

The Rhetoric of Realism: Courbet and the Origins of the Avant-Garde c. 1840–1880

INTRODUCTION The story of Realism is one of the most perplexing for students of nineteenth-century art. Within the domain of culture, we usually take the word “realism” (lowercase) to mean a work of art or literature that represents reality in a faithful way. If a picture bears a close resemblance to some person or thing in the world, or a novel conjures up a plausible likeness, we might say it is “realistic.” But in the context of nineteenth-century art, Realism is something else entirely.

Around the time of the revolutions of 1848, workers and the lower middle class in the major European and American cities began to demand and expect a culture that spoke to them in a language they could understand. Forced by enclosure laws, higher rents, impoverished soils, and poor crop yields to leave the countryside to find work in urban factories, construction trades, retail or domestic service, they sought a culture that affirmed them and inspired them in their struggles for economic security and political power. If a picture on view at the Paris Salon or the Royal Academy in London had an obscure Classical, religious, or mythological subject, they would greet it with disdain. If it was painted in a style that suggested a refinement or elitism foreign to them, they would reject that too. What they wanted was an art that was popular in content, legible in form, and familiar in style. And sure enough, such an art quickly arose: Realism. Its chief apostle in France was Gustave Courbet, and in England the group of young artists who called themselves the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, or PRB (the term “Realism” was not generally used in Great Britain, but the artistic culture there, between about 1847 and 1855, was nevertheless similar to that in France).

In fact, the Realism created by Courbet, Daumier, and Millet in France, or by the Pre-Raphaelites in England, was not unalloyed populism. Rather, it was every bit as sophisticated, complex, and indirect as any art that came before.

But it did one new and remarkable thing: it made the insurgent classes—the ones addressed by Karl Marx in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848)—its subject, in some cases adopting even their language or argot. In William Holman Hunt’s *Rienzi Vowing to Obtain Justice . . .* (1848–49), we see a triad of plain Englishmen in the left foreground (modeled on young members of the PRB themselves) vowing to take revenge against the patrician warriors who wantonly killed the recumbent boy-figure in front. The composition is clear, the gestures immediately legible, and the detail almost photographic. In Millet’s much more painterly *The Sower* (1850), we see a rough-hewn peasant enacting the familiar, biblical parable of Christ as the sower who can plant the seed of faith only in the most favorable soil. The image must have inspired former peasants, urban workers, and ardent revolutionaries seeking to spread their creed of equality and democracy.

The most sophisticated and accomplished Realist was Courbet, who veritably invented the term. In his great trilogy of pictures from 1850—*The Stonebreakers*, *The Peasants of Flagey Returning from the Fair*, and *A Burial at Ornans*—he devised a pictorial apparatus that deployed the scale, subject, and prestige of history painting, with the style of genuinely popular art. The near-monochrome palette and flatness of the *Burial*, for example, derived from cheap, hand-colored woodcuts that would have been known to peasants and workers across the country. For a while, as the ardor of revolution remained hot, it appeared that Courbet’s Realism might overturn the entire edifice of Academic and official art and help to destroy the bourgeois political order that sustained it. But as it happened, by 1851, the political revolution was defeated in France, across the continent, and in England, and Realism was broken, or at least tamed. An “official” or conservative Realism took the place of the real thing, and soon the word came to mean more or less what it does today.

RHETORICS OF REALIST ART AND POLITICS

Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) 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 a 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 principles 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 based upon the idea of reasoned debate and the achievement of consensus. Together, these crises and caesuras combined to convince the artists and writers of the mid-century and after 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* (1848), 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* (c. 1862–64), Millet’s *The Gleaners* (1857, p. 262), and Courbet’s *The Stonebreakers*

11.1

11.2, 15



11.1 Honoré Daumier
The Third-Class Carriage, c. 1862–64.
Oil on canvas,
25¾ × 35½"
(65.4 × 90.2)



11.2 Jean-François Millet *The Gleaners*, 1857. Oil on canvas, 33 × 44" (83.8 × 111.8)

(1850, p. 274); the poet stripped of his halo is the subject of Baudelaire's ironic prose-poem "The Loss of a Halo" in *Paris Spleen* (1869).

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 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."

In contrast to Baudelaire's irony, Daumier and his fellow caricaturist Grandville (J.-I.-I. Gérard, 1803–1847) chose anachronism to satirize the "real conditions" of their "suffering age." In the 1840s, 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

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.

11.3 Grandville "Apple of the Hesperides and rum ice," from *Un Autre Monde*, 1844

Grandville's engraving of Romans ordering an "apple of the Hesperides and rum ice." In the latter sheet, from *Un Autre Monde*, a text consonant with the utopian socialist ideals of Charles Fourier, a modish ménage wearing Roman sandals are seated in a bistro, being served drinks by a surly waiter standing in Classical *contrapposto*. 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."

THE PRE-RAPHAELITE BROTHERHOOD

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. And here, too, the impetus for artistic revitalization—embodied by the young artists who in 1848 banded together and called themselves the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood—is found in the spheres of the social and political. 1848 marked the culmination of a period of economic recession dubbed "the Hungry Forties," and the simultaneous apogee of Chartism, a broad working-class movement that sought to overturn the Poor Law Reform Act of 1834 (which denied in-home relief to the poor and unemployed), enfranchise working men, and enact an array of wealth taxes. Plans for a mass Chartist demonstration and delivery of a petition for universal (male) suffrage on April 10, 1848 (just weeks after the revolution in France that toppled the regime of Louis Philippe), led to the largest peacetime mobilization of military and civilian forces in British history. Public buildings were sandbagged, the Queen fled the capital, and an armed force of more than 100,000 police and specially deputized constables waited to confront the demonstrators at strategic locations in the city. London was geared for revolution. But the overwhelming show of force, combined with bad weather and disorganization on the part of the protestors, prematurely broke up the mass march and emboldened the government to rebuke the rally organizers and ignore Chartist demands. Government ministers even mocked the petition to Parliament, saying that it contained just 1.9 million signatures, not the almost 6 million claimed

by the Chartist journalist and representative Feargus O'Connor, and that many of these were false, consisting of names such as No Cheese, Pug Nose, and Victoria Rex. By 1850, Chartism was dead and nearly forgotten; the general increase in levels of employment and wages dissipated radical energies, and another generation would pass before the working-class movement regained its footing. The Crystal Palace Exhibition a year later (see pp. 186–89) was like the crowing of a cock, announcing the dawn of a renewed British imperium.

William Holman Hunt (1827–1910), John Everett Millais (1829–1896), and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882) constituted the core of the young artists who in February 1848—the month of the revolution in France—formed the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB). Their early meetings at the studio of the sculptor Thomas Woolner (1825–1892), or at the Millais family home in Bloomsbury, Hunt later recalled, were taken up with general commiseration with the poor and condemnation of the wealthy. Together, they read scripture and poetry, debated politics, and decried the policies and programs of the Royal Academy. Their adoption of the PRB moniker (which caused confusion

and consternation on the part of critics and the public) indicates a desire for the comforting anonymity of group identity. They were an assembly of male adepts, like the Freemasons, Carbonari, or Skull and Bones who came before them. And they spoke—or rather painted—in a common argot of bright tonalities, vivid color, linearity, and naturalism. Rejecting the mannerism of the later Raphael as much as the sentimental, neo-Baroque formulas of such Royal Academicians as Richard Redgrave (1804–1888) and David Wilkie (1785–1841), author of *The First Earring* (1835), 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 Christ-like beards and long hair, were a counter-revolutionary, esoteric society of Catholic-converted German artists, active in Rome after 1810. They included Peter Cornelius, Friedrich Overbeck, and Franz Pfors: see p. 154). From these sources, and from the political well-spring of Chartism, the PRB sought to build an artistic movement that would serve as a basis for the regeneration of British culture and society. The group's short-lived

11.4 William Holman Hunt *Rienzi Vowing to Obtain Justice for the Death of His Young Brother, Slain in a Skirmish between the Colonna and Orsini Factions, 1848–49.* Oil on canvas, 86.3 × 122" (34 × 48)





11.5 John Everett Millais *Christ in the House of His Parents*, 1850. Oil on canvas, 33½ × 54" (85 × 137.2)

journal was named *The Germ*, its title (printed in Black Letter) evoking at once the hermeticism of a closed Gothic-era religious community, the organicist metaphors of Romanticism, and the interrogative naturalism of Victorian science.

One of the first pictures to carry the PRB initials, painted in 1848 and exhibited at the Royal Academy a year later, was a work that proclaimed the values of masculine and martial solidarity and political justice.

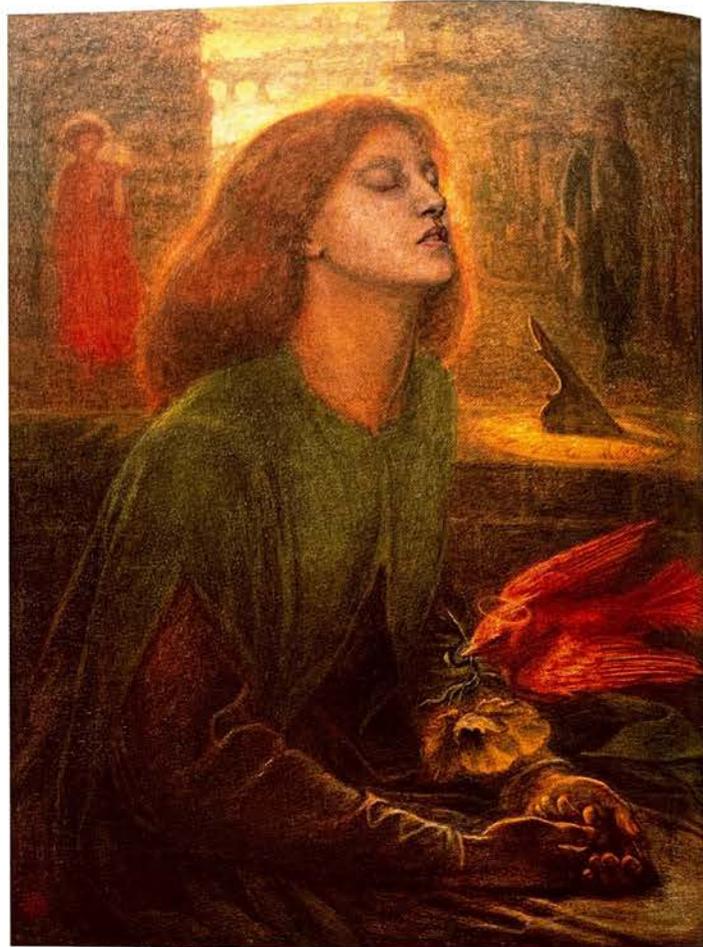
^{11.4} Hunt's *Rienzi Vowing to Obtain Justice for the Death of His Young Brother, Slain in a Skirmish between the Colonna and Orsini Factions* depicts the vengeful outcry of the fourteenth-century Roman plebeian leader Cola di Rienzi after the murder of his younger brother by the patrician Colonna knights. By its subject—drawn from history and the novel *Rienzi, Last of the Roman Tribunes* by Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1835)—and its form, the painting makes a critical intervention into English art and politics; its egalitarian sentiment, frieze-like composition and focus upon virtuous, martyred youth recall the art of David just before and during the French Revolution. In addition, Hunt's vivid naturalism—apparent in the treatment of trees and grasses at left and right, and the unidealized faces of the protagonists (modeled by members and associates of the PRB)—stands at a great remove from the idealism of such Royal Academicians as C. R. Leslie (1794–1859), or the eroticized classicism of William Etty (1787–1849),

whose history paintings and nudes, for example *The Golden Age* (c. 1840), evince at once the aura of the Venetian Renaissance and the libertine decadence of the artist's studio. More than any other PRB canvas, *Rienzi* appears to be drawn from the pride and hurt of April 10, 1848. Never again would political violence be so clearly represented in Pre-Raphaelite Art.

Millais, too, dispensed with Classical costume and architecture as well as with High Renaissance grace and timelessness in *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1850). ^{11.5} The historical genre scene of the boy-Christ (with cut finger) and his working-class family instead enshrines matter-of-factness, physical labor, and the unidealized modern 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. Its combination of typological symbolism—hand tools of the crucifixion, the ladder for the deposition, the bowl of water for baptism, the dove of the holy spirit—and grubby realism was startling and alarming to conservative critics. Even Charles Dickens, otherwise sympathetic to social reform, decried the work in his *Household Words, A Weekly Journal* as “mean, odious, repulsive and revolting.” Its protagonist, he said, was a “hideous, wry-necked, blubbering red-headed boy in a bed gown,” and his mother “so horrible in her ugliness, that



11.6 Dante Gabriel Rossetti *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*, 1848. Oil on canvas, 28½ × 16½" (72.4 × 42)

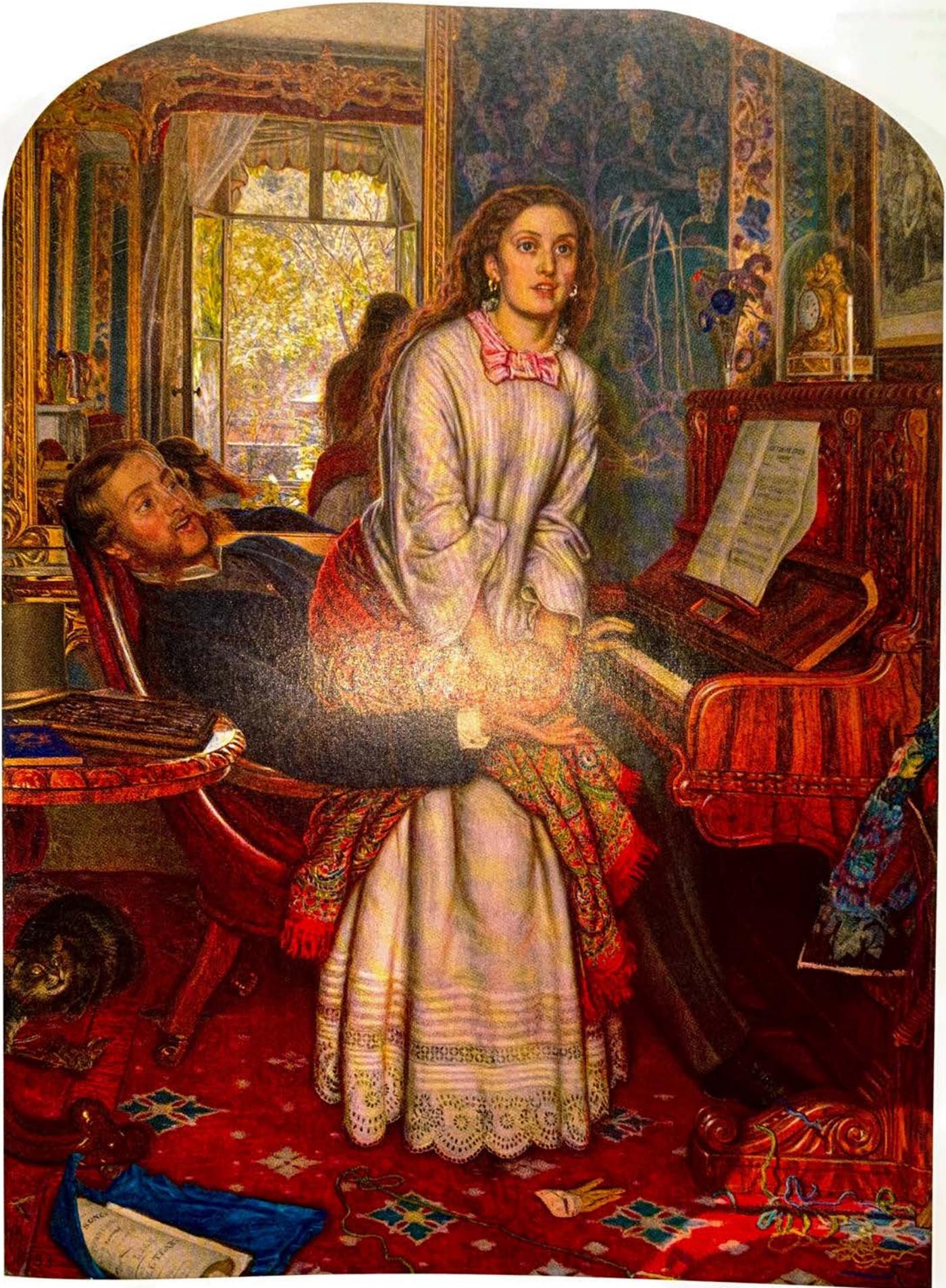


11.7 Dante Gabriel Rossetti *Beata Beatrix*, 1867–70. Oil on canvas, 34 × 26" (86.4 × 66)

- she would stand out . . . in the vilest cabaret in France, or the lowest gin-shop in England." The reference to France was surely intended to invoke the disreputable politics of February, and especially June 1848, when the working class erected barricades across the streets of Paris. Rossetti's
- 11.6 response to the poor reviews of his starkly realist *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* ("Behold the handmaid of the Lord"), whose Virgin Mary resembled a blushing, Victorian pubescent, was simply to stop exhibiting his works in public,
- 11.7 and eventually to abandon realism. His *Beata Beatrix*, a dreamy paean to Dante, was an expression both of the Aesthetic Movement (the idea of "art for art's sake") and emerging European Symbolism.

Never again was the language of English criticism so vivid or so angry as it was in 1850–51. The attainment of relative social peace, the pleasurable distractions of the Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1851, the rapid dissolution of

the Pre-Raphaelites' group identity and their shift from political to moral criticism all combined to lower the rhetorical temperature and bring the movement closer to mainstream art and ideology. In contrast to the working-class ambience of Millais's *Christ*, the interior of Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* (1853) bears the stigma of the lower middle class, and of artistic condescension. It is filled with all manner of Victorian gewgaws and bric-a-brac, and records the moment when a young woman, "with a startled holy resolve," in the painter's words, determines to escape her sinful life. Like the woman and man themselves, the drawing-room has a design physiognomy that tells a story which is, as Ruskin wrote, "common, modern, vulgar . . . tragical." Recalling the lessons in good and bad design inculcated at the Museum of Ornamental Art in London starting in 1852, the picture bespoke "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.



11.8 William Holman Hunt *The Awakening Conscience*, 1853. Oil on canvas, 29½ × 22" (74.9 × 55.8)

11.9 Ford Madox Brown

Work, 1852–65. Oil on canvas, 27 × 39" (68.4 × 99)



FORD MADOX BROWN'S WORK

11.9 Like Millais's *Christ in the House of His Parents*, the monumental and complex painting *Work* (1852–65) by Ford Madox Brown (1821–1893) 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 in 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 pipes, 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. (It was also widely believed that sewer pipes were necessary to drain waste water responsible for “miasmas,” the source of such diseases as cholera.) 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, Rossetti, and Brown’s pictures, like many others by the PRB and their associates, were initially 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 depicting “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; by then, the struggle over Chartism was a distant memory, and the English working-class movements stimulated by Marx, William Morris, and others had not yet appeared on the scene. Instead, *Work* 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. The quiescent aftermath of Chartism also had its own parallel in France with the regime of Napoleon III and the emergence of artistic modernism.

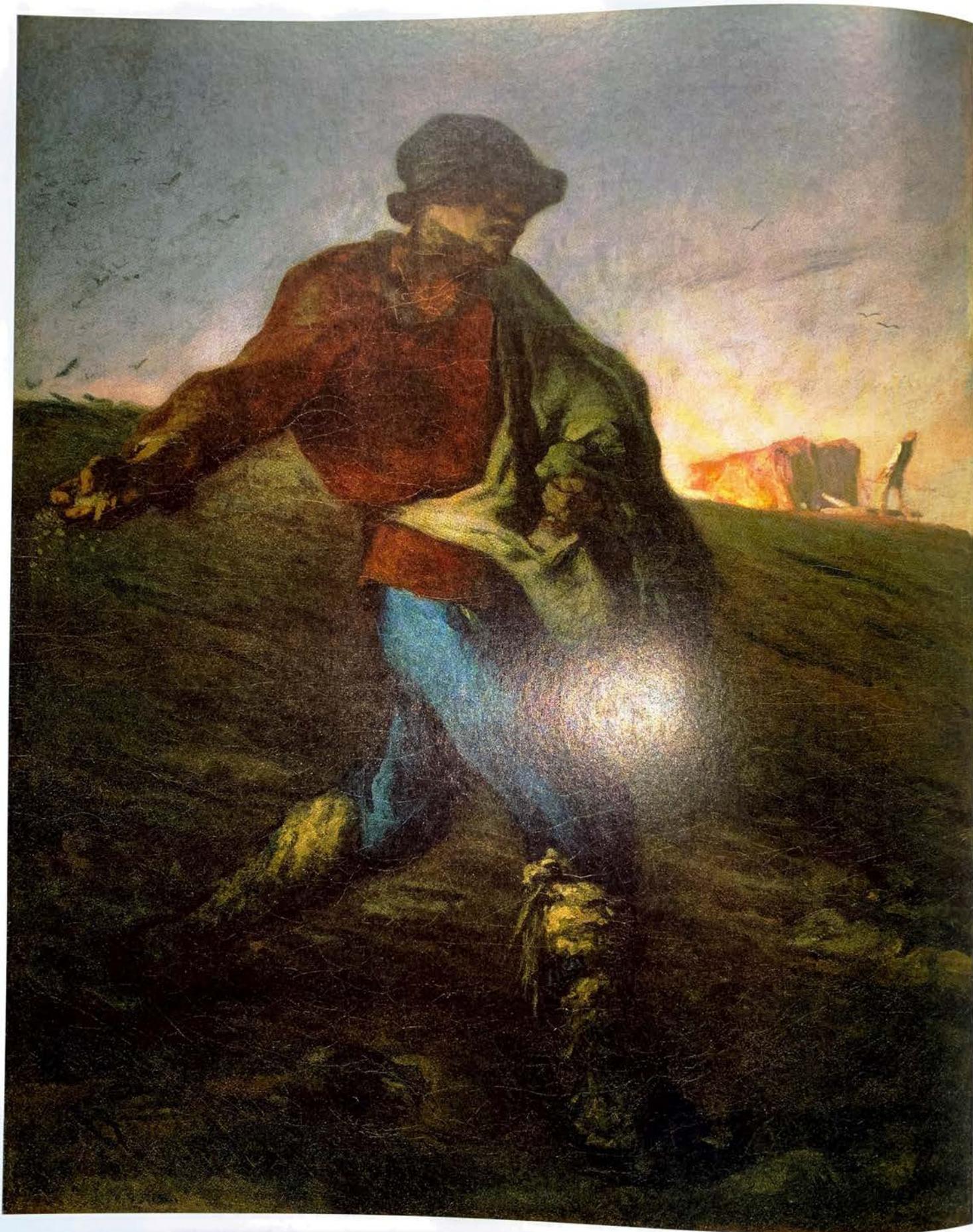
ART AND REVOLUTION

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 1846–48, 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; 1,500 died in the three days of battle,

3,000 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, 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, economies, 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, p. 270) 11.10 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



11.10 Jean-François Millet *The Sower*, 1850.
Oil on canvas, 40 × 32½" (101.6 × 82.6)

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 means 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 the academic and bourgeois *juste milieu*, and an espousal of the formal principles found in nonclassical and working-class or peasant popular art. By this means, Courbet attempted to turn formerly neglected 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



11.11 Gustave Courbet
Man with Leather Belt,
c. 1845. Oil on canvas,
39½ × 32¼" (100 × 82)

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” practiced by Couture and others in the 1840s. Yet even as a young artist, Courbet demonstrated independence and self-assurance: his self-portraits, including *Man with Leather Belt* (c. 1845) and *The Wounded Man* (c. 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 of Alexis de Tocqueville*, 1844, p. 272), 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, p. 272), Courbet’s paintings convey a psychological complexity, physical proximity, and eroticism that has 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 possible sources for *Man with Leather Belt*—along with Titian portraits such as *Man with a Glove* in the Louvre.)

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



11.12 ABOVE Théodore Chassériau *Portrait of Alexis de Tocqueville*, 1844. Pencil on paper, 11 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (30 × 24)

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 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



11.13 Isidore Pils *The Death of a Sister of Charity*, 1850. Oil on canvas, 95" × 10' (241 × 305)



11.14 Gustave Courbet
After Dinner at Ornans,
 1849. Oil on canvas,
 76¾" × 8'5½" (195 × 257)

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.

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 three paintings in the previous seven years, he exhibited ten works in 1848 and eleven 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 composition, 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 both realms ambiguously 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* (destroyed), *A Burial at Ornans* (both p. 274), and *Peasants of Flagey Returning from the Fair* (p. 275). As the art historian T. J. Clark has shown, and 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.

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

11.15, 16

11.17

11.15

11.15 Gustave Courbet

The Stonebreakers,
1850. Oil on canvas,
63" × 8'6" (160 × 259)



one behind him is a young man about fifteen years old, suffering from scurvy." Stonebreaking for roads was a rare, though not quite unprecedented, subject for art (Edwin Landseer had painted it in 1830), but it had never been treated so unflinchingly and so monumentally: this painting was almost 5½ by 8 feet. Two nearly life-size 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 pre-war

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."

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

11.16 Gustave Courbet

A Burial at Ornans,
c. 1849–50. Oil on
canvas, 10'4" × 21'9"
(315 × 663)





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 beadles (minor church administrators). 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's 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.

Tonal simplicity, compositional fracture, and emotional opacity also characterize the *Peasants of Flagey*. Like the *Burial*, its subject was conventional—previous examples include P. P. Rubens's *Peasants Going to Market* (c. 1618) and Thomas Gainsborough's *Road from Market* (c. 1767)—but its treatment here 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 (1822–1899), whose *Plowing in the Nivernais: The Dressing of the Vines* (1849, p. 276) records with patriotic and monumental specificity the agricultural practices 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? This is an important question in peasant and animal paintings.) Unlike Jules Breton (1827–1906),

11.17 Gustave Courbet
Peasants of Flagey
Returning from the Fair,
1850. Oil on canvas,
81½" × 9'1½" (206 × 275)

11.18



11.18 Rosa Bonheur
Plowing in the Nivernais: The Dressing of the Vines, 1849. Oil on canvas, 52 $\frac{1}{2}$ " \times 8'6 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (134 \times 260)

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 (probably to make gravel for roads) 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.

ART AND POPULAR CULTURE

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 in 1941 and T. J. Clark in 1973 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 song-sheets—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 mortuaires* 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



11.19 Gustave Courbet
The Meeting, 1854. Oil
 on canvas, 50¾ × 58½"
 (129 × 149)

11.20 BELOW
Hippolyte-Jean
Flandrin *Napoleon III*,
 1860–61. Oil on canvas,
 83½ × 58" (212 × 147)

drawings for Champfleury's *Les Chansons populaires de France*. Further examples of the artist's interests in popular culture are his depiction in 1853 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 *The Meeting* (1854).

11.19 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, represented in Flandrin's

11.20 *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. (It is therefore unsurprising that they were among the chief subjects of Daumier when he turned to painting: see his *Wandering Saltimbanques*, c. 1847–50.) 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-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 arena. 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.

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 often 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:

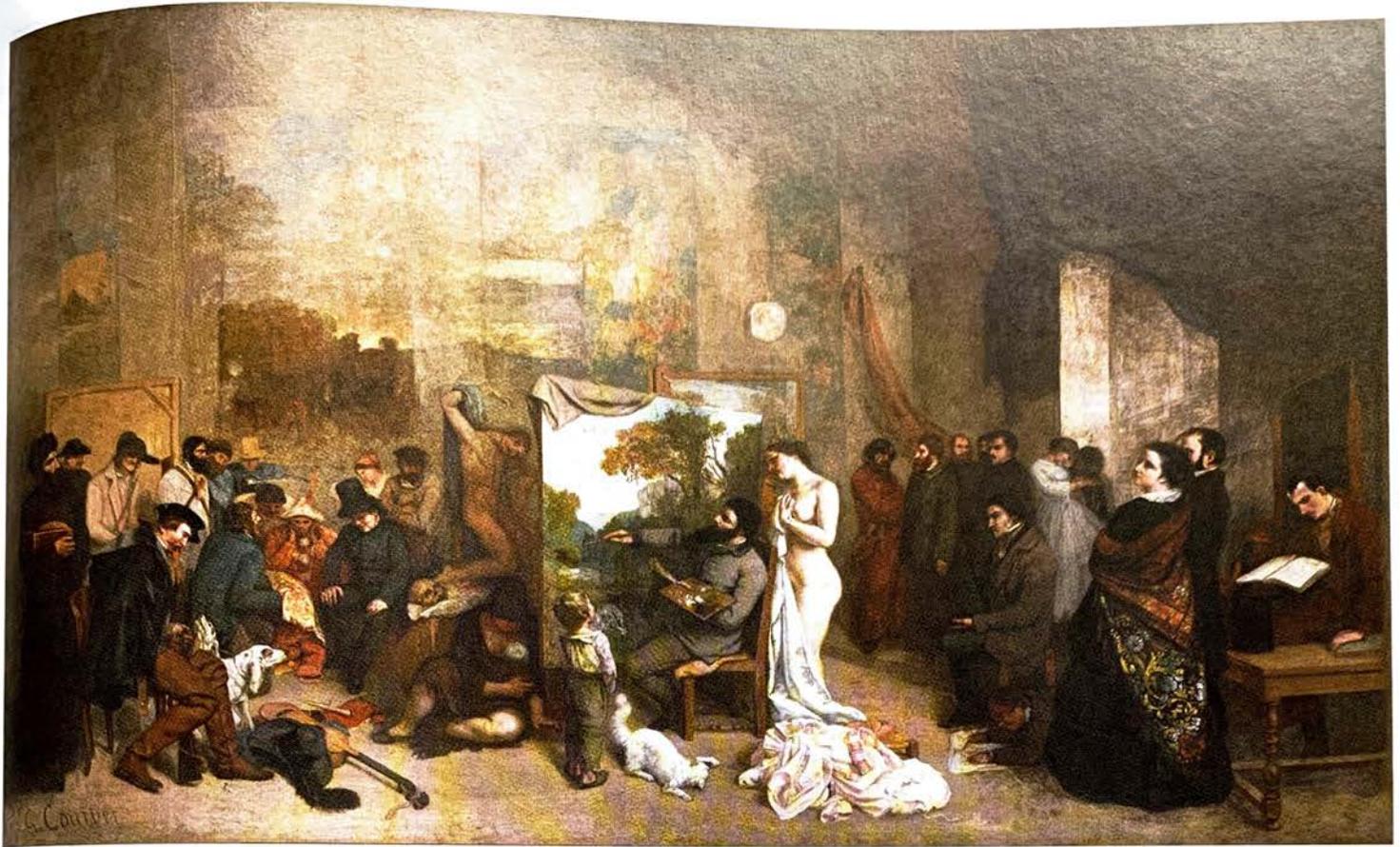
The people have my sympathy. I must turn to them directly, I must get my knowledge from them, and they must provide me with a living. Therefore I have just embarked on the great wandering and independent life of the bohemian.

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 do not 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, Épinal 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 co-optation:

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 (some 11 by 20 feet) and somewhat dour 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

11.21 Gustave Courbet
The Studio of the Painter: A Real Allegory Summing Up Seven Years of My Artistic Life, 1854–55. Oil on canvas, 11'10" × 19'8" (361 × 600)

11.21

(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 (subject of a veritable retrospective), 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:

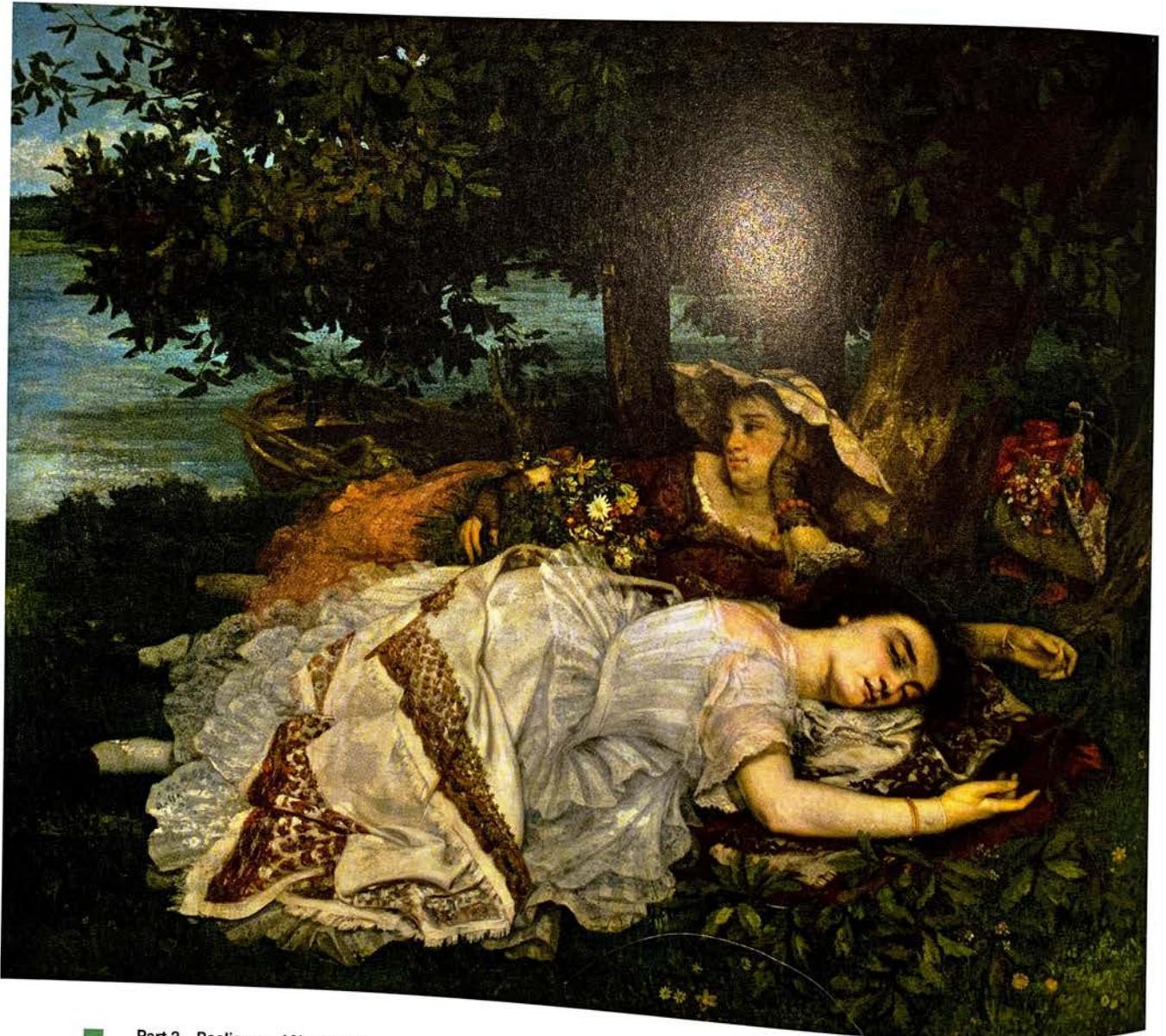
Paris, 3 August

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

11.22 Gustave Courbet *The Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine*, 1856–57. Oil on canvas, 68½ × 81½" (173 × 206)





11.23 Gustave Courbet
The Sleepers,
 1866. Oil on
 canvas, 53¼ × 78¾"
 (135 × 200)

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 picture. 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. She is not muse or *Source*, as in Ingres's painting of 1856; she 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* (1856–57) 11.22 and *The Sleepers* (1866), and of course the provocative and metonymic *Origin of the World* (1866), Courbet re-enacted 11.23

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, albeit sometimes nothing more. (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*.)

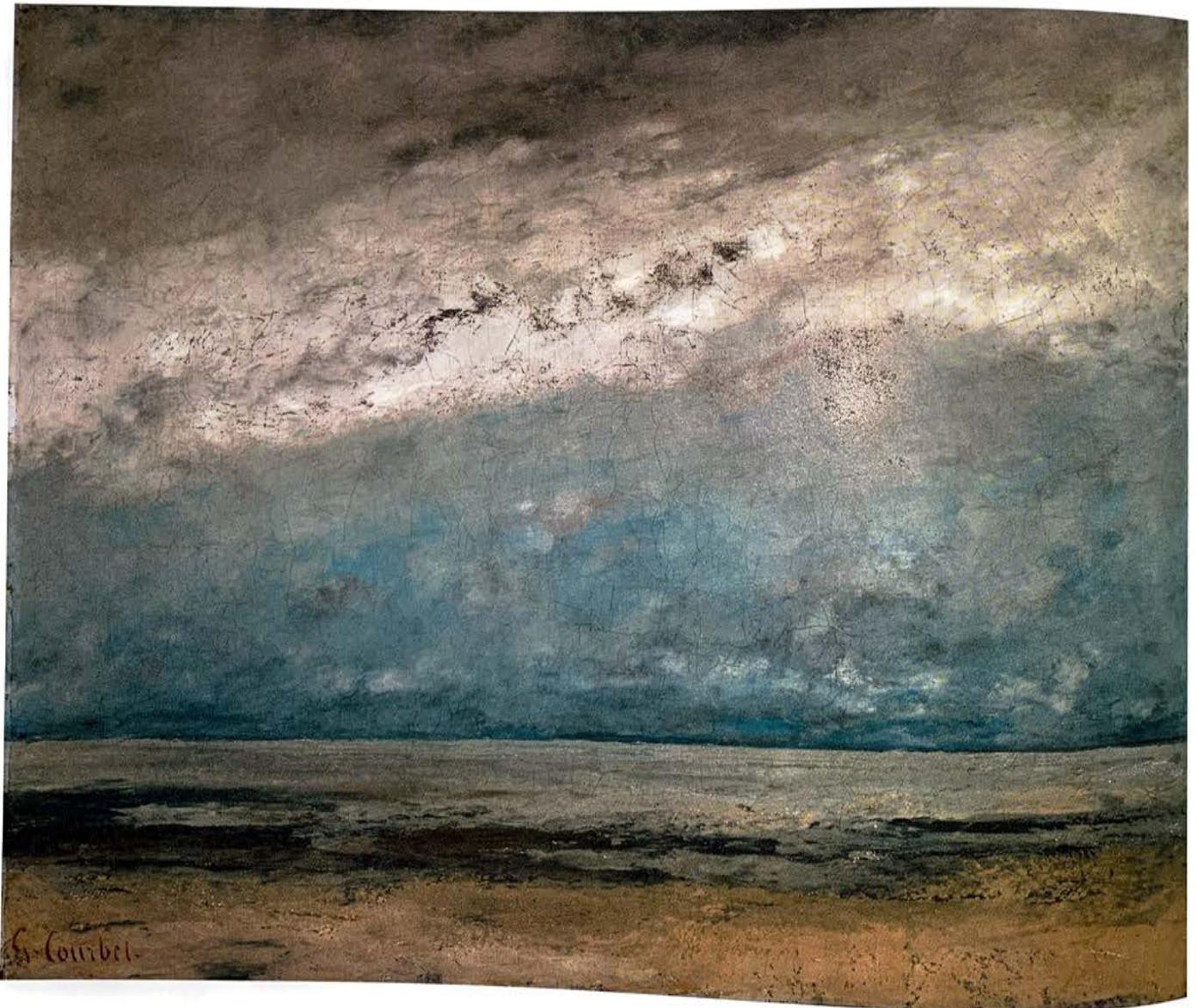
Just as Courbet's nude model functions as a cipher of artistic volition, so too does the landscape and "real sky," in Delacroix's words, function as an anchor for painterly autonomy. For the Realist, landscape—especially the type of rugged and inaccessible woodlands represented on the artist's easel—constituted the dream space of personal freedom, and the idealized locus, as the art historian Klaus Herding described it, of social reconciliation. In

landscape painting after landscape painting, from the *Château d'Ornans* (1850) to *The Beach* (1865) to the *Panoramic View of the Alps, Les Dents du Midi* (1877),¹²⁴¹²⁵ 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

11.24 Gustave

Courbet *The Beach*,
1865. Oil on canvas,
21¼ × 25¼" (53.5 × 64)





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 interpretations of the painting bear out the artist’s words, but it may be that Courbet himself supplied the painting’s best gloss in its title.

11.25 Gustave Courbet *Panoramic View of the Alps, Les Dents du Midi*, 1877. Oil on canvas, 59½ × 82¾" (151 × 210)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was the significance of 1848 in history and in art? Name one French and one English artist who represented the ethos and attitudes of “48.”
2. Who were the Pre-Raphaelites? What was their most important achievement? And why was the movement so short-lived?
3. To what audience (or audiences) did Courbet direct his trilogy of paintings of 1849–50? Did he reach them? How do we know? What was he trying to convey?
4. Based upon the historical use of the term, define Realism in art.