39 On the Social History of Art

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> Art – in other words the search for the beautiful and the perfecting of truth, in his own person, in his wife and children, in his ideas, in what he says, does and produces – such is the final evolution of the worker, the phase which is destined to bring the Circle of Nature to a glorious close. Aesthetics and above Aesthetics, Morality, these are the keystones of the economic edifice.
> (A passage copied by Baudelaire in 1848 from Proudhon's *Système des contradictions économiques ou Philosophie de la misère* (1846).)

> In our oh-so-civilized society it is necessary for me to lead the life of a savage; I must free myself even from governments. My sympathies are with the people, I must speak to them directly, take my science from them, and they must provide me with a living. To do that, I have just set out on the great, independent, vagabond life of the Bohemian.
> (Courbet, letter of 1850 to Francis Wey.)

> To glorify the worship of images (my great, my only, my primitive passion).
> To glorify vagabondage and what one might call Bohemianism, the cult of multiplied sensation, expressing itself through music. Refer here to Liszt.
> (Baudelaire, *Mon cœur mis à nu*.)

> M. Courbet is the Proudhon of painting. M. Proudhon – M. Courbet, I should say – does democratic and social painting – God knows at what cost.
> (The critic L. Enault, reviewing the 1851 Salon in the *Chronique de Paris*.)

> Pen in hand, he wasn't a bad fellow; but he was not, and could never have been, even on paper, a *dandy*; and for that I shall never forgive him.
> (Baudelaire on Proudhon, letter of 2 January 1866 to Sainte-Beuve.)

These statements conjure up an unfamiliar time, a time when art and politics could not escape each other. For a while, in the mid-nineteenth century, the State, the public and the critics agreed that art had a political sense and intention. And painting was encouraged, repressed, hated and feared on that assumption.

Artists were well aware of the fact. Some, like Courbet and Daumier, exploited and even enjoyed this state of affairs; some, following Théophile Gautier, withdrew inside the notion of *l'Art pour l'Art*, a myth designed to counter the insistent politicization of art. Others, like Millet, accepted the situation with a wry smile – in a letter of 1853 he wondered whether the socks which one of his peasant girls was darning would be taken, by the Government, as giving off too much of a 'popular odour'.

This book sets out to explore this specific moment in French art; to discover the actual, complex links which bind together art and politics in this period; to explain, for example, the strange transitions in the five opening sayings. To call a worker an artist; to call a painting 'democratic and social'; to condemn an anarchist because he failed to be a dandy – these are, to say the least, unfamiliar manœuvres. What kind of an age was it when Baudelaire took notes from Proudhon and three years later

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dismissed *l'Art pour l'Art* as a 'puerile utopia', saying that art was 'hitherto inseparable from morality and utility'? Why did Courbet believe that art for the people was bound up with a Bohemian life-style? What was it about the *Burial at Ornans* that moved M. Enault to such anger? Such an age needs explaining, perhaps even defending.

It is not simply that the terms are out of fashion (or back in fashion, with a difference). It is the bizarre *certainty* of the arguments; it is the way they suggest an alien situation for art, an alien power. Power – no word could be more inappropriate, more absurd, now, when we talk of art. Which is if anything the reason for this book: it tries to reconstruct the conditions in which art was, for a time, a disputed, even an effective, part of the historical process.

When one writes the social history of art, it is easier to define what methods to avoid than propose a set of methods for systematic use, like a carpenter presenting his bag of tools, or a philosopher his premises. So I begin by naming some taboos. I am not interested in the notion of works of art 'reflecting' ideologies, social relations, or history. Equally, I do not want to talk about history as 'background' to the work of art – as something which is essentially absent from the work of art and its production, but which occasionally puts in an appearance. (The intrusion of history discovered, it seems, by 'common sense': there is a special category of historical references which can be identified in this way.) I want also to reject the idea that the artist's point of reference as a social being is, *a priori*, the artistic community. On this view, history is transmitted to the artist by some fixed route, through some invariable system of mediations: the artist responds to the values and ideas of the artistic community (in our period that means, for the best artists, the ideology of the *avant-garde*), which in turn are altered by changes in the general values and ideas of society, which in turn are determined by historical conditions. For example, Courbet is influenced by Realism which is influenced by Positivism which is the product of Capitalist Materialism. One can sprinkle as much detail on the nouns in that sentence as one likes; it is the verbs which are the matter.

Lastly, I do not want the social history of art to depend on intuitive analogies between form and ideological content – on saying, for example, that the lack of firm compositional focus in Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* is an expression of the painter's egalitarianism, or that Manet's fragmented composition in the extraordinary *View of the Paris World's Fair (1867)* is a visual equivalent of human alienation in industrial society.

Of course analogies between form and content cannot be avoided altogether – for a start, the language of formal analysis itself is full of them. The very word 'composition', let alone formal 'organization', is a concept which includes aspects of form *and* content, and suggests in itself certain kinds of relation between them – all the more persuasively because it never states them out loud. For that reason it is actually a strength of social art history that it makes its analogies specific and overt: however crude the equations I mentioned, they represent some kind of advance on the language of formal analysis, just because they make their prejudices clear. Flirting with hidden analogies is worse than working openly with inelegant ones, precisely because the latter can be criticized directly. In any discourse analogies are useful and treacherous at the same time; they open up the field of study, but may simply have deformed it; they are a kind of hypothesis that must be tested against

other evidence. This is as true of art history as any other discipline. Faced with the strange and disturbing construction of the *Burial at Ornans*, it would be sheer cowardice not to give some account of the meaning of that construction; but I shall try to keep that account in contact and conflict with other kinds of historical explanation.

The question is: what in this subject can be studied, once these various comforting structures are set aside? Must we retreat at once to a radically restricted, empirical notion of the social history of art, and focus our attention on the immediate conditions of artistic production and reception: patronage, sales, criticism, public opinion? Clearly these are the important fields of study: they are the concrete means of access to the subject; time and again they are what we start from. But, to put it briefly, the study of any one 'factor' in artistic production leads us very swiftly back to the general problems we hoped to avoid. The study of patronage and sales in the nineteenth century cannot even be conducted without some general theory – admitted or repressed – of the structure of a capitalist economy. Imagine a study of the critical reaction to Courbet which had no notion of the function of art criticism in nineteenth-century Paris, no theory of the critics' own social situation, their commitments, their equivocal relation – half contemptuous, half servile – to the mass public of the Salons. Perhaps I should have said remember, not imagine: the kind of haphazard collage which results, the dreary mixture of 'absurd' and 'sensitive' remarks, is all too familiar to art historians.

Not that I want to ignore the critics and the texture of what they wrote: on the contrary. No less than forty-five writers had their say about Courbet in the Salon of 1851, and that mass of words is crucial evidence for us. It makes up a complex dialogue – between artist and critic, between critic and critic, between critic and public (sometimes that public makes an appearance, in imaginary form, within the criticism itself; for the most part it is an implied presence, a shadow, an occlusion; it is what critic and artist, in their civilized and hypocritical discourse, agree to leave out – but without success). In that weird, monotonous chorus, what matters is the structure of the whole, and the whole as a structure hiding and revealing the relation of the artist to his public. For our purposes, the public is different from the audience: the latter can be examined empirically, and should be. The more we know about the audience – about the social classes of Paris, the consumption habits of the bourgeoisie, how many people went to exhibitions – the more we shall understand that curious transformation in which it is given form, imagined, by the critic and by the artist himself.

As for the public, we could make an analogy with Freudian theory. The unconscious is nothing but its conscious representations, its closure in the faults, silences and caesuras of normal discourse. In the same way, the public is nothing but the *private* representations that are made of it, in this case in the discourse of the critic. Like the analyst listening to his patient, what interests us, if we want to discover the meaning of this mass of criticism, are the points at which the rational monotone of the critic breaks, fails, falters; we are interested in the phenomena of obsessive repetition, repeated irrelevance, anger suddenly discharged – the points where the criticism is incomprehensible are the keys to its comprehension. The public, like the unconscious, is present only where it ceases; yet it determines the structure of private discourse; it is the key to what cannot be said, and no subject is more important.

These are, I think, the only adequate attitudes to patronage and criticism in this period. And they lead us back to the terrain of those earlier theories I rejected – that is, the complex relation of the artist to the total historical situation, and in particular to the traditions of representation available to him. Even if one distrusts the notions of reflection, of historical background, of analogy between artistic form and social ideology, one cannot avoid the problems they suggest.

What I want to explain are the connecting links between artistic form, the available systems of visual representation, the current theories of art, other ideologies, social classes, and more general historical structures and processes. What the discarded theories share is the notion that all artists experience, answer and give form to their environment in roughly the same way – via the usual channels, one might say. That may be a convenient assumption, but it is certainly wrong. If the social history of art has a specific field of study, it is exactly this – the processes of conversion and relation, which so much art history takes for granted. I want to discover what concrete transactions are hidden behind the mechanical image of 'reflection', to know *how* 'background' becomes 'foreground'; instead of analogy between form and content, to discover the network of real, complex relations between the two. These mediations are themselves historically formed and historically altered; in the case of each artist, each work of art, they are historically specific.

What is barren about the methods that I am criticizing is their picture of history as a definite absence from the act of artistic creation: a support, a determination, a background, something never actually *there* when the painter stands in front of the canvas, the sculptor asks his model to stand still. There is a mixture of truth and absurdity here. It is true and important that there is a gap between the artist's social experience and his activity of formal representation. Art is autonomous in relation to other historical events and processes, though the grounds of that autonomy alter. It is true that experience of any kind is given form and acquires meaning – in thought, language, line, colour – through structures which we do not choose freely, which are to an extent imposed upon us. Like it or not, for the artist those structures are specifically aesthetic – as Courbet put it in his 1855 Manifesto, the artistic tradition is the very material of individual expression. 'To know in order to be able to do, that was my idea'; '*Savoir pour pouvoir, telle fut ma pensée*.' Nevertheless, there is a difference between the artist's contact with aesthetic *tradition* and his contact with the artistic world and its aesthetic *ideologies*. Without the first contact there is no art; but when the second contact is deliberately attenuated or bypassed, there is often art at its greatest.

The point is this: the encounter with history and its specific determinations is made by the artist himself. The social history of art sets out to discover the general nature of the structures that he encounters willy-nilly; but it also wants to locate the specific conditions of one such meeting. How, in a particular case, a content of experience becomes a form, an event becomes an image, boredom becomes its representation, despair becomes *spleen*: these are the problems. And they lead us back to the idea that art is sometimes historically effective. The making of a work of art is one historical process among other acts, events and structures – it is a series of actions in but also on history. It may become intelligible only within the context of given and imposed structures of meaning; but in its turn it can alter and at times

disrupt these structures. A work of art may have ideology (in other words, those ideas, images and values which are generally accepted, dominant) as its material, but it *works* that material; it gives it a new form and at certain moments that new form is in itself a subversion of ideology. Something like that happened in the Salon of 1851.

I have been arguing for a history of mediations, for an account of their change and ambiguity. What this means in practice may become clearer if I tie it down to some familiar problems of art history. Take, for example, the artist's relation to the artistic world and its shared ideologies. In its usual form this is a question of the artist's membership of one particular 'school' – in particular whether or not he was one of the *avant-garde*. Clearly we want to know how the *avant-garde* was formed, but we equally want to know what it was *for*; in both cases what we need is a sense that the category itself is fundamentally unstable, illusory. To write a history of the *avant-garde* simply in terms of personnel, recruitment, fashion: nothing could be more misguided. It ignores the essential – that the concept of *avant-garde* is itself profoundly ideological; that the aim of the *avant-garde* was to snatch a transitory and essentially false identity from the unity of the Parisian artistic world. It is the unity that is fundamental, not the factions.

The more we look at the artistic world in Paris, the more its schools and dogmas seem an artifice; what really mattered was the ease of transition from attitude to attitude, style to style, posture to imposture. Balzac was the great exponent of such transformations; below him (below his real, hard-won inclusiveness) lesser men traded allegiances, played at metamorphosis for a living. Gautier, the refined Parnassian poet and the agile, time-serving critic, could write a poem to the mummified hand of the poet-murderer Lacenaire (which Maxime du Camp kept in a jar), or could dash off a set of pornographic letters to Madame Sabatier. The same Madame Sabatier, queen of the literary salons in the early 1850s, was portrayed at one time or another by Flaubert, Gautier (in his official role), Clésinger, Baudelaire, even Meissonier. A minor figure like the novelist Duranty could combine aggressive Realism with a projected biography of Baudelaire; Baudelaire himself was reconciled with his Catholic critic Veuillot. These are random examples; the list could go on indefinitely.

In such a world, being *avant-garde* was just an institutionalized variant of everyone's gambit. It was a kind of initiation rite – a trek out into the bush for a while, then a return to privileged status within the world you had left. It was a finishing-school, an unabashed form of social climbing. When we look at Champfleury, Courbet's mentor and parasite, we see that process to perfection.

In this light the real history of the *avant-garde* is the history of those who bypassed, ignored and rejected it; a history of secrecy and isolation; a history of escape from the *avant-garde* and even from Paris itself. The hero of that history is Rimbaud, but it makes sense of many others in the nineteenth century: Stendhal, Géricault, Lautréamont, Van Gogh, Cézanne. It applies precisely, I think, to four of the greatest artists of the mid-nineteenth century: Millet, Daumier, Courbet and Baudelaire. [. . .] Each of them had truck with the *avant-garde* and its ideas; each of them was part of it at certain moments or in certain moods; but in each case the relationship is shifting and ambiguous, a problem rather than a 'given'. We shall not solve the problem by counting heads known, ideas shared, salons visited. Count these by all means, but also measure the distance these men established from Paris

and its coteries. We need to search for the conditions of this distance: the reasons for rejection and escape as much as the continuing dependence on the world of art and its values. We need also to distinguish *avant-garde* from Bohemia: they fought, for a start, on different sides of the barricades in June: the Bohemians with the insurrection, and the *avant-garde*, of course, with the forces of order. We need to unearth the real Bohemia from the *avant-garde's* fantasy of it; to rescue Bohemia from Murger's *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème*. These are distinctions with some relevance to the present.

This brings us back to the problem of artist and public. I want to put back ambiguity into that relation: to stop thinking in terms of the public as an identifiable 'thing' whose needs the artist notes, satisfies or rejects. The public is a prescience or a phantasy within the work and within the process of its production. It is something the artist himself invents, in his solitude – though often in spite of himself, and never quite as he would wish. [. . .]

For the artist, inventing, affronting, satisfying, defying his public is an integral part of the act of creation. We can go further – we need to, if we are to understand the strength of mid nineteenth-century art and the desperation of what followed. It is when one of those stances towards the public becomes an autonomous or over-riding consideration (on the one hand, *épater le bourgeois*, on the other, producing specifically for the market), or when the public becomes either too fixed and concrete a presence or too abstract and unreal a concept, that a radical sickness of art begins.

All this is vital because Courbet was an artist for whom the public was very much present, richly, ambiguously defined: subject-matter and spectator, the mainspring of his art. I am talking here of Courbet in his thirties, from 1848 to 1856, the great period of his painting. His decline after 1856 had a lot to do with the disappearance of that public.

Finally, there is the old familiar question of art history. What use did the artist make of pictorial tradition; what forms, what schemata, enabled the painter to see and to depict? It is often seen as the only question. It is certainly a crucial one, but when one writes the social history of art one is bound to see it in a different light; one is concerned with what prevents representation as much as what allows it; one studies blindness as much as vision. [. . .]

When the blindness is breached by extreme circumstances the result is pathos. Listen to Tocqueville, suddenly confronted, when the National Assembly was invaded by the clubs on 15 May 1848, with the arch-revolutionary Louis-Auguste Blanqui:

> It was then I saw appear, in his turn at the rostrum, a man whom I never saw save on that day, but whose memory has always filled me with disgust and horror. His cheeks were pale and faded, his lips white; he looked ill, evil, foul, with a dirty pallor and the appearance of a mouldering corpse; no linen as far as one could see, an old black frock-coat thrown about spindly and emaciated limbs; he might have lived in a sewer and have just emerged from it. I was told that this was Blanqui.

It is not merely that this description of Blanqui is untrue – though we have only to put Tocqueville's paragraph against the drawing by David d'Angers (done eight years earlier) to show that. It is more that we are confronted with prejudice which

clearly believes itself to be description: before our eyes depiction changes into ideology. [. . .]

So the problem of schema and pictorial tradition is rather altered. The question becomes: in order to see certain things, what should we believe about them? What enables an artist to make effective use of a certain schema or the formal language of a certain artist of the past? There is nothing unchanging or automatic about this. To take one example, it became quite fashionable in certain circles after 1848 to admire the art of the seventeenth-century brothers Le Nain. Several critics praised them; several artists attempted to imitate them. But your Le Nains and my Le Nains? Courbet's Le Nains and Champfleury's? Worlds apart, we shall discover – indeed, what Champfleury half-laughingly called their weaknesses, Courbet went ahead aud used. What we want to know are the reasons for that difference; and we shan't find them by adding up 'influences'.

The same thing applies to popular imagery. When Courbet said, in his 1850 letter to Francis Wey, that he wanted to draw his science from the people, he meant, among other things, pictorial science. All his circle of friends and admirers were interested in popular art; but how many put it to use instead of collecting it? How many realized that they needed its forms and structures if, 'below a certain social plane', they were to see at all? Courbet did; his friend Buchon knew it but could not act upon it; I doubt if Champfleury, the great propagandist for popular imagery, really understood the point. So here too one must integrate the separate art-historical problem into a wider account; one must ask, ultimately, what kind of 'visibility' a certain symbolic system made possible; and in what specific circumstances one artist could take advantage of this, and another fail to. To answer merely in terms of artistic competence is just begging the question.

There is thus a general question which cannot be avoided, though the means of access to it must be particular: whether we can discover in the complex and specific material of a single artist's historical situation and experience the foundation of his unique subject-matter and 'style'.

Let us take the case of Courbet. It is fairly easy to list the various factors to be taken into account when we talk about his art: his situation in rural society and his experience of changes within it; the various representations – verbal and visual – of rural society available to him; the social structure of Paris in the 1840s; the iconography of Bohemia and his use of it; the nature and function of his notorious life-style in the city; the artistic ideas of the period; the aspects of artistic tradition which interested him. We shall have to give flesh to these bare categories of experience; but the list itself, however elaborate, stays this side of explanation. The real problem is to describe the specific constellation of these factors in 1849–1851, and what determined that constellation. In other words, what made Courbet's art distinctive, effective, at a certain moment?

To answer that, we shall have to go far afield, from painting to politics, from a judgment of colour to more general concerns – concerns which touch the State, which move anger and delight because they are the concerns of many. But we shall discover these politics in the particular, in the event, in the work of art. Our starting point is a certain moment of historical coalescence – a gesture, or a painting, which is supercharged with historical meaning, round which significance clusters. The *Burial at Ornans*, the *Stonebreakers* and the *Peasants of Flagey* are paintings like this –

the more we look and enquire, the more facets of social reality they seem to touch and animate.

Take one small but significant gesture to illustrate the point. In May 1850, in Salins in the Jura, a religious procession took place. The *Procureur général*, the political prosecutor of the regime, reported on the matter to the Minister in Paris:

> The situation in the town of Salins, the most degenerate of all the Jura towns, shows signs of improving. The processions for Corpus Christi day were very colourful and went off in a very orderly way; a special procession, ordered in this town by the Bishop of Saint-Claude, *to atone for Proudhon's blasphemies*, did not give rise to any disturbances, even minor ones. We were extremely surprised to see citizen Max Buchon taking part in this procession, candle in hand, and in a state of perfect composure; he is one of the leaders of the Socialist party, a professed advocate of the doctrine of Proudhon, and apparently his intimate friend. Did his presence at this ceremony indicate, as many have supposed, sincere contrition? I see it rather as one of those eccentricities which we have long since been led to expect from this man, who loves above all to strike a pose and make himself a talking-point.

Max Buchon cracks a joke: one which typifies the time. Jokes resemble art, certain Freudians have suggested, in their treatment of unconscious material; perhaps in their treatment of historical material too. Buchon's joke plays on his audience's doubts about history; he puts the unexpected in contact, confuses codes; instead of an argument he uses an act and its ambiguity. In this particular case, the tactic was advisable – it was difficult, even in 1850, to send a man to jail for a joke you did not quite understand, and Buchon wanted to avoid jail (he had been acquitted of revolutionary conspiracy four months earlier at the Jura assizes).

As with the pictures, I shall later have to explain the point of the joke and its material, spoiling it in the process. We shall have to know more about Buchon himself, Courbet's oldest friend, poet and translator, dedicated revolutionary. More also about Salins and the strange politics of 1850; about the radical confusion of religion and politics after 1848; about the nature of this kind of public irony, the whiff of the dandy and Baudelaire in the whole performance (if Proudhon was no dandy, some of his followers were). Knowing about Buchon and Salins (a twenty-five-mile walk from Ornans, and Courbet's point of political reference) will eveutually lead us back to the *Burial at Ornans*, the beadles' red noses and Buchon's place in that particular religious procession (he lurks in the background, sixth from the left).

From a wisecrack to a masterpiece; but in both cases it is what is done to the historical material that counts. Joke and picture play with different contexts of meaning in order to constitute an individuality. Discover the codes by all means. Investigate burials, religion, Salins and Ornans; describe the political temper of the Jura, the social significance of a frock-coat and spats. But remember also that Buchon and Courbet juggle with meanings, switch codes, lay false trails and make *one* thing, not many. (A quick pun, not an immense shaggy dog story.) Look at the process of transformation – call it work, call it play – as well as what the work is done to.

Striking that balance is sometimes difficult, especially in the social history of art. Just because it invites us to more contexts than usual – to a material denser than the great tradition – it may lead us far from the 'work itself'. But the work itself may appear in curious, unexpected places; and, once disclosed in a new location, the work may never look the same again.

I have been saying that there can be no art history apart from other kinds of history. But let us restrict ourselves in a rough and ready way to art history 'proper'. Even within the discipline – perhaps especially here, just because its limits are so artificial – there is a problem of choice of perspectives.

So far, nineteenth-century art history has usually been studied under two headings: the history of an heroic *avant-garde*, and the movement away from literary and historical subject-matter towards an art of pure sensation. But what a bore these two histories have become! It is not that they are false in any simple sense – just that they are no more than fragments of the story. And one cannot help feeling that what they miss is precisely the essential. Try to understand, for example, the careers of Cézanne and Van Gogh with their aid! We shall retrieve the meaning of these concepts only if we demote them, uncover the *avant-garde* only if we criticize it, see the point of an art of pure sensation only if we put back the terror into the whole project. In other words, explain Mallarmé's words to Villiers de l'Isle-Adam: 'You will be terrified to learn that I have arrived at the idea of the Universe by sensation alone (and that, for example, to keep firm hold of the notion of pure Nothingness I had to impose on my brain the sensation of the absolute void).' Which leads us straight to Hegel and other disagreeable topics.

What we need, and what a study of any one period or problem in detail suggests, is a multiplicity of perspectives. Let me name a few, more or less in note form.

First, the dominance of classicism in nineteenth-century art – not just the continuing power of academic classicism in the Salon, but the bias of French art towards an introspective, fantastic, deeply literary painting and sculpture which drew on antique form and subject-matter. An art history which sees Chassériau, Moreau, Gérôme, Rodin, Puvis and Maurice Denis as marginal episodes, rather than the most vivid representatives of a vigorous, enduring tradition – that art history will not do. Precisely because it fails to account for the ambivalence of artists whom we call *avant-garde*: the classicism of Corot, of Daumier, of Millet, Degas, Seurat. Realism is an episode against the grain of French art; aud therefore its forms have to be extreme, explosive. Hence Courbet's Realism; hence Cubist realism which looked back to Courbet as its extremist founding father; hence, finally, Dada. And hence also the neo-classical reaction against all three.

Second, the progress of individualism in French art – which is something different from the movement towards an art of absolute sensation. It was a doctrine with confusing implications for the arts. Moreau and Rodin thought it meant the reworking of classical form and content. Courbet thought it meant immersion in the physical world, a rediscovery of the self the other side of matter (in this he was the carrier of his friends' Hegelianism). Gautier and the classicists thought it an unworthy ideal. Individualism was the platitude of the age, contradictory, inflated, often absurd; yet somehow or other the idea that art was nothing if not the expression of an individuality, and that its disciplines were all means to this ambiguous end, survived. The Realist movement was shot through with this dogma; why it persisted, and what in practical terms it prescribed, is a central nineteenth-century problem.

Third, whether to sanctify the newly dominant classes or to look for a means to subvert their power. Whether to address your respectful, ironic preface *Aux Bourgeois*; or to climb the barricades, hands black with powder, to dispute their rule. Baudelaire tried both solutions in the space of two years, and then gradually retreated into an icy disdain: 'What does it matter whether the bourgeoisie keeps or

loses an illusion?', as he commented in 1859. But it continued to matter for artists; they continued to wonder whether bourgeois existence was heroic, or degraded, or somehow conveniently both. They did so because it was a doubt that touched their own identity. Was one to be, as in Renoir's *Portrait of Alfred Sisley and his Wife*, the artist as bourgeois; or was one to be, in fact or dream, in a thousand evasive self-portraits, the artist as outcast? Or, perhaps, the artist as opponent – Courbet's intention, which also persisted. (In the 1880s and 1890s art and anarchism renewed their contact.)

Fourth, the problem of popular art, which is part of this wider crisis of confidence. In its most acute form – in Courbet, in Manet, in Seurat – the problem was whether to exploit popular forms and iconography to reanimate the culture of the dominant classes, or attempt some kind of provocative fusion of the two, and in so doing destroy the dominance of the latter. On its own, a Utopian project. But one which haunted French art, from Géricault's London lithographs to Van Gogh's Arlesian portraits. Hence, once again, the connection of art with political action.

Fifth and last, the withering-away of art. In a century which 'liberated the forms of creation from art' – the century of the photograph, the Eiffel Tower, the Commune – iconoclasm is not incidental. No theme is more insistent; it is, necessarily, part of the century's Realism: Iconoclasm and *l'Art pour l'Art* are different responses to the same unease. When Proudhon wrote in *Philosophie du progrès* in November 1851, 'For our own most rapid regeneration, I should like to see the museums, cathedrals, palaces, salons, boudoirs, with all their furniture, ancient and modern, thrown to the flames – and artists forbidden to practise their art for fifty years. Once the past was forgotten, we would do something', he was, surprisingly, addressing himself to the same problem that exercised Gautier. His bluster is only the other side of Gautier's irony ('You think me cold and do not see that I am imposing on myself an artificial calm,' as Baudelaire put it later).

Somewhere between irony and bluster lie Courbet's attitudes, or Baudelaire's conviction in 1851 that 'art *had to be* inseparable from . . . utility'. In Baudelaire's case that belief lasted three or four years at the most; afterwards came blackness, despair, the first poetry to celebrate 'the theatrical and joyless futility of everything' (Jacques Vaché). If art was useless, so was life; and that was not an idiosyncratic conclusion. It leads us to Mallarmé's 'horrible vision of a work that is pure' (*'vision horrible d'une œuvre pure'*), to Tzara's 'Rhymes ring with the assonance of the currencies, and the inflexion slips along the line of the belly in profile', and to Miró's 'murder of painting'.

The inheritor of Baudelaire's short-lived belief is Surrealism: in Breton's words, 'We have nothing to do with literature, but we are quite capable, when the need arises, of making use of it like everyone else'. Though by then the implications of that belief were clearer: to quote the Surrealist Declaration of 1925, 'We are not utopians: we conceive of this Revolution only in its social form.'

When Proudhon talked in *Du principe de l'art* of creative activity entering the world and taking it as its material, to be altered directly and not just on canvas, he echoed Hegel but presaged the moderns. Malevich said, 'Let us seize the world from the hands of nature and build a new world belonging to man himself.' And Mondrian: 'One day the time will come when we shall be able to do without all the arts, as we know them now; beauty will have ripened into palpable reality. Humanity will not lose much by missing art.'