RHETORICS OF REALIST ART AND POLITICS

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

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

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

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

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

Millais dispensed with Classical costume and architecture as well as with High Renaissance grace and timelessness in Christ in the House of His Parents (180). The genre scene of
the boy-Christ and his working-class family instead enshrines matter-of-factness, physical labor, and the unidealized body. Derived from his observation of a carpenter’s shop on Oxford Street in London, Millais’s interior is filled with accurate details of metier-tools and wood shavings—connoting the human and spiritual worth of sweat and handcraft.

By contrast with Millais’s Christ, the interior of Hunt’s The Awakening Conscience (1853) is filled with all manner of Victorian gewgaws and bric-a-brac. The picture records the moment when a young woman, “with a startled holy resolve,” in the painter’s words, determines to escape her sinful, fallen life. Like the woman and man themselves, the drawing-room has a physiognomy that tells a story which is, as Ruskin wrote, “common, modern, vulgar . . . tragical.” Furniture, rugs, curtains, tapestry, book, clock, and picture all possess a “terrible lustre” and “fatal newness” which bespeak, in Ruskin’s words, “the moral evil of the age in which it is painted.” As with Couture’s Romans of the Decadence, Hunt’s Awakening Conscience argues that the issue of moral and material degeneracy is inseparable from “the woman question,” but whereas the one depicts a female as the heedless agent of modern society’s corruption, the other sees her as its guileless victim.
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Indeed, amid the extraordinary welter of persons, anec-
dotes, and details, "not the smallest [of which] has been
considered unworthy of thought and deep study" (as the
artist's granddaughter noted), the presence of Carlyle is
especially significant. In his Past and Present (1843), Carlyle
condemned the loss of affective human bonds in contemporary
British society, and their replacement by a cold and impersonal "cash-payment nexus." The solution to the
present crisis, he believed, lay in leadership by an aristocracy of talent, and in the cleansing power of hard work. Physical
labor, he wrote: "[is like] . . . a free-flowing channel, dug and
torn by noble force ... draining off the sour, festering water ...
making instead of a pestilent swamp, a green fruitful
meadow." In Work, Brown made the Carlyle metaphor
concrete and real. His navvies are laying pipe, as the art
historian Gerard Curtis has discussed, to provide fresh water
to replace the fetid streams that turned working-class
eighborhoods into filthy- and pestilential slums. Hard work,
Brown and Carlyle believed, is essential to human health and
human nature itself; it ennobles people and cleanses their very
them, and ensla-c than to t...
and Auguste Blanqui) felt compelled as never before "to face with sober senses [the] real conditions of life and [man's] relations with his kind." Many now believed that, regardless of the immediate outcome of the insurrection, a new stage in European evolution had been reached in which working people—pressed by circumstance to forge alliances and form opinions of their own—were on the point of overturning or transforming not just single policies, ministries, or even governments, but society itself. On this point there was a strange unanimity between right and left, and between sober politicians and wisecracking artist journalists: writing in the tense interregnum between February and June 1848, the right-leaning de Tocqueville exclaimed that he saw "society cut into two: those who possessed nothing united in a common greed; those who possessed something in common terror." At the same time, the left-wing Daumier depicted a conversation between a peasant and his local mayor in *Le Charivari* (May 5, 1848): "Tell me, what is a communist?" They are people who want to keep money in common, work in common and land in common. 'That's fine, but how can it happen if they have no common sense?"

Of the existence of a dominant rhetorical timbre to the French art and literature of mid-century, there can be little doubt. Octave Tassaert, and Isidore Pils shared a perception of social dislocation, alienation from the Classical past, and concern or joy about a pending revolution. The Realist Daumier, who lived at this time in the midst of the working-class 9th Arrondissement of Paris, described and depicted in his paintings and caricatures, contemporary urban street life and leisure, and the domestic hardships and joys of working people. The Realist Millet, who left Paris in 1849 for the peaceful rural village of Barbizon, represented in *The Gleaners* and *The Sower (1850)* the virtue of agricultural labor and the biblical nobility of rural poverty. Both artists are Realists by virtue of their common focus upon contemporary working-class life and urban and rural conflict. Yet the very commonality of this rhetoric of Realism should serve as a warning that we are in the presence of an ideology whose function was to obscure as much as it was to reveal "the content beyond the phrase" of 1848. Indeed, by 1855 the dictator Louis Napoleon had succeeded in establishing a conservative school of official realism—including Pils, Tassaert, Jules Breton, Rosa Bonheur, Theodule 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 etre de son temps;* all more or less agreed with the novelist, critic, folklorist, and political chameleon Champfleury (Jules Husson) that art must represent the everyday life of common people. Rather, the issue concerns the actual position and function of Realist works within the mode and relations of production of their time. "This question," Walter Benjamin writes, "is concerned, in other words, directly with the [artistic] technique of works." Thus the argument made below will be that the innovative technique of Gustave Courbet more than any other artist of the day-propelled political change by challenging the existing institutional relationship between art and the public. Like Jacques-Louis David before him, Courbet employed a technique alien to the established traditions and audiences for art. For the Enlightenment David, this alienation arose from his rejection of Rococo and aristocratic bon ton, and his embrace of Neoclassical and bourgeois noblesse. For the Realist Courbet, this alienation entailed a rejection of academic and bourgeois juste milieu, and an espousal of the formal principles found in nonclassical and working-class
popular art. By this means, Courbet attempted to turn formerly neglected peasant and proletarian Salon spectators into artistic collaborators, thereby potentially ennobling and empowering them at the expense of their putative betters. In the course of the decade following 1848, Courbet enacted an interventionist cultural role that has since been defined as avant-garde. Avant-garde art, I shall argue at the end of this chapter, is exceptional in the nineteenth century, and exceptionally fragile. By the end of Courbet’s life, it had mutated into a nearly quietist modernism.

COURBET’S TRILOGY OF 1849-50

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