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## Art and Politics: An Underlying Pictorial - Political Topos in Courbet's *Real Allegory*

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"J'ai étudié, en dehors de tout esprit du système et sans parti pris, l'art des anciens et l'art des modernes. [...] J'ai voulu tout simplement puiser dans l'entière connaissance de la tradition le sentiment raisonné et indépendant de ma propre individualité. Savoir pour pouvoir, telle fut ma pensée. Etre à même de traduire les moeurs, les idées, l'aspect de mon époque, selon mon appréciation, en un mot, faire de l'art vivant, tel est mon but".

G. Courbet, "Le Réalisme", 1855.<sup>1</sup>

In a recent examination of putative antecedents, including prints, of Gustave Courbet's *Workshop of the Painter: A Real Allegory Summarizing A Period of Seven Years of My Life as an Artist* [Fig. 1], Margaret A. Seibert has pointed to a number of interesting iconographic and textual *topoi* that help to pin down the layered meanings of the artist's elusive *Allégorie réelle*.<sup>2</sup> All of them are useful, especially in light of the pioneering researches by Meyer Shapiro and Linda Nochlin showing the wide variety of materials used by the artist, particularly his frequent reliance upon popular imagery, seen in nearly all the major paintings that preceded *L'Atelier*.<sup>3</sup> An awareness of Courbet's affinity for rustic, mass-produced prints was also recognized by his earliest critics, e.g. Champfleury (Jules - François-Félix Husson) and Louis de Geoffroy, a hostile reviewer of the painter's *imagier*-based compositions.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to these contemporary appraisals of Courbet's sources, there is particular interest in Seibert's concluding observation that: "It is impossible to think that Courbet was unfamiliar with Revolutionary symbols [especially considering that] he loved his grandfather, a veteran of 1793".<sup>5</sup> This suggests a more traditional line of specifically political content, traceable perhaps back to 1789. Previously, only contemporary political ideas had been discussed in the context of *L'Atelier*. For instance, in 1968 Linda Nochlin explained the painting as a representation of socialist and egalitarian ideas of Universal Harmony, specifically the "Fourierist ideal of the Association of Capital, of Labor and of Talent", recalling that Courbet had called himself a "Fourieriste".<sup>6</sup> Additionally, in 1980 James H. Rubin explored the influence on the painter of radical ideas espoused by Pierre Joseph Proudhon (whose portrait appears in *L'Atelier*), noting in particular that "Courbet's obsession with artistic freedom [or] liberty" is paralleled by Proudhon's written polemics on Liberty as "anti-governmentalism", and hence as "the eternal contradictor... the indomitable insurgent, whose only faith is in himself".<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, according to Courbet's own statement, his political ideas were to be traced to the Revolution of 1789; he was, therefore, "a Republican by birth through his maternal grandfather, [and] continued the revolutionary idea received from his father, a sentimental liberal of 1830".<sup>8</sup> Given this, it may be suggested that *L'Atelier* links these two recognized characteristics of Courbet's artistic means and his sentiments, that is, his reliance upon popular

print-imagery and his self-proclaimed emotional attachment to social reform in general and, “by birth”, particularly to the revolutionary First Republic. Clearly, a key concept is “la Liberté”. This may serve to introduce a popular print of 1789 that I believe helps explain the mechanics of the unity between form and content in *L’Atelier*, and also accounts for some of its compositional anomalies.<sup>9</sup> This is an engraving by Claude Niquet (ca. 1770 - ca. 1831) that treats the stirring subject of “*La Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen*” [Fig. 2].<sup>10</sup>

On the one hand, the most credible way to relate this print to Courbet’s painting is as a conceptual analogue, that is, one sharing a common tradition of political allegory, dealing with stock revolutionary themes, and also employing in a timely manner figures in modern dress similarly placed in a contrived, stage-like setting. Like *L’Atelier*, it conveys meanings by the actions of various allegorical figures, standing for such abstract ideas as Liberty, Death, Oppression, Felicity, and Enlightenment. On the other hand, if this print may be believed to have actually provided Courbet *both* an initial thematic inspiration *and* the corresponding compositional layout for his “real allegory”, then it would be particularly the bilaterally divided, three-part format of the engraving that would best explain the possibly external origins of the formal anomalies of the artist’s *L’Atelier*. Therefore, if Niquet’s picture is accepted as Courbet’s primary model, then this *Urbild* tells us a great deal about the “real allegory”, including aspects previously only suspected.

In Courbet’s “real allegory”, the expressive central pivot of his composition is a self-portrait of the painter, putting the finishing touches on a Realist landscape. This is a directly “revolutionary” sign of “true veracity”, as may be inferred from a letter by Courbet of November 1851, published in *Le Messager de l’Assemblée*; here he had described himself as: “non seulement socialiste, mais bien encore démocrate et républicain, en un mot partisan de toute la Révolution, et, par-dessus tout, réaliste, c’est-à-dire ami sincère de la vraie vérité”.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in his famous letter to Champfleury of January 1855, Courbet directly addressed the nature of his allegorical representation in *L’Atelier*, making it clear that he was reverting to a traditional kind of historiated and moralizing composition (“*l’histoire morale*”), that is, one which was deliberately divided into a “positive” side – to the right – and a “negative” side – to the left (or sinister) side. As the painter described his ambitious project: “Me voilà lancé dans un immense tableau. [...] C’est l’histoire morale et physique de mon atelier. Première partie [to the right], ce sont les gens qui me servent, me soutiennent dans mon idée, qui participent à mon action. Ce sont les gens qui vivent de la vie, [while to the left are those] qui vivent de la mort. C’est la société dans son haut, dans son bas, dans son milieu. En un mot c’est ma manière de voir

la société dans ses intérêts et ses passions. [...] Le tableau est divisé en deux parties [that is, the two flanking sides]. Je suis au milieu, peignant. A droite, tous les actionnaires, c’est-à-dire les amis, les travailleurs, les amateurs du monde de l’art. A gauche, l’autre monde de la vie triviale, le peuple, la misère, la pauvreté [contrasted to], la richesse, les exploités [contrasted to], les exploités, les gens qui vivent de la mort”.<sup>12</sup>

The pivotal centerpiece depicts, besides the painter, two figures who are earnestly studying the canvas leaning against its easel [Fig. 3]. One is a woman and the other a young boy. According to Seibert’s interpretation, which I largely accept, we have two allegorical figures representing Innocence and (in part) Truth,<sup>13</sup> who are carefully studying the veiled message conveyed by the landscape – subject of the painter’s canvas. The staged nature of this arrangement suggests that the landscape must also be understood in an essentially larger, or metaphorical, way.<sup>14</sup> In a statement written in 1871, Courbet had explained the *terminus ante quem* (1848) of this “phase of seven years of my artistic life”, itself the year of yet another Revolution, by reference to his own continuous struggles against “all forms of authoritarian government and those by divine right.” He thereby revealed his curious but characteristic amalgamation of “Realism” in art – as it would be represented in *L’Atelier* by a landscape – with his ceaseless labors as a “partisan of the entire Revolution,” in the “service of man”, and as a fighter against all forms of tyranny: “Reniant l’idéal faux et conventionnel [des Salons], en 1848 j’arborai le drapeau du réalisme, que seul met l’art au service de l’homme. C’est pour cela que, logiquement, j’ai lutté contre toutes les formes de gouvernements autoritaires et de droit divin, voulant que l’homme se gouverne lui-même selon ses besoins, à son profit direct et suivant sa conception propre”.<sup>15</sup>

For Courbet, the idea of his “conquest of intellectual Liberty” (as he put it in 1853, and again in 1855<sup>16</sup>) would have been generally symbolized in *L’Atelier* by his landscape, which is being studied by the admiring allegorical figures of Truth and Innocence, the only two figures who are physically able to “read” the message represented by the tilted canvas. This canvas is not only the emblem of Courbet’s revolutionary art, “au service de l’homme”, but also can even be read as a kind of representation of Liberty itself, that is, of “les droits de l’homme”, continually threatened by “toutes les formes de gouvernements autoritaires et de droit divin”.<sup>17</sup> This interpretation may be verified, as by Seibert’s explanation of the white cat as an emblem of Liberty [Fig. 4].<sup>18</sup>

We may now compare Niquet’s print to Courbet’s triptych-like *L’Atelier*,<sup>19</sup> noting the more significant resemblances and divergences between them. Niquet’s engraving had also been divided into three nearly discrete parts, and is dark on the sinister, or left side, and bright on the positive, or right side.



1) Gustave Courbet, «The Workshop of the Painter: A Real Allegory Summarizing A Period of Seven Years of My Life as an Artist», 1854-55. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

The “pivot” of the 1789 print has the same distinctive rectangular shape and central placement as Courbet’s landscape. In the print this element was a large, tilted signboard, inscribed with the complete text (comprising seventeen articles) of the “Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen”, proclaimed by the “Assemblée” on 26 August 1789. The first article in the Declaration states that: “Les hommes naissent et demeurent libres et égaux en droits”. That this was indeed the painter’s belief at the very moment when he was working on his *L’Atelier* may be shown by a comment he wrote to his patron, Alfred Bruyas, just before the opening of his exhibition of “le Réalisme”. In supporting the exhibition: “Vous servez là une cause sainte et sacrée qui est la cause de la Liberté et de l’Indépendance, cause à laquelle j’ai consacré ma vie entière ainsi que vous”.<sup>20</sup>

In short, like Courbet’s canvas proclaiming in its central

motif the painter’s version of the “rights of man”,<sup>21</sup> specifically those of the Realist artist, a “partisan of the entire Revolution”, Niquet’s image similarly pivoted about a centrally situated, diagonally tilted, rectangular manifesto celebrating the bright ideals of the 1789 Revolution (quickly tarnished in 1793 by “The Terror”). Whereas Niquet used real words to proclaim his utopian declaration, Courbet employed painted, or sub-verbal, means: a revolutionary form of artistic subject matter, the new Realist landscape as the emblematic pivot of a “real allegory”.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the combination of the Realist painter *and* his Realist painting must be considered the central emblematic ensemble or the axis of meaning of Courbet’s *L’Atelier*. The intrinsic meanings of both lateral sides of Niquet’s print, negative left and positive right, also meaningfully parallel the implied content of Courbet’s “real allegory”. Whereas Courbet had explained somewhat cryptically that the darker,



2) Claude Niquet, «La Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen», 1789 (Photo: Collection Giraudon, Paris).

left wing of his canvas depicted “the other world, that of vulgar life [personified by] the exploited [and]... the exploiters, those who live on death”, Niquet was even more explicit; the left side of this print shows only one figure, a fallen giant clutching a money-bag and lying on top of a crumpled document defending “droits féodaux et privilèges”. The sinister side of the print, that dark world of “feudal rights and privileges”, corresponds to all those evils Courbet had decried: “the exploiters and the exploited”, and “all forms of authoritarian government and [rule by] divine right”.<sup>23</sup> Although in his letter of 1855 to Champfleury Courbet had only labelled the people in the left half of the painting as types (professional or ethnic),

recently Hélène Toussaint has attempted to name these people and to identify them with public figures of the time, including Louis Napoléon, with a hound, in the role of “*le braconnier*”.<sup>24</sup> The painter was far more explicit, however, in naming the people of the brighter right half of the painting, citing Bruyas, Proudhon, Cuenot, Buchon, and Baudelaire, who, according to his explanation, served the artist’s heroic cause in pursuit of liberty and independence, and are, therefore, the “people who thrive on life... society at its best”. In Niquet’s “unreal” allegory, however, apparently parallel ideas had been summarily and conventionally represented in the right corner of his print by a group of brightly lit, joyously dancing figures circling a



3) Detail of Fig. 1: «Allegorical Ensemble of the Artist, Truth-Liberty, and the Innocent Eye».



4) «La Libertà», from C. Ripa, *Iconologia*, Padua, 1611.

maypole topped by a Phrygian cap, the familiar symbol of “la Liberté”.

In contrast to the latent meanings buried in the complex, private fabric of Courbet’s *L’Atelier*, Niquet’s print clearly is less difficult to decipher, and the easily accessible and public allegorical meanings that would have been quickly perceived by the viewer of the print in 1789 – or perhaps by Courbet in 1854 – are described by François Furet and Denis Richet, authors of a recent study on the French Revolution: “Pourquoi est-ce à l’ombre d’un palmier que la gravure ci-dessous nous présente la Déclaration des droits de l’homme? Parce que, pour les lecteurs de Jean-Jacques Rousseau et de Bernadin de Saint-Pierre, l’exotisme du paysage est synonyme de bonheur et de liberté. Vivant à l’état de nature, les habitants des “isles” sont comme Paul et Virginie, libres et heureux. Quant au bonnet phrygien qui coiffe le mat de cocagne, à droite, il symbolisait, dans l’Antiquité, l’affranchissement des esclaves”.<sup>25</sup>

My proposal that Niquet’s print is a close thematic and compositional analogue to *L’Atelier* in turn suggests the nature of the several changes Courbet might have imposed upon a rather crude graphic prototype. Courbet’s compositional adjustments and modifications would be, in this case, quite consistent with similar formal and iconographic transformations made by the painter in other transpositions from *imagerie populaire* in his previous works.<sup>26</sup> Besides the addition of many more *dramatis personae*, perhaps the most radical departure from

Niquet’s print was Courbet’s decision in *L’Atelier* to divest the central female figure of her clothing. If we regard this as a meaningful action, then this served a specific iconographic purpose, that is, to make her an effective allegorical synthesis of “Verità” and “Libertà”,<sup>27</sup> the latter reference accounting for the substitution of the white cat for the merely decorative roses in the print. Courbet also makes “Truth-Liberty” look directly at his painting rather than at the little boy, as she did in Niquet’s print where she is shown reading the Declaration, shadowed by a palm-tree, to the boy standing at her side. As this inscribed text became transformed into a painted manifesto of the new Realist declaration in *L’Atelier*, the little boy, now converted into a symbol of “the innocent eye, which lacks convention”,<sup>28</sup> did not need the woman to interpret or to translate the meaning of the landscape for him. She is thus left at her leisure to regard earnestly the Realist image before her.<sup>29</sup> In effect, instead of functioning as the spokesperson-translator for “la Liberté”, as in Niquet’s print, in Courbet’s *L’Atelier* this woman now *is* Liberty. The transformation of the boy into a representative of the “unconventional, innocent eye”, rather than an “ear”, in turn allowed him to move away from the side of the female figure, and to stand literally at the feet of the Master, that is, Courbet himself. The landscape setting of Niquet’s print is also changed by Courbet since, as he wrote to Champfleury: “The scene is laid in my studio in Paris”.<sup>30</sup> If indeed there is any reference to Niquet’s half-stormy, half-sunny, stage-like setting in Courbet’s composition, it is only hinted at in the half-darkened, half-lit setting of *L’Atelier*. The scale of the figures is also very different; in Courbet’s painting the figures, from left to right, all have a similar spatial relationship, without any apparent hierarchy. Courbet in this respect also sought an objective, democratic, or Realist, “way of seeing society in its interests and passions”.<sup>31</sup>

The role of Alfred Bruyas should also be mentioned in the context of this presumed conceptual use of a pictorial prototype. As Benedict Nicolson remarked, “there is no question that it was under the stimulus of Bruyas – who had developed a taste for the real and the ideal [...] and for pictures which only yielded their meaning when the symbols were unraveled – that he [Courbet] realized that the solemn step, [that is,] to combine the real and the ideal on a single vast canvas, was the one he should take”.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Courbet’s *Réalisme* exhibition of 1855, of which *L’Atelier* was to serve as the centerpiece, was originally conceived of as a joint exhibition in which Courbet’s recent works were to be integrated into a pre-existing program conceived by Bruyas.<sup>33</sup> In 1854, during the initial planning stages of *L’Atelier*, Courbet’s patron-collaborator had published a curious brochure entitled *L’Explication des ouvrages de peinture du Cabinet du M. Alfred Bruyas*.

PHASE D'UNE ÉDUCATION D'ARTISTE DE LA GRANDE FAMILLE.

(Cabinet BRUYAS.)

MONTPELLIER. — 1834.

# LA PEINTURE

AU XIX<sup>e</sup> SIÈCLE.

AMOUR.

TRAVAIL.

RELIGION.

DÉBUT.

SOLUTION.

AU JEUNE ARTISTE  
Les beautés de la Nature!

A. CABANEL.  
Rome, 1845.

CONVICTION.



L'HUMBLE ATELIER  
Au grand Artiste

O. TASSAERT.  
Paris, 1852.

LIBERTÉ (1)

G. COURBET. — 1853.

Sujets de Tableaux, pour plafond, destinés au salon Velleda, par A. B.

ÉTUDES DE MAÎTRES,

ou

Souvenirs de Voyage (principalement l'Italie et Paris), appuyées par quelques  
Morceaux anciens et par des Tableaux modernes.

(1) La preuve que la liberté est l'idéal divin de l'homme, c'est qu'elle est le premier rêve de la jeunesse, et qu'elle ne s'évanouit dans notre âme que quand le cœur se flétrit et que l'esprit s'avilit ou se décourage.

LAMARTINE.

5) Frontispiece, *L'Explication des ouvrages de peinture du Cabinet du M. Alfred Bruyas*, Paris, 1854.



Its odd subtitles – “Catalogue of Heaven and Hell” or “Liberty in Goodness” – have led James Rubin to believe that: “Apparently Bruyas felt that all levels of society – the individual, the political, and the artistic – were faced with a momentous decision. [...] Choice was but one aspect of the more generic concept of diametrical opposition that permeated Bruyas’ thought. Indeed, he appears to have conceived his gallery [*Le Cabinet*] as a spiritual autobiography, in which progress toward his *Solution* was revealed through a series of representations of opposing personalities, either of his own or of others”.<sup>34</sup>

In light of this comment, an observation made in 1854 by François Sabatier-Ungher concerning Bruyas’ allegorizing *Le Cabinet* provides an interesting insight on its relationship to the opposing, bipartite and evidently moralizing compositional format of *L’Atelier*. Sabatier had called Bruyas) “gallery of portraits... something more than a reunion of different individualities expressed in their mutual opposition. They are different moments of the same individual [Bruyas], the genius of a single personality, the history of its intellectual development in its successive phases”.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, according to Rubin, clearly “the principle underlying Courbet’s *Studio* was identical. [...] Bruyas reminded the reader [of his *Explication*] that most of the pictures he owned were the results of his own ideas and an agreement with the artists who executed them”.<sup>36</sup>

Another relationship between Niquet’s print, Bruyas’ *Explication*, and Courbet’s *L’Atelier* is revealed in the schematic diagram appearing on one of the title pages of the pamphlet published in 1854 by Courbet’s patron [Fig. 5]. At the top of this page Bruyas provides a sub title to his verbal-symbolic composition: *Phase d’une éducation d’artiste*. This statement parallels the paradoxical subtitle to Courbet’s *L’Atelier du Peintre: Une allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique*. Additionally, using a didactic-typographic format, Bruyas emblematically had shown himself as having moved away from an early fascination with the

beauties of nature (*Début... les beautés de la Nature!*), and moving towards a *Solution*, which he called “the Humble Workshop-Studio of the Great Artist” (*Solution. L’Humble Atelier du Grand Artiste*). As in Niquet’s print, in the center, or critical mid-point, between his “*Début*” and “*Solution*”, Bruyas has strategically placed the word *LIBERTÉ!*, under which is inscribed the name of *G. Courbet*. In fact, in a letter written to Bruyas in May 1855, Courbet himself exclaimed: “I am conquering Liberty; I am saving the independence of art!”<sup>37</sup>

These verbal ideas seem to offer certain significant ideological and compositional parallels to the popular print of 1789, which had also visually, as well as verbally, extolled the revolutionary values of *Les Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen*, leading to the celebration of *la Liberté* on the positive right side of the composition. Given knowledge of the artist’s previous reliance upon such imagery, it thus appears more than just likely that Niquet’s forthright *image populaire* provides the single, most plausible, external explanation for the curious compositional anomalies and, especially, for the distinctive overall “triptych format” of Courbet’s “real allegory”. One final, common, and strictly thematic, linkage between Niquet’s *Déclaration*, Bruyas’ *Explication*, and Courbet’s *L’Atelier* may be cited. At the bottom of Bruyas’ title-page [Fig. 5] there had been placed a quotation from Lamartine that extolled devotion to the elusive desideratum of *la Liberté*, that “*idéal divin de l’homme*”, which triumphantly emerges as the generalized but essential linkage between three images, separated in time by some sixty-five years. As cited by Bruyas, and as placed at the exact center of the base of his typographical-emblematic construction, Lamartine’s manifesto had boldly proclaimed that: “The proof that Liberty is the divine ideal of man is that Liberty is the first dream of youth, and Liberty will never vanish from our souls – except when our hearts become blighted, and our spirits become depressed or disheartened”.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>1</sup> G. Courbet, “Le Réalisme”, preface to his pamphlet-length catalogue, *Exhibition et vente de 40 TABLEAUX & 4 DESSINS de l’oeuvre de M. Gustave Courbet*, Paris, June 1855.

<sup>2</sup> M. A. Seibert, “A Political and a Pictorial Tradition Used in Gustave Courbet’s *Real Allegory*”, *Art Bulletin*, LXV, 1983, pp. 311-316; see also her recent “Letter: Courbet’s *Real Allegory*”, *Art Bulletin*, LXVI, 1984, 154. Besides B. Nicolson, *Courbet: The Studio of the Painter*, New York, 1975, and R. Huyghe, G. Bazin, J. Adhémar, *Courbet. L’Atelier du peintre, allégorie réelle*, Paris, 1944, another monograph dedicated to this canvas is by B. Schrug, *Courbet: Das Atelier* (“Werkmonographien zur bildenden Kunst”, no. 73), Stuttgart, 1962. This large canvas originally measured 2.75 x 5 meters; in the

course of its execution (perhaps begun in Ornans in October 1854) Courbet added strips along the sides, and it now measures 3.59 x 5.98 meters. It was acquired by the Louvre in 1920.

Seibert has cited as relevant to the interpretation of the traditional meanings latent in Courbet’s *L’Atelier* earlier allegorical views of artists’ studios, workshops, and picture galleries, for which, in general, see M. Winner, “Gemalte Kunsttheorie: An Gustave Courbet’s ‘Allégorie réelle’ und die Tradition”, *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen: Jahrbuch der preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, (n.F.), IV, 1962, pp. 151-84. Courbet’s studio-based “real allegory” has often been compared to Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*; however, recent research reveals the very different purposes of that earlier painting, for which see J.

F. Moffitt, "Velázquez in the Alcázar Palace in 1656: The Meaning of the *mise-en scène* of *Las Meninas*", *Art History*, VI, 1983, pp. 272-301. To the list of traditional references in Courbet's *L'Atelier* assembled by Seibert, two more may be added. The first is, obviously, the "Friendship-Picture", for which see H. Keller, "Entstehung und Blütezeit des Freundschaftsbildes", *Essays in the History of Art Presented to Rudolph Wittkower*, London, 1967, pp. 161-73. Also, given the painter-hero's central placement between the "moralized" left and right wings of his three-part composition, one may believe that there was also a latent, generalized reference to the familiar theme of "The Choice of Hercules", for which see E. Panofsky, *Hercules am Scheidewege und andere antike Bildstoffe in der neueren Kunst*, Berlin, 1930. Although not discussed by Seibert (nor Winner), mention may also be made of an ironic wash-drawing of 1557, which Courbet may have seen in Paris: Marcus Gheeraedts, the Elder, *The Painter Torn Between Olympus and Everyday Life* (Bibliothèque Nationale). This artist's dilemma is explained by an inscription: "Haud facile emergunt quorum virtutibus obstat Res augusta domi ex dono Marci Gerardi brugensis" (based, in part, on Juvenal, *Satires*, III, 164-5). As in Courbet's *L'Atelier*, the artist sits in the center of the composition before his easel. To the left are seen Mercury and Minerva, the latter posing (with one breast bared) while sitting in front of a window opening into a bright landscape. On the dark right side of the composition we see the painter's haggard wife, his scolding mother-in-law and several noisy, naked children. Like a Flemish Hercules, the frustrated painter tears his hair while he ponders his choice, somewhat similar to Courbet's inasmuch as he must make a difficult professional decision between sophisticated elegance and provincial squalor; see D. R. Smith, "Rembrandt's Early Double Portraits and the Dutch Conversation Piece", *Art Bulletin*, LXIV, 1982, pp. 259-88; fig. 31.

The paradoxical confrontation of *réelle* and *allégorie* certainly did not escape Courbet's colleagues. In a letter to Georges Sand, Champfleury rightly observed that "an allegory cannot be *real*, any more than *reality* can become *allegorical*". The objections of the Socialist philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (*Du principe de l'art et de sa destination sociale*, Paris, 1865, p. 285) were much more heated: "I have heard Courbet call his pictures 'real allegories'; an unintelligible expression. [...] What! He calls himself a realist, and occupies himself with allegories! This wretched style, these false definitions have done him more harm than all his eccentricities; he is a realist, and he is turning back to the ideal through allegory" (Champfleury and Proudhon, as quoted by Nicolson, *op. cit.*, p. 66). For these purposes, a useful definition of "*l'allégorie*", which may be believed consistent with Courbet's understanding of the term, is that given by André Masson: "Employer l'allégorie, c'est, étymologiquement, dire une chose pour une autre, et, dans le domaine des arts, représenter une idée abstraite par une image, peupler le champ visuel d'objets considérés comme le signe d'une réalité invisible" (A. Masson, *L'Allégorie*, ["Que sais-je?"], Paris, 1974, p. 6). For the larger cultural-historical meanings and implications of Courbet's adjective – *réelle* – see the excellent, comprehensive study by L. Nochlin, *Realism: Style and Civilization*, Harmondsworth, 1971. Perhaps the most concise way to define the nature and component parts of Courbet's "real allegory" is to say that it is essentially a symbolic composition stated in the vigorous language of naturalism. As it appears, however, Courbet was responsible for two other allegorical paintings, both now lost (for which see J. H. Rubin, *Realism and Social Vision in Courbet and Proudhon*, Princeton, 1980, p. 151, nr. 6).

<sup>3</sup> The art historical significance of Courbet's reliance upon popular prints was first discussed by M. Schapiro, "Courbet and Popular Imagery: An Essay on Realism and Naïveté", *Journal of the Warburg*

*and Courtauld Institutes*, IV, 1941, pp. 164-91. Schapiro's pioneering suggestions were further pursued by Linda Nochlin; besides her 1963 dissertation (L. Nochlin, "The Development and Nature of Realism in the Work of Gustave Courbet: A Study of the Style and its Social and Artistic Background", Ph.D. diss., Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 1963), where she shows (pp. 52-3) that he probably employed a popular print as early as 1847 (*St. Nicholas Receiving the Little Children*, Parish Church of Saules, near Ornans), see also her important later article, "Gustave Courbet's *Meeting*: A Portrait of the Artist as a Wandering Jew", *Art Bulletin*, XLIX, 1967, 209-22. Courbet had resorted to a specific photograph for the figure of the nude model in the center of *L'Atelier* (see A. Scharf, *Art and Photography*, London, 1968, pp. 98-99) and, moreover, a popular print for the figure of Proudhon, seen to the right (see A. Bowness, "The Painter's Studio", in *Courbet in Perspective* [P. ten-Doesschate Chu, ed.], Englewood Cliffs, 1972, pp. 121-38 [p. 132 for the citation of the print]). For yet another supposed print-source, this time quite possibly serving for the overall compositional idea of the specifically "bohemian" and "contemporary" studio-setting, see A. Seltzer, "Gustave Courbet: All the World's a Studio", *Artforum*, XVI, Sept. 1977, pp. 44-50. According to Seltzer, the basis of Courbet's *L'Atelier* was a wood engraving by Henry Valentin, "*L'Intérieur de l'atelier d'un artiste au dix-neuvième siècle*", published in the December 1849 issue of the *Magasin pittoresque*. This print echoes several principal features in the large canvas painted six years later, namely a crowd of relaxed bohemians placed in a crowded studio-setting, including a busy painter at his easel with a (clothed) woman at his back (this motif is, however, found on the far left side of Valentin's composition). See also H. Toussaint, "Le Dossier de 'L'Atelier' de Courbet", (in *Gustave Courbet (1819-1877)*, Exhibition catalogue: Grand Palais, Paris, 1977, pp. 241-72 ("Sources iconographiques", pp. 266-69).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Champfleury compared the unsettling composition of Courbet's *Burial at Ornans*, (1849; Salon of 1851) to "la vue de ces naïves images sur bois, taillées par un couteau maladroit, en tête des assassinats imprimés rue Git-le-Coeur. L'effet est la même, parce que l'exécution est aussi simple. L'art savant trouve le même accent que l'art naïf". As this critic also observed, "par la composition et l'arrangement des groupes, Courbet rompait déjà avec la tradition" (Champfleury, "L'Enterrement d'Ornans", (in *Grandes Figures d'hier et d'aujourd'hui*, Paris, 1861, pp. 244, 251). According to Geoffrey, "évidemment, M. Courbet est un homme que se figure avoir tenté une grande rénovation... il ramène l'art tout simplement à son point de départ, à la grossière industrie des maîtres imagiers" (L. de Geoffrey, "Le Salon de 1850", *Revue des Deux Mondes*, IX, 1851, p. 928).

<sup>5</sup> Seibert, *op. cit.*, p. 316. As Nochlin had earlier stated (*op. cit.*, 1963, p. 1), "Courbet's political outlook seems to be the very foundation on which his art is based". These conclusions may be reinforced by reference to a written statement by Courbet. In 1866, in an autobiographical note now preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale (which had been intended for inclusion in the *Panthéon des illustrations françaises au XIXème siècle*), the painter stressed his Republican – Revolutionary family origins and sentiments: "[Courbet was] a Republican by birth through his maternal grandfather, continued the revolutionary idea received from his father, a sentimental liberal of the 1830 type. [...] In 1840, he followed the socialists of all sects. On his arrival in Paris, he was a Fourierist. [...] He studied the French and German philosophers and, for some ten years, until 1848, took an active part in the Revolution. [...] In 1854, the Government of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte offered Courbet terms which he could not accept [see Rubin, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-9, for these terms, and note 16 below]. As a result, the committee headed by M. de Morny refused

him a room in which to exhibit his works. [However,] M. Fould gave him permission to hold a paying and public exhibition, which he did at his own expense, showing sixty [sic: 44] works which he was able to bring together. No such act of independence had ever been seen before in France". Courbet, as quoted by G. Boudaille, *Gustave Courbet: Painter in Protest*, Greenwich, Conn., 1969, pp. 25, 53 (see also note 17 below). As Nochlin points out (*op. cit.*, 1963, p. 72), even the title of *L'Atelier* alludes to the painter's revolutionary sentiments: "When in 1855 Courbet subtitled his *Atelier du peintre*, a 'real allegory determining a phase of seven years of my artistic life', he is telling us in no uncertain terms that 1848 was the crucial year in his development. [...] The main impact of the Revolution [of 1848] lay in the realm of the social, in the aspirations of the non-privileged of all degrees to obtain their share of power and social justice".

<sup>6</sup> L. Nochlin, "The Invention of the Avant-Garde", *Art News Annual*, XXXIV, 1968, pp. 11-19.

<sup>7</sup> Proudhon, as quoted by Rubin, *op. cit.*, p. 17. For other, perhaps too extreme views of the artist's politicized consciousness (stressing the themes of class consciousness and conflicts), see T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic, 1848-51*, London, 1973.

<sup>8</sup> Courbet, as cited in notes 5 and 17.

<sup>9</sup> Nochlin (*op. cit.*, 1963, pp. 222-3) commented upon the compositional anomalies of *L'Atelier* as follows: "It must be admitted that the composition as a whole is far more balanced, traditional and overtly premeditated in its appearance than any of the major works which precede it. [...] In addition, whether or not the composition is actually as traditional or even as academic as some authorities have asserted, it is certainly obvious that Courbet took pains to provide a clear central focus for the painting, and, in certain cases, added elements to his original conception simply to create an equilibrium between the two sides of the work [...] thereby serving in an unequivocal way to direct one's attention to the expressive pivot of the work. All of this is quite different from the additive, discrete compositions, the lack of atmosphere, and the avoidance of traditional focus which characterized Courbet's major work up to 1855". To this may be added Nicolson's comment (p. 70) that, as yet, "no specific [compositional] prototype for the style of *The Studio* has been pinpointed". Actually, the painting remains abandoned in an unfinished state, especially in regard to the background. According to Nicolson, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-22: "Courbet came to realize that only by leaving the background indeterminate could he achieve his aim, of concentrating the attention on the main actors. Nevertheless, the background is unsatisfactory in the state he left it. [...] Courbet was hard pressed for time, and would surely have tidied up the mess, made the forms more explicit and substantial, had he been able to devote a few more weeks to the picture's perfection". As I suspect, had he finished it, the left vs. right light-polarities would have been emphasized even more than they are now. For the "Chronology of Events" of the rushed execution of *L'Atelier*, see Nicolson, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-79. For a detailed analysis of the technique and stages of execution of this painting, see L. Faillant-Dumas, "*L'Atelier* de Courbet: Étude radiographique au Laboratoire de Recherche des Musées de France", *Annales du Laboratoire de Recherche des Musées de France*, 1977, pp. 30-41.

<sup>10</sup> Claude Niquet, although today scarcely remembered, did enjoy a certain measure of success in the 1793 Salon, where he exhibited overtly political, painted "real allegories"; see E. Bénézit, *Dictionnaire des peintres, sculpteurs, dessinateurs et graveurs*, Paris, 1966, VI, p. 367, giving the titles of the works that brought him recognition.

<sup>11</sup> Courbet, as quoted by G. Riat, *Gustave Courbet, peintre*, Paris, 1906, pp. 93-94.

<sup>12</sup> For the complete text in French of Courbet's letter, see Huyghe (*et. al.*), *op. cit.*, p. 23, Toussaint, *op. cit.*, pp. 246-47, and Rubin, *op. cit.*, pp. 110-12. Reading the complete text of the artist's explanation of his complex work, one will recognize that Courbet's descriptions of the iconography of his painting are only specific in regard to the names (or typology) of the individual figures in the "good", right side of the composition but, unfortunately, rather noncommittal in regard to the overall meaning of the composition as regards the darker left side (*pace* Toussaint, *op. cit.*, and as in note 24 below). The most important hint is, however, Courbet's tantalizingly brief mention of a bilateral compositional scheme, with the painter (and what are now recognized as two allegorical flanking-figures; see next note) serving as the expressive pivot of a "real allegory", also regarded as a "moral history".

<sup>13</sup> The image of "Verità" given by Cesare Ripa in the *Iconologia*, establishing the pictorial norm for this allegory, depicts a nearly nude woman (a cloth is draped about her hips) holding a sun in her right hand and a book and palm in her left; her right foot rests upon a globe (C. Ripa, *Iconologia, ovvero descrizione d'imagini...*, Padua 1611, p. 529). Although Ripa's illustration has, of course, no clearcut visual relationship with Courbet's nude model standing by the painter's easel, part of Ripa's text does seem to fit the woman shown in *L'Atelier* (Ripa, *op. cit.*, p. 531): "Verità. Fanciulla ignuda, con alcuni veli bianchi d'intorno, per dimostrare, che essa deve esser ricoperta, & adornata in modo con le parole, che non si levi l'apparenza del corpo suo bello, & delicato, & di se stesso più che d'ogn'altra cosa s'adorna, & s'arricchisce". Seibert, *op. cit.*, pp. 311-22, also cites the contemporary interpretation of the little boy at Courbet's side as a sign of "the innocent eye which lacks convention" (but see also note 28 below).

<sup>14</sup> The metaphorical context of Courbet's landscape was pointed out by Werner Hofmann, *Das irdische Paradies: Motive und Ideen des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Munich, 1974, p. 15: "[Courbet] setzt das soziale Milieu in eine menschliche Vision um, er zeigt, dass der souveräne Künstler das Wahrgenommene, zum geistigen Erlebnisinhalt verdichtet, jederzeit zurückrufen kann. Dass man, auch im Atelier, eine Landschaft malen kann. Vielleicht liegt gerade in dieser Landschaft der Zugang zur 'Botschaft' des Bildes. [...] In ihr verkörpert sich – wenn man den Vergleich mit religiösen Vorstellungen nicht scheut – eine der Heilgewisheiten des modernen Menschen. So wird die Geste des Malers zum prophetischen Hinweis, und dem Blick der beiden Menschen, die ihm zur Seite stehen, eignet ein Mass an Hingabe, wie es nur der Gläubige besitzt". See also K. Herding, "Egalität und Autorität in Courbets Landschaftsmalerei", *Städel-Jahrbuch*, n.F., V, 1975, pp. 159-99, stating that the artist's landscapes represented the larger idea of the individual's triumph over authority, and that the depiction of a scene set in the Franche-Comté represented the ideological antipode of Paris (see also notes 20 and 22 below).

<sup>15</sup> Courbet, as quoted by P. Courthion, (ed.), *Courbet raconté par lui-même et par ses amis*, Genève, 1948-50, II, p. 47.

<sup>16</sup> In a letter of 1853 to Bruyas, Courbet stated that "j'avais fait de la peinture, non pour faire de l'art pour l'art, mais bien pour conquérir ma liberté intellectuelle". For the complete text of this letter, describing the painter's angry meeting with Count Nieuwerkerke, Director of the Fine Arts Academy, see Rubin, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-9. In May 1855, the month before the opening of his Realism Pavillon, Courbet again wrote Bruyas, then affirming, "je conquiers la liberté; je sauve l'indépendance de l'art!" (P. Borel, ed.), *Lettres de Gustave Courbet à Alfred Bruyas*, Genève, 1951, pp. 50-51). For the chronology of events leading to the relative incompleteness, and subsequent installation of *L'Atelier*, see Nicolson, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-79.

<sup>17</sup> Concerning his revolutionary origins and sentiments, Courbet

said of himself (in Courthion, *op. cit.*, II, p. 27), "arrivé à Paris, il [Courbet] était fourieriste. [...] Il étudia les philosophes français et allemands, et fut pendant dix ans, avec les rédacteurs de la *Réforme*, et du *National*, de la révolution active, jusqu'en 1848" (see note 5 above). As Nochlin points out (*op. cit.*, 1963, p. 87), in line with Courbet's Fourierist outlook, the content of his work ideally would express "a new didactic, socialist subject matter, glorifying work and calling the masses to insurrection against the established social order".

<sup>18</sup> According to Ripa's *Iconologia* (1611, pp. 312-13), which shows the animal (like Courbet's cat) to be white, at the feet of "Liberty" there is: "il gatto [che] ama molto la Libertà... detto animale non può comportare di essere riserrato nell'altrui forza, così loro impatientissimi di servitù". Although the allegorical figure of "la Liberté" was also shown completely clothed in a standard French adaptation of Ripa's *Iconologia*, this text nevertheless again establishes the fact of the cat as a standard emblematic attribute of Liberty: "Liberté. [...] Le chat est emblème de ce sujet, parce que cet animal ne peut souffrir la contrainte". J. B. Boudard, *Iconologie, Tirée de Divers Auteurs. Ouvrage utile aux Gens de Lettres, aux Poètes, aux Artistes, & généralement à tous les Amateurs de Beaux Arts*, Vienne, 1766, II, p. 155. For Champfleury's citation (1849) of a cat found at feet of the goddess of Liberty, see Seibert, *op. cit.*, p. 315. Mention may also be made of another 19th-century reference to Liberty's cat, which is not cited by Seibert. According to J. B. Huet (*Le trésor des artistes*, Paris, 1810), in designing an allegorized figure of "la Liberté... on prétend également [la] designer par le Chat, [représentant] l'instinct naturel de l'indépendance" (Huet, as cited in M. Trachtenberg, *The Statue of Liberty*, London, 1974, p. 64). In all these sources, the illustrations concur in showing a *white* cat at the feet, and in front of the goddess.

<sup>19</sup> As observed by Hofmann (*op. cit.*, p. 14), "das Bild ist ein Triptychon, dessen geistiges Zentrum folgerichtig mit dem Mittelstück zusammenfällt. [...] Die reale Szene weitet sich in allegorische Dimensionen, in denen das Verhältnis des Künstlers zu seiner Umwelt gedeutet wird". For a compositional diagram of Courbet's "triptych", see Toussaint, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

<sup>20</sup> Borel, *Lettres, op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>21</sup> As Nochlin points out (*op. cit.*, 1963, pp. 218-9), in *L'Atelier*, "it is only the artist himself who stands in an active relation to reality, purposefully pursuing his goal: the re-creation of reality itself in the work of art on his easel. [...] Courbet is working, not preaching: if he has a 'message', it is embodied in the concrete product of his brush, a [landscape] painting which is itself attached to the immediate and the earthly. [...] Far from being a complicated *machine de Salon*... [it] is merely a landscape of the Franch-Comté" (see Hofmann in note 14 above).

<sup>22</sup> As Rubin affirms (*op. cit.*, p. 6), "the notion of 'real allegory' proposed by the title [of *L'Atelier*] might be said to emerge from the center of the picture as a definition of Realism as pure landscape painting" (see also Hofmann and Herding, as cited in note 14, and Nochlin, as quoted in note 21).

<sup>23</sup> Rubin (*op. cit.*, pp. 42-43) is also sensitive to the fact of "the diametrically opposed right-hand side of *The Studio*", which is deliberately played against the left-hand side, which "becomes, in its own particular way, an incarnation of one aspect of the stultifying *principe d'autorité*".

<sup>24</sup> Toussaint, *op. cit.*, pp. 251-60. Besides identifying the "poacher" with Napoléon III (although one should recall the general popularity of the goatee at the time), Toussaint called the *Juif* Achille Fould (a prominent Jewish banker in Paris); the *Curé* becomes Louis Veuillot, a royalist and Catholic journalist; the *Ancien Républicain de '93* is

Lazare Carnot, and so forth. This strikes me as altogether too explicit. Even if they *were* representations of these real contemporaries, I must agree again with Rubin, whose overall conclusion was that, in the end: "each becomes, in its own particular way, an [allegorical] incarnation of one aspect of the stultifying *principe d'autorité*". One is also skeptical specifically about Toussaint's overall "Masonic" interpretation of the canvas (*op. cit.*, pp. 261-3), not finding much internal evidence to support her case (see also note 12 above), even though it is championed by Klaus Herding, *Realismus als Widerspruch: Die Wirklichkeit in Courbet's Malerei*, Berlin, 1984, pp. 227-31.

<sup>25</sup> F. Furet, D. Richier, *La Révolution: des États Généraux au 9 Thermidor*, Paris, 1965, p. 124.

<sup>26</sup> For these studies, linking Courbet's compositions to popular prints, see note 3 above; especially important for the present argument is Nochlin's 1967 article, showing in convincing detail Courbet's manner of translating an eighteenth-century print of the *Juif Errant* motif into the naturalistic idiom of his 1854 painting of *The Meeting*.

<sup>27</sup> See notes 13 and 18 for the individual iconographic components of Courbet's allegorical synthesis.

<sup>28</sup> Certainly the motif of the child as a symbol of the "innocent eye" was known to one of Courbet's friends, who also happens to be depicted on the "good", right side of *L'Atelier*, Charles Baudelaire: "L'enfant voit tout en nouveauté. [...] Rien ne rassemble plus à ce qu'on appelle l'inspiration que la joie avec laquelle l'enfant absorbe la forme et la couleur". Furthermore, by this kind of reasoning, artistic genius is itself "*l'enfance retrouvée à volonté*" (Baudelaire, as quoted and discussed in Nochlin, *op. cit.*, 1963, p. 217).

<sup>29</sup> That Courbet represented his female figure as being engaged specifically in the act of watching him in the act of painting his landscape scene is made quite clear in his letter to Champfleury (see note 12): "Seconde partie. Puis vient la toile sur mon chevalet et moi peignant. [...] Derrière ma chaise est un modèle de femme nue. Elle est appuyée sur le dossier de ma chaise *me regardant peindre* un instant; ses habits sont à terre en avant du tableau, puis un chat blanc près de ma chaise" (emphasis mine).

<sup>30</sup> "La scène se passe dans mon atelier à Paris" (Champfleury letter, as cited in note 12).

<sup>31</sup> This underlying "democratic" compositional-metaphor has also been recognized by a German scholar, Lorenz Dittmann, who remarked upon it as the parallel to Proudhon's anarchism because the painter refused to subordinate his figures to one another; see L. Dittmann, "Courbet und die Theorie des Realismus", (in *Beiträge zur Theorie der Künste im 19. Jahrhundert*, (H. Keepman & J. A. Schmol, eds.), Frankfurt, 1971, I, pp. 215-39).

<sup>32</sup> Nicolson, *op. cit.*, p. 17; the fact of Bruyas' contribution to the disguised programme of *L'Atelier* was first recognized in Huyghe, (*et al.*), *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Nicolson, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>34</sup> Rubin, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>35</sup> Sabatier to Bruyas, in Bruyas, *Explication*, 1854, p. 209; as quoted by Rubin, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>36</sup> Rubin, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>37</sup> Borel, *Lettres, op. cit.*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>38</sup> As seen from Bruyas' title-page [Fig. 5], the central sequence, reading from top to bottom, is as follows: "RELIGION – CONVICTION – LIBERTÉ (I) – G. COURBET. – 1853". It is the footnote number (1) which directly leads us below, to the quotation from Lamartine: "(I) La preuve que la liberté est l'idéal divin de l'homme, c'est qu'elle est le premier rêve de la jeunesse, et qu'elle ne s'évanouit dans notre âme que quand le coeur se flétrit et que l'esprit s'avilît ou se décourage. LAMARTINE".