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AMBITION, COMMITMENT, AND SUBVERSION IN COURBET'S REALISM

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Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, *The Most Arrogant Man in France: Gustave Courbet and the Nineteenth-Century Media Culture* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007)

Linda Nochlin, *Courbet* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2007)

Gustave Courbet intrigues students of art and culture for many reasons. The most gifted and celebrated French artist of his generation (younger than Delacroix and Ingres but older than Manet and the Impressionists), he was bound up with the life of his time in manifold ways, as a chief exemplar of mid-nineteenth-century realism, an artist with many ties to politics, a fierce individualist who also declared himself a democrat and socialist, and a pioneer in seeking recognition not through old-style patronage but with a direct approach to viewers through market relations. Two recent books, both by art historians who have long devoted themselves to him, provide a basis for considering some of the issues his case raises. Petra ten-Doesschate Chu's book is the more original in the sense that it develops an argument its author has not presented extensively before, but Linda Nochlin's collection of her articles and essays (all save one and a portion of another previously published) is the more ambitious, both in the significance it seeks to find in its subject and in the way it draws attention to its author. Both have admirable virtues and unnerving weaknesses.

Chu approaches Courbet by way of his frank and extensive involvement in publicity and its chief vehicle in his time, the newly expanded newspaper press. From the mid-1830s French publishers adopted strategies to raise the circulation of their papers, increasing both readership and income by sharply reducing subscription prices. They more than made up for the lost revenue through the ballooning number of readers (attracted both by the lower cost and by the stories and serial novels published as *feuilletons*) and the higher volume of advertising it drew in. The papers were read, as Chu notes (13), by "a male and female public that ranged form the wealthy bourgeoisie to the literate upper

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level of the working class," providing the material for a new kind of popular culture. Observers quickly recognized the opportunities this situation opened up for a more direct relationship between artists and writers and their audience, but also the danger that painting and literature would abandon their high vocation in order to serve the whims and cravings of popular taste. Courbet, moved at once by a burning determination to succeed and a fierce disdain for the academic traditionalism that dominated French painting, attached himself quickly and closely to the new world of journalism, using his contacts with writers and critics to keep his name before the public. He called attention to himself through work that shocked viewers on grounds of both style and content, and through a public image—at once spontaneous and cultivated—as an explosive, unbuttoned, beery challenger of convention and propriety, self-centered and proud, yet altruistic and pure by virtue of his devotion to social reform and to justice for the poor and weak. He was among the first to grasp that marginality and radicalism could serve as advertisements for artists in an age uncertain about how to draw the balance between its devotion to progress and the heightened need for stability engendered by rapid political and social change.

Chu is not the first to recognize how central Courbet's devotion to publicity was in his career, but she fills out the picture by relating it to his series of self-portraits, his representations of famous people in his time (linking him to some with whom he had only a tenuous relationship, such as Berlioz), his devotion to irony, his extensive work as a painter of landscapes (whose connection to subjects of more directly contemporary import, such as *The Stone Breakers* and *A Burial at Ornans* has puzzled some commentators), and his complex, sometimes mysterious, representations of women. Along the way she makes interesting use of some contemporary documents whose relevance to Courbet has been overlooked or insufficiently developed, for instance throwing new light on his depiction of his sisters' dress in *The Young Ladies of the Village Giving Alms to a Cowherd*, exhibited in 1852, with a contemporary debate about simplicity and pretense in feminine fashion (included in a story from the *Journal des demoiselles* of the same year), and relating his interest in publicity to an essay about the effect of market relations on art and culture published in *L'Artiste* in 1832. The second instance is worth pausing over for a moment, since it helps to see both something of what Chu's approach contributes, and also some of her book's limits.

The article's author was a critic with ties to both Saint-Simonianism and Catholicism, Alexandre de Saint-Cheron. Against others who saw the new reading public and similar post-Revolutionary cultural developments as debasing art and literature, Saint-Cheron pictured the shift from patronage to the market as a source of moral and aesthetic betterment:

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Today the artist is placed in the middle of society as a whole, he takes inspiration from the desires and sufferings of everyone, he speaks to all, he creates for all; he is no longer a retainer but a part of the people; he expects to be paid only for his work and the free products of his genius. His social position has therefore become more moral, more independent, more able to favor the progress of art.[1]

There is no evidence that Courbet knew Saint-Cheron's piece, but Chu notes the considerable overlap between what it argued and a declaration of principles the painter sent to Francis Wey in 1850:

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* . . . People *want to pay in order to be free* [Chu's italics] so that their judgment won't be influenced by gratitude. They are right. I am eager to learn and to that end I will be so outrageous [*brutal*] that I'll give everyone the power to tell me the cruelest truths.

He added that establishing such a relationship with his audience at once allowed him to "give an example of freedom and character in art," and "to publicize the art I undertake" (quoted in Chu, 13). Clearly Courbet's sense that dealing directly with the public through market relations offered artists new resources for their work and greater freedom for themselves and their public was shared by others in his time. The connections both he and Saint-Cheron observed between these things helps us to understand how Courbet could regard his passion for material success as compatible with his devotion to radical subjects and principles.

Such compatibility was by no means assured or unquestionable, however, and some of Courbet's friends did not hesitate to decry his less subtle attempts to produce easily marketable work (particularly landscapes and nudes) as selling out. Chu knows this, of course, but she presents this whole complex of issues in a way that sometimes becomes thin and one-sided. There was much worry in artistic circles about the harmful effects of commercial relations on artists in the 1830s and 1840s, and it was by no means limited to such conservative critics as Sainte-Beuve, the only person she cites as giving voice to it. Alongside Saint-Cheron's article, *L'Artiste* in 1832 published essays arguing the other side, which she does not mention.[2] In this context, Saint-Cheron's comment needs to be recognized as in good part a political gesture, a brief on behalf of the post-Revolutionary cultural world and against those who longed for a return to the earlier one; his intervention pre-dated the new journalistic system (inaugurated by Emile de Girardin for his paper *La Presse* in 1836) by several years, so that it should not

[1] Chu, 9; but I give the translation I offered some years ago in *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830–1930* (New York, 1986; reprinted Baltimore, 1999), 14, assuming, however that Chu is correct that the verb is *crée* where I had *crie*. She seems unaware that anyone else has given attention to Saint-Cheron's article.

[2] I took note of them, quoting from one, in *Bohemian Paris*, 14–15.

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be read as a reference to the changes introduced at that point. Moreover, deep fears about the power of commercial relations to corrupt artists who needed to sell their work to survive were very much alive in the bohemian circles Courbet frequented in the 1840s, which Chu portrays too simply as places where he could make the kinds of contacts with writers that nurtured a positive attitude toward the cultural market. Henry Murger, largely responsible for putting bohemia on the map in the years just before and after the revolution of 1848, was close to a group of young artists and writers who called themselves the Water Drinkers, the name standing for the Stoic (Murger used the term) distance they sought to keep from the pleasures and satisfactions available in Paris, but—or so they feared—only to those who compromised their principles. For the most part Courbet's affinities were with the opposite wing of *la bohème*, the one that decried existing society for its authoritarian rigidity rather than for the corrupting power of the gratifications it brandished, but he had ties with both parts, doing portraits of two more "Stoic" bohemians, the Fourierist prophet Jean Journet, and the mystically inclined Catholic (he considered becoming a priest) Marc Trapadoux. Nor was Courbet always so confident about the public as in his letter to Wey. He often felt isolated from his audience, on grounds he explained in a letter to his family in 1846:

> The more one distinguishes oneself from others the harder it gets. To change a public's way of seeing is no small thing; it is nothing less than to overturn what exists and to replace it with something else . . . Painting, when you think about it, is a state of frenzy, a continual struggle, a way of going crazy.[3]

One might object that the "public" cited here was not the same thing as the "people" appealed to in the letter to Wey, but Courbet expected the latter to be able to pay well enough so that he could live off them, and in practice his audience never consisted of *peuple* in the narrower sense. In addition, he sometimes sought refuge from existing taste in just the field of relations whose demise Saint-Cheron applauded, namely patronage. The patron on whom he relied most was a wealthy and radical Montpellier bourgeois called Alfred Bruyas, famously pictured with Courbet in *The Meeting*. His support was direct and personal, and Courbet clearly valued it as an escape from the generalized expectations of a wider public, writing to him at one point that "With your antecedents, your intelligence, your courage, and your pecuniary means, you can save us during our lifetime and make us skip over a century" (quoted in Nochlin, 46–7). Chu of course recognizes Bruyas's importance to Courbet, but she makes no acknowledgment that their association provided him with an alternative to the populace that sometimes disappointed him; one way she keeps the question from arising is by misreading

[3] Quoted with citations in *Bohemian Paris*, 87.

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Saint-Cheron's approval of direct relations between artists and the wider public to exclude only "state or institutional patronage" (13), when he in fact attributed modern moral and aesthetic progress at least as much to the demise of personal dependency. Courbet also sought liberation from the kind of public judgment he seemed to invite in the letter to Wey through his love of mystification in painting, illustrated by the pleasure he took in the difficulty he knew people would find in understanding his depiction of himself among his subjects and associates in *The Painter's Studio*. "Let whoever can guess [its meaning] do so," he declared.[4]

I do not mean to suggest that there was no way to reconcile the conflicts Courbet sometimes acknowledged between himself and the public with the mutually nourishing relationship to it he posited in the letter to Wey. The tensions might be appeased through a kind of innocence (Courbet was both naive and sophisticated), or overwhelmed by his profound self-centeredness and vaunting ambition (the "arrogance" Chu puts in her title but whose full significance she might have interrogated more), or resolved through the power of his extraordinary talent. Perhaps all these parameters operated, successively and together, in making him see his goal, as he wrote to a friend in 1854, as "the unique miracle . . . to live from my art my whole life through without giving up a jot of my principles." Calling his aim a "unique miracle" acknowledged difficulties in achieving it that deserve more attention than they get here.[5] We have the right to expect that a book that organizes its understanding of Courbet's career around his connections to modern forms of publicity and the market pay closer attention to the whole range of his attitudes and feelings in regard to these things, and not deal with what was a complex and sometimes problematic relationship in a unilateral way. Nor is this the only instance where she does so. Her repeated references to bohemian circles and writings, including those of Murger and Champfleury, as "subversive" fails to come to terms with the powerful desire to enjoy the benefits of a bourgeois existence clearly evident in Murger's career and writings (and which gave his simultaneous and never-surmounted involvement in bohemia much of its power to speak to other conflicted bourgeois), and even Champfleury, a more serious and multifaceted writer than his one-time apartment mate, is far better characterized in terms of ambivalence than "subversion." Recognizing such tensions inside the bohemian circles Courbet frequented might have opened a more revealing perspective on his shifting and ambivalent relationship to bourgeois attitudes and values, and thus toward the broad public Chu shows he often had in his mind, than her book supplies.[6]

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4 From a letter quoted by Hélène Toussaint in her discussion of the *Studio* in the catalogue of the Paris exhibition *Gustave Courbet (1819–1877)* (Paris 1977), 260–61.

5 I take up this comment in *Bohemian Paris*, 83. I do not believe Chu cites it.

6 For a sustained argument to this effect see *Bohemian Paris*, esp. chap. 2.

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There is much overlap between the subjects and issues Chu considers and those treated by Linda Nochlin in her collection of articles, but whereas the first book seeks to provide an integrated account of Courbet's career from a stable standpoint, the second prides itself on making evident the shifting angles of view its author has adopted toward her subject over her near half-century of research and writing about him. Indeed her evolving concerns and the changing methodology she has adopted to pursue them provide a kind of outline of broader changes in cultural history since the 1960s, a point she emphasizes by presenting her texts as a kind of "allegory" of an evolution rooted in a broader history, on the model Courbet provided when he described *The Painter's Studio* as "a real allegory summing up seven years of my artistic and moral life" (Nochlin, 6), Nochlin was originally drawn to Courbet out of sympathy for features of his career that made him especially appealing in the 1960s—his democratic radicalism and his interest in popular culture—and these concerns have never ceased to inspire her involvement with him. But they have been joined and in part reshaped by a more explicit and passionate feminism, given intellectual direction by some of the theoretical perspectives offered as supports for gender equality over the past half-century. Some of her early essays are classics of the mix of social history and aesthetic description that developed in the 1960s (and of which T. J. Clark provides a different kind of instance), notably her analysis of the popular origins and political implications of *A Burial at Ornans*, her discovery of the motif of the "wandering Jew" as a source for *The Meeting* (between Courbet and Bruyas), and her demonstration of Courbet's explicit representation of local customs in *La Toilette de la mariée* (*Dressing the Bride*; recent discoveries that the painting began as a depiction of a funeral do not lessen the importance of her earlier account of it). Chu's theme of Courbet's involvement with publicity and the enlarged audience for art does not escape her, but she develops it less, in part because she recognizes that the cultural market was not yet so developed as it would be for the Impressionists after 1870.

To this reader, the contributions of these early essays remain among the most important in the Courbet literature; pleasant as it would be to linger over them, that would leave no space to consider the issue more explicitly raised by publishing all the essays together, namely what has been gained or lost by the different approach of the later ones. First the gains. Since the 1980s Linda Nochlin has become a powerful force in piercing the veil of convention and unquestioned assumptions that long assigned positive agency in art solely to men as painters and controllers of taste, leaving women passive both in their status as models to be deployed and gazed upon, and in the roles often assigned them in the scenes represented. I for one will never forget how the scales fell from my eyes when she offered the depictions of determined men and swooning women in David's

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Oath of the Horatii as an exemplification of these relationships.[7] The passion and imagination behind this revelation are evident in her long meditation on *The Painter's Studio*, which climaxes (180–81) in an imagined alternative scene with the same title. In Nochlin's version, however, Rosa Bonheur, fully clothed, takes the central position Courbet assigned himself, while he, "nude, or rather partly draped, stands modestly behind her." The scenario, too extensive to recount here, ends hilariously with a group of women artists collapsing in laughter at the baleful bodies and awkward poses of their naked male models, Courbet himself and his friend Proudhon, famous at the time for his anti-feminism. Nochlin introduces her fantasy scene defensively, saying that it will be "written off as a mere frivolity by serious critics and a desecration by serious art historians," but I for one find it stirring and bracing, a welcome breath of fresh air, and a powerful example of feminist scholarship's ability to open our eyes to what lies hidden behind so much we have too long taken for granted.

Alas, however, Nochlin's exemplification of this virtue is packaged together with her loyalties to a politics of interpretation that deserves a reaction closer to the one she anticipates for the substitute *Studio*. The problems revolve around two buzz words of contemporary scholarship that appear repeatedly in her work—subversion and transgression (I concentrate on the first here). Both resound with the late twentieth-century turn that sought a critical stance at once more radical and less historically burdened than Marxism through analyses that focused not on social and political power as usually understood, but on its supposed roots in the inescapable lures of discourse and the insidious domination "always already" present in the projects of liberation through rational reflection and enlarged self-determination espoused by earlier liberals and progressives. Such analyses call for subversion and transgression in place of reform or even revolution because they locate the sources of oppression at a level too deep to be touched by direct action. Escape, if it is possible, can only come through an assault on the underlying architecture of subjection which is shared by power, culture, sexuality, and the psyche, and which makes every sphere a synecdochic equivalent for the reign of domination in which all participate. I do not know whether Nochlin would accept this account of what lies behind her approach to Courbet's *Studio*, but its effects become evident over and over again in her essay. To exemplify such relations she puts Courbet's painting alongside another "real allegory," Ingres's *Apotheosis of Homer*, where the Greek poet at the center of the scene receives at once a laurel crown and the adulation of cultural figures from many historical periods. The painting affirms the power of the classical tradition to which Ingres was devoted,

7 The talk was published as the title essay in Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power* (New York, 1988).

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and which the French state, which commissioned the work in 1827, cultivated as a prop of its power. But these fairly banal relations between power and culture are transformed into something much more global and oppressive by Nochlin's reading of the picture as "a figural equivalent of the most rigid authority . . . a permanent emblem of the pedigree and permanence of power. Aesthetic control in Ingres's work is overtly equated with a politics of domination" (160–61). The last sentence rests on nothing more than the assertion, drawn from postmodern theory, that to find or seek coherence and structure in cultural objects is a concomitant of political domination. That, on the contrary, the two things often work at cross purposes is evidenced by Ingres's sometimes tense relations with the Bourbon regime and by the ability of its critics to develop Romanticism as an aesthetic alternative despite the government's explicit attempt to repress it (in the Academy's condemnation of 1824).

Viewed in this way, however, the Ingres painting provides a backdrop against which to take *The Painter's Studio* as an opportunity to pit stable interpretation against the subversion to which it can always be subjected, and thus to make the picture into an icon for the dismantling of every form of authority. Her point of arrival is that to undermine "the laws of gender" is "the ultimate subversion" (180). To get there she starts out from recent interpreters of the picture (whose mysteries have tempted many to offer elaborate keys to it), in particular Klaus Herding. He "correctly and convincingly reads, and makes sense of, Courbet's hidden intentions in this work: to teach the emperor on the propitious occasion of the great Exposition Universelle of 1855, a lesson of rulership," as a project of "reconciliation, of peaceful coexistence and harmony among opposing factions, classes, and nations" for which art, since it mediates between human society and nature, provides the inspiration and model. Nochlin sets Herding's reading up as definitive:

> One might say that from the standpoint of history, indeed from that of a social history of art, Herding, in his closely reasoned and masterfully inclusive argument, has finally solved the riddle of *The Painter's Studio*. The search for meaning is apparently exhausted; there is nothing left to discover. We have come to the end of interpretation. (158)

Whatever the virtues of Herding's argument, however, Nochlin has no intention of resting with it. As an instance of seeking coherent and stable meaning it may be as good as we can get, but just for this reason it provides an exemplary point of departure for a reading that instead presents the painting as a fluid field of uncertainty and incompleteness, inhabited by "the slippery flow of unfixed meaning," and "the interminable production of significance." Many authorities are offered in support of this project, Baudelaire, Benjamin and Barthes prominent among them, and the deconstructive premises on behalf of which she appeals to them are too familiar to require repetition. But Nochlin, in

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line with her claim about gender as "the ultimate subversion," stresses her own female exclusion from traditional authority as the source of her need to counter the kind of approach represented by Herding, and the chief elements that make up her alternative reading of the picture focus on the women who appear in it. Of these, one was identified by Courbet as a ragged Irish beggarwoman he had seen on a London street. Herding too focused on this woman in his reading, seeing her as a sign of Napoleon III's failure to deliver on his promise to "extinguish" poverty (as the title of a tract he published in 1844 had it). But Nochlin raises her significance to another level: "she denies and negates all the male-dominated productive energy of the central portion, and thus functions as the interpreter and overturner of the whole sententious message of progress, peace, and reconciliation of the allegory as a whole" (168).

Two things need to be said about this proposal. First, it is surely possible that Courbet intended the Irishwoman's presence as a negative comment on society in his day, and on the falseness of the imperial government's claims to improve the lot of the poor. But the "male-dominated productive energy of the central portion" means Courbet, so that if this is negated, so is the critique of the Bonapartist regime. Here we come up against the consequences of taking the subversion of all coherence and authority as a principle of interpretation, namely that the all-or-nothing premise on which it rests leaves us with no solid basis on which to distinguish between people and things that may contribute to goals in which we (or the past figures we write about) find positive value and those that do not. Courbet, to whom Nochlin was originally drawn for his progressive stance in both aesthetics and politics, here becomes part of the crushing system to which unrelenting subversion is the only proper response. Second, like other examples of deconstructive practice, this one begins from premises that deny the possibility of stable significance, only to propose readings that yield to none in their explicitness, specificity, and unequivocal claims to elicit meaning. (There may be something about *The Painter's Studio* that draws interpreters to excessively concrete decodings, since Chu as well, after treating Klaus Herding with more skepticism than Nochlin does, ends up offering a similarly overprecise, and I think unpersuasive, analysis according to which Courbet presented himself literally as a substitute emperor.) Not all may agree that Nochlin's raising of the beggarwoman to such symbolic heights deserves to be called arbitrary (as I admit I do), but things get worse as the essay goes on. We are told more than once that the central group of Courbet himself, a female model, and a young boy looking at the picture on the artist's easel represents "the Oedipal triangle" (on no other grounds, it seems, than that every grouping of an adult male and female with a child must be Oedipal); in addition, the model's presence in a scene that shows Courbet picturing not her but a landscape means that "Courbet goes so far as to cross out woman in the Lacanian sense by substituting 'nature' for her." That

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femininity was often thought to be close to nature in the nineteenth century is true enough, but there is no basis in the picture for the claim that Courbet was substituting one for the other, since he does not look at the model, who merely looks on while he works on an image of something else. To Nochlin, however, this supposed extinction is illuminated by recognizing that Baudelaire's famous self-description "I am the wound and the knife" is "another way of saying 'I am the vagina, I am the penis,'" and that this in turn means "for Courbet the visual artist 'I am the female flesh, I am the male brush or palette knife'" (171–2).

It should be noted in passing that Nochlin offers this series as part of an argument against Michael Fried's attempt to take Courbet's way of seeming to identify with the bodies of his female subjects as a kind of proto-feminist intuition, and on this score she seems to me to have the better part. Like other people at the time (Chu provides an interesting discussion of them, alas marred by her taking on board Naomi Schorr's term "bisextuality," which introduces some of the same issues as Nochlin's later work, and whose theoretical complexity Chu makes no real attempt to handle) Courbet was sometimes fascinated by the "male" qualities of some women and vice versa, and like men of many times also by female homosexuality, but there seems little reason to think that his views about women were very far from the those of his misogynist friend Proudhon. However this may be, we need to conclude by recognizing what Nochlin's persisting will to offer precise and highly explicit readings, in the face of her assertions about the fluidity and instability of meaning, in fact demonstrates: what makes the quest for definitive interpretations of texts or paintings forever a mirage has nothing to do with the putative power of signs (verbal or visual) to overturn our uses of them, and everything to do with the need and desire of successive interpreters to enlist elements of some past on behalf of their present aims. The destructive power this desire can generate when yoked to certain interpretive strategies is made evident in Nochlin's case by her insisting on taking seriously some readings that, she admits, belong to "the level of vulgar Freudian symbolism": intellectual vulgarity is no sin if offered in the name of subversion.

If Nochlin's evolution is, as she puts it, a kind of "real allegory" of wider developments in cultural history in her (and my) generation, then her book presents an apt opportunity to distinguish between the gains these changes have brought and the losses some have been willing to accept on behalf of them. Others of us will hope that future generations of historians and critics leave the strategies of subversion behind, and do their work in a spirit closer to Courbet's sturdy realism, the same spirit that drew Linda Nochlin to him in the first place.

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