous style—Courbet was explicitly rejecting the hierarchism and personality cult fostered by the regime of President and then Emperor Louis Napoleon, and represented in Flandrin’s *Napoleon III* (1860–61). Indeed, even as Courbet was exhibiting his works in Paris during the winter of 1850–51, Bonapartists in the rural provinces were clamping down the activities of a legion of *colporteurs*, balladeers and pamphleteers who they judged were active in the revival of popular culture and the establishment of a radical, peasant solidarity. In Paris, too, the popular entertainers—clowns, street musicians, mountebanks and *saltimbanques*—were viewed by the police and the Prefects as the natural allies of subversives and Socialists; their activities were curtailed after 1849 for being inconsistent with order and social peace. In this feverish political context, when a celebration of the popular was understood as an expression of support for the “democratic and social republic,” it is not surprising that Courbet’s works were received with fear and hostility. “Socialist painting,” one critic said of Courbet’s Salon entries in 1851; “democratic and popular,” said another; “an engine of revolution,” exclaimed a third.

What appears to have most disturbed conservative critics about Courbet’s art, and what prompted these and other charges, was its “deliberate ugliness,” which meant its embrace of both a popular (“ugly”) content and a popular (working-class) Salon audience. Artwork and audience waltzed in a strange and morbid syncopation, critics of the Salon suggested, and vainglorious Courbet was dancing—

209 GUSTAVE COURBET *A Burial at Ornans* 1849. 10'4" × 21'9" (315 × 663)





210 GUSTAVE COURBET *Peasants of Flagey Returning From the Fair* 1849. 81½ × 9'1½ (206 × 275)



211 ROSA BONHEUR *Plowing in the Nivernais: The Dressing of the Vines* 1849. 69 × 8'8 (175.3 × 264.2)

master. After surveying the critical response to the artist's trilogy, T. J. Clark summarized Courbet's historic achievement: "He exploited high art—its techniques, its size and something of its sophistication—in order to revive popular art. . . . He made an art which claimed, by its scale and its proud title of 'History Painting', a kind of hegemony over the culture of the dominant classes." It should be mentioned that the claim was fragile, and turned out to be short-lived, but that to many at the time it appeared powerful enough to threaten the stability of the public sphere. Courbet's grand and sophisticated popular art could not survive intact the *coup d'état* and the inevitable dissipation of revolutionary consciousness that followed. Nevertheless, his trilogy has survived until the present as a model of artistic activism.



212 HIPPOLYTE-JEAN FLANDRIN *Napoleon III* 1860-61. 83½ × 58 (212 × 147)

213 GUSTAVE COURBET *The Meeting* 1854. 50½ × 58½ (129 × 149)



Indeed, it may be argued that Courbet's three paintings and the scandal they precipitated proved to be the historical point of origin of avant-gardism as a cultural stance of ideological opposition and political contestation. The goal of the artistic avant-garde, from Courbet to the Surrealists, has been to intervene in the domain of real life by changing the language of art so as to turn passive spectators into active interlocutors. Like the many artists who followed—Manet, the Impressionists, Van Gogh, Seurat, and the Russian avant-garde—Courbet sought to effect this intervention by recourse to the “popular,” that is to a cultural form or tradition from without the fixed canon of cultural legitimacy and ruling-class authority. Yet like those artists too, Courbet was ultimately unable to pursue his ambition to its promised end—events overtook him and the overwhelming assimilative powers of the dominant culture won out. Thus his trilogy also marks the onset of modernism as a formal procedure of esthetic self-reference and political abstention. The loss of an active and engaged oppositional public following the consolidation of the Second Empire (especially after 1857) led to the abstraction and generalization, as Thomas Crow has described it, of the antagonistic pictorial strategies adopted by Courbet in 1850. From this point forward, the interventionist goals of the avant-garde faded before the ultimate aim of modernism which—from Courbet to Frank Stella—was the achievement of artistic autonomy. Indeed, for Courbet, political insignificance always lurked just the other side of popular engagement. In July 1850, while crating his pictures for shipment to Paris, he wrote to the Weys:

The people have my sympathy. I must turn to them directly, I must get my knowledge from them, and they must provide me with a living. Therefore I have just embarked on the great wandering and independent life of the bohemian.

Don't be mistaken, I am not what you call a flimflammer. A flimflammer is an idler, he has only the appearance of what he professes to be, like the members of the Academy and like toothdrawers who have their own carriages and handle gold.

For Courbet as for later ambitious French and European artists, avant-garde and modern are the two sides of a coin that doesn't add up to a whole; the one connotes community, the other individuality; the one implies engagement, the other an ivory tower; the one invites bohemianism, the other flimflamery. In fact, however, avant-garde and modern possess the same specific gravity since the technical procedures that make possible the first are the very ones that inevitably conjure up the second. My argument in sum is this: the interventionist stance of the avant-garde entailed a rejection of established academic procedures and an embrace of the formal simplicity,

clarity, and flatness of popular art as found in nineteenth-century broadsheets, chapbooks, Epinal prints, and tradesmen's signs, as well as in the performances of *saltimbanques*, balladeers, and café singers. To employ such forms—such a new technique—was to carve out a new position for art within the means and relations of production of the day and thereby potentially to turn formerly alienated or passive working-class spectators into active participants. The cool self-regard of modernism entailed many of the same formal strategies, but in the absence of an oppositional public of like mind, the techniques were no more than vestiges of the dreamed interventionism. After 1852, avant-garde and modern marched in virtual lockstep. Courbet noticed this and made an allegory on the subject in 1855.

COURBET'S *THE STUDIO OF THE PAINTER*

On May 8, 1853 a decree was published announcing that the Salon of 1854 was canceled, but that a colossal art exhibition would be included among the exhibits of a great Universal Exposition to be held in 1855. The idea of the fair was to display to the world the marvelous industrial, cultural, and social progress achieved in France since Napoleon III's assumption of dictatorial powers in 1851. As a demonstration of his liberalism and magnanimity, the Emperor had his Intendant des beaux-arts, the Comte de Nieuwerkerke, invite Gustave Courbet to luncheon in order to propose that the artist cooperate with his government's plans, and submit to the Exposition jury a work of which the Comte and the Emperor would approve. In a letter to his friend and patron Bruyas, Courbet described his indignant response to this naked effort at cooptation:

You can imagine into what rage I flew after such an overture . . . first, because he was stating to me that he was a government and because I did not feel that I was in any way a part of that government; and that I too was a government and that I defied his to do anything for mine that I could accept. . . . I went on to tell him that I was the sole judge of my painting; that I was not only a painter but a human being; that I had practiced painting not in order to make art for art's sake, but rather to win my intellectual freedom, and that by studying tradition I had managed to free myself of it; that I alone, of all the French artists of my time, had the power to represent and translate in an original way both my personality and my society.

Courbet's letter went on to describe the rest of his tense and abortive luncheon with Nieuwerkerke—additional sparring, dressings-down, and protestations of sincerity and pride—and the artist's intention to press ahead in his artistic project

“with full knowledge of the facts.” What is perhaps most salient about the letter, however, is that it announces a kind of program for future work, in particular for the very painting that Courbet would make and then insinuate into the heart of the Exposition grounds, *The Studio of the Painter: A Real Allegory Summing Up Seven Years of My Artistic Life*. According to his remarks above, Courbet was seeking in his painting to explore the social and cultural position of the artist; to cast off “art for art’s sake” while nevertheless maintaining independence; and to explore the complexities of reality in order to “represent and translate . . . my personality and my society.” Courbet’s manifesto in paint was underway by November 1854 and finished six months later, just in time for it to be rejected by the Exposition jury.

The Studio is a vast (almost 11 by 20 feet) and somewhat lugubrious depiction of the artist’s atelier and its thirty-odd occupants. The composition is divided into two parts with the painter himself in the middle. He is seen painting a landscape and is accompanied (in perfect Oedipal fashion, as Linda Nochlin has said) by a small boy and nude woman who cast admiring glances. To the right are the painter’s “shareholders,” as he called them in a letter to Champfleury, that is, his various artistic and bohemian friends. These include Baudelaire (at the far right, reading), Champfleury (seated), and Bruyas (with the beard, in profile). To the left are “the people, misery, poverty, wealth, the exploited and the exploiters, the people who live off death.” The identification of this group is less clear, but it appears to include Louis Napoleon (seated, accompanied by spaniels), the Minister of State Achille Fould (standing with cask, at far left, and described by the artist as “a Jew whom I saw in England”), the late regicide Lazare Carnot (in white coat and peaked hat), and perhaps the European revolutionaries Garibaldi, Kossuth, and Kosciuszko. The upper half of *The Studio*, above the heads of all of the figures, consists of an expanse of brown paint (“a great blank wall”) that inadequately covers the ghost of *The Peasants of Flagey*.

Denied the chance to display the puzzling *Studio* alongside his other accepted works, Courbet decided to erect a “Pavilion of Realism,” in the form of a circus tent, on land just opposite the entrance to the Exposition. There he would display his new paintings as well as his most controversial older works, and steal the thunder from the officially sanctioned Ingres, Delacroix, Vernet, and Descamps, among others.

With the financial assistance of Bruyas, the “Pavilion of Realism” was indeed quickly built, but the public response was not what Courbet hoped for and planned: attendance was poor and the critics were largely indifferent. The most considered response to Courbet’s *Studio*, in fact, is found in the private diaries of Delacroix:

Paris, 3 August

Went to the Exposition, where I noticed the fountain that spouts artificial flowers.

I think all these machines are very depressing. I hate these contrivances that look as though they were producing remarkable effects entirely on their own volition.

Afterwards I went to the Courbet exhibition. He has reduced the price of admission to ten sous. I stayed there alone for nearly an hour and discovered a masterpiece in the picture they rejected . . . In [*The Studio*] the planes are well understood, there is atmosphere, and in some passages the execution is really remarkable, especially the thighs and hips of the nude model and the breasts. . . . The only fault is that the picture, as he has painted it, seems to contain an ambiguity. It looks as though there were a real sky in the middle of the painting. They have rejected one of the most remarkable works of our time, but Courbet is not the man to be discouraged by a little thing like that.

Delacroix’s chief insights occur at the beginning and near the end of this passage. His remark about the “machines . . . acting entirely on their own volition” constitutes a succinct account of “commodity fetishism,” a term coined and defined a few years later by Marx in *Capital* (1867) as the disguising of the “social relation between men . . . [in] the fantastic form of a relation between things.” The 1855 Exposition, which consisted primarily of the mass display of consumer goods and the machines that produced them, was indeed an early important landmark in the fetishization of commodities. It heralded the beginnings of a world that would increasingly identify progress with the rationalization of production, liberty with the freedom to consume standardized goods, and human intimacy with the market exchange of sex. Delacroix appears to have understood something of this historic aspect of the Exposition, and found it (with unusual understatement) depressing. Courbet’s picture was thus judged a triumph in opposition to this sobering exhibition of modernity.

Delacroix’s other insights into Courbet’s *The Studio of the Painter: A Real Allegory Summing Up Seven Years of My Artistic Life* are contained in his comments about the “remarkable” execution of the thighs, hips, and breasts of the nude and the “ambiguity [of] a real sky in the middle of the picture.” In these few lines, the Romantic painter has encapsulated the woman/nature dyad that constituted Courbet’s personal response to the dispiriting forces of modernization on display at the Exposition. For Courbet, woman and nature are the “real” touchstones for the personal and political “allegory” that began in 1848 and ended with the exhibition of 1855.

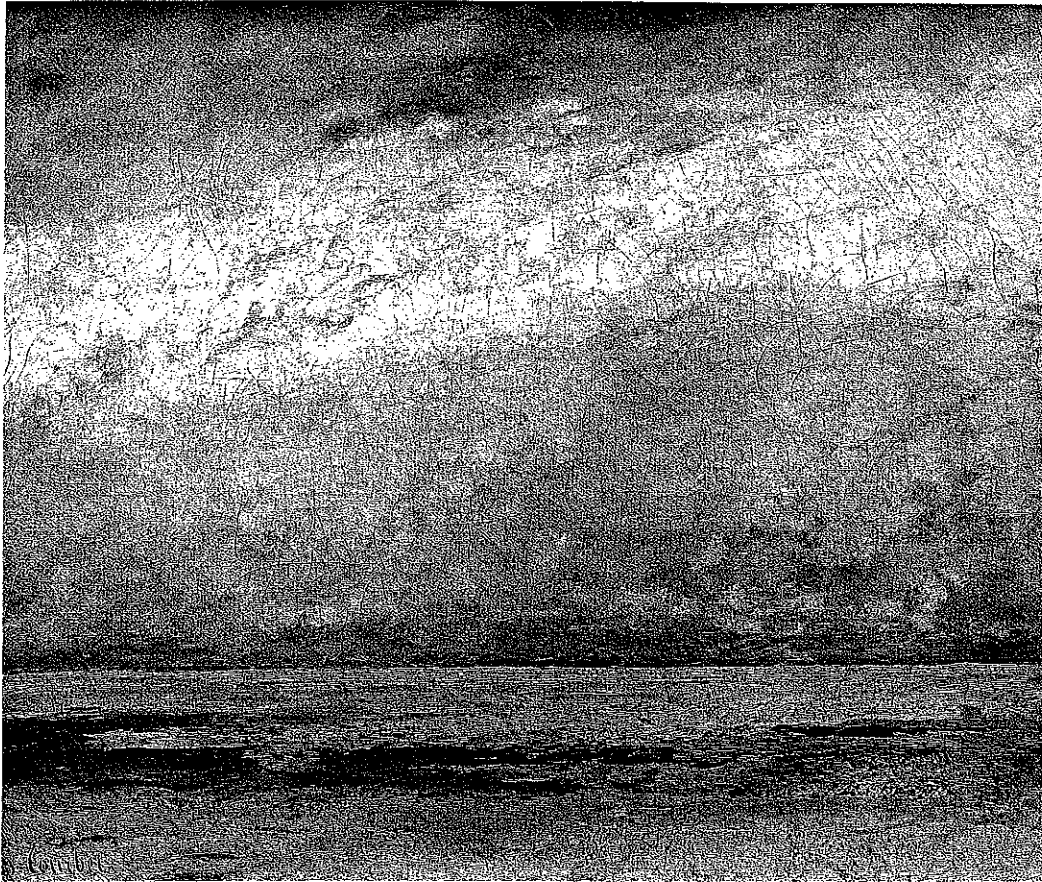
The nude woman in *The Studio* (as Delacroix and Courbet both wrote) is a model and nothing more: she is not Venus.



214 GUSTAVE COURBET *The Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine* 1856-7. 68 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 81 $\frac{1}{4}$ (173 × 206)



215 GUSTAVE COURBET *Sleepers* 1866. 53 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 78 $\frac{3}{4}$ (135 × 200)



216 GUSTAVE COURBET *Seaside* 1866. $21\frac{1}{4} \times 25\frac{1}{4}$ (53.5 × 64)



217 GUSTAVE COURBET *Grand Panorama of the Alps With the Dents du Midi* 1877. $59\frac{1}{2} \times 82\frac{1}{2}$ (151 × 210)

214 She is not muse or *Source*, as in Ingres's painting of 1856; she
215 is not the allegory of Liberty, the Republic, Spring, Misery,
Tragedy, or *War and Peace*, as in Pierre Puvis de Chavannes's paintings of 1867. At once freed of the allegorical burdens placed upon her by innumerable academic artists of the Second Empire, and stripped of her only sources of cultural power, she is instead a blank canvas, like the cloth she holds, upon which the modern male painter will figure his authority and independence. In painting after painting until the end of his life, including *The Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine* (1856–7) and *The Sleepers* (1866), Courbet re-enacted this dialectic of the feminine. Divested of any but sexual power, Courbet's women are reduced to mere passive vehicles of painterly dexterity and authority; relieved of the burden of allegorization, women are for perhaps the first time in the history of Western art shown actually to possess a sexuality. (The politically incendiary aspect of this latter emancipation would be strikingly exposed in the critical response, a decade after *The Studio*, to Edouard Manet's *Olympia*.)

216–17 Just as Courbet's nude model functions as a cipher of artistic volition, so too does the landscape and "real sky," in Delacroix's words, function as an anchor for painterly autonomy. For the Realist, landscape—especially the type of rugged and inaccessible woodlands represented on the artist's easel—constituted the dream space of personal freedom, and the idealized locus, as the art historian Klaus Herding has described it, of social reconciliation. In landscape painting after landscape painting, from the *Chateau d'Ornans* (1850) to *Seaside* (1866) to the *Grand Panorama of the Alps With the Dents du Midi* (1877), Courbet represented his dreamed

personal autonomy and social equality ("I too was a government") by his rejection of the traditional formulas of the genre. His landscapes, like those of the Impressionists who followed, lacked compositional focus, internal framing devices, *repoussoir* elements, atmospheric perspective, and coloristic sobriety and balance. They were instead painterly, sketchy, vibrant in color, bright in tonality, spatially flat (though texturally three-dimensional), and democratic, meaning that the painter paid nearly equal attention to all parts of the picture—the sides, bottom, top, and corners, as well as the center of the picture.

Courbet's *The Studio of the Painter* is thus as much a foretelling of the painter's future as it is a summary of his past. In addition, it is an early instance of the modernism—represented by the nude, the landscape, and the great swathe of brown paint that constitutes the upper half of the painting—that would flourish in succeeding generations. Modernism is the name for the visual art that would increasingly de-emphasize representation in favor of the integrated material surface; it is the art that would avoid direct engagement in the ongoing battle of classes and interests in the name of individual and pictorial autonomy. Another way to describe the development of modernism is simply to say that it involved the rejection of *allegory* and the embrace of the *real* in all its contradictoriness. "The people who want to judge [*The Studio of the Painter: A Real Allegory*]," Courbet wrote to Champfleury, "will have their work cut out for them." The numerous, conflicting, and often convoluted interpretations of the painting (not excepting this one) bear out the artist's words, but it may be that Courbet himself supplied the painting's best gloss in its title.